

1 CORINTHIANS 7:10

November 13, 2022

Brad Norman

Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7. In this chapter Paul began responding to a letter from the Corinthian believers. He was addressing a variety of topics that they asked him about. And the first topic that he focused on was the theme of marriage in the first 24 verses of chapter 7. In verse 1 he started by quoting the Corinthian believers. Some of them thought that it was good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. So these people were advocating abstinence from sexual relations. But in verses 2–4 Paul responded by saying that abstinence is not allowed for married people. A husband and wife have a marital duty to give sexual intimacy to each other. They are under each other's authority in this area.

But in verse 5 Paul did grant one exception to this rule. He said that a husband and wife could abstain as long as it was for the purpose of being devoted to prayer. But they had to agree on it and choose a specific length of time. And they needed to come back together and have sexual relations again once that time was over. Then Paul ended this verse by talking about why it's so important for a husband and wife not to deprive each other apart from this exception. He said that otherwise Satan might tempt them because of their lack of self-control. All Christians should be growing in self-control, but we won't reach perfection in this area until Jesus comes back. And so married people who are used to having regular sexual relations may have a hard time resisting temptation during a long period of abstinence. That's why Paul said in verse 6 that he was giving this exception as a concession and not as a command. He did not require married couples to abstain for the purpose of prayer. He just gave them permission to do it.

Then in verse 7 Paul took a step back and looked at the big picture of marriage. He said, "I wish that all people were as I am." But as we can see in verse 8, Paul was single. Now this obviously doesn't mean that it's a sin to be married. Paul wasn't even saying that married people are inferior to single people. He was just giving a personal desire, not a moral desire. And so Paul went on in verse 7 to say that "each has his own gift from God, one person has this gift, another has that." Paul knew that God gives two different gifts in this area. He didn't say what they are, but it's pretty clear that he was referring to singleness and marriage. Both of these statuses are gracious gifts from God that we should appreciate.

Then in verses 8–9 Paul gave some elaboration on these two gifts. In verse 8 he talked about singleness, and then in verse 9 he talked about marriage. But he was addressing single people in both of these verses. In verse 8 Paul said that he was talking "to the unmarried and to widows." The Greek word for unmarried just refers generally to someone who is not married. There's nothing inherent in this word that communicates whether the person has ever been married. But the context can limit the meaning of this word to a particular type of single person. And in this verse Paul also mentioned widows. The Greek word for

widows just refers to a woman whose husband has died. In other words, it does not refer to widows and widowers but only to widows. So most likely the word “unmarried” was just Paul’s way of referring to widows here.

And at the end of verse 8 Paul told widows and widowers that it’s good for them to remain as he was. So Paul was clearly single at the time that he wrote this letter. And this comparison probably implies that Paul was also a widower. We can’t say that for certain, but I think it’s the most likely possibility. Now Paul wasn’t commanding widows and widowers to remain single. He was just giving them a recommendation. He didn’t want them to rush into another marriage without considering the possibility of remaining single. There are a lot of advantages to being single, as we’re going to see later in this chapter. I don’t think Paul could have done all the missionary work that he did if he had a family. His singleness gave him the freedom to serve the Lord in ways that he couldn’t have if he were married.

But then in verse 9 Paul switched his focus from singleness to marriage. He said, “But if they do not have self-control, they should marry, since it is better to marry than to burn with desire.” So in this verse Paul gave a conditional statement. And the condition was not having self-control. He was considering a scenario in which some widows and widowers didn’t have the self-control to resist sexual temptation. Most likely they were going to prostitutes to find sexual fulfillment. But Christians should be growing in self-control, because it’s part of the fruit of the Spirit. If we are truly saved and have the Holy Spirit living in us, then he’s going to be helping us to grow in this area. Paul said later in chapter 10 and verse 13 that God will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able. God’s power is always available to help us say “no” to temptation.

But if any Christian widows and widowers don’t have much self-control in this area, then Paul said in verse 9 that they should marry. In fact, Paul used a third person imperative in the Greek text here. He wasn’t just making a suggestion; he was giving a command! A better translation here would be the phrase “they must marry.” Now Paul wasn’t saying that other widows and widowers can’t get married. He just wasn’t giving them a command to get married. They were free to remain single or get married. But what Paul was saying here is that some single people must get married. If widows and widowers are weak spiritually and lack the self-control to resist sexual temptation, then it’s God’s will for them to get married. This doesn’t mean that these people should go out and get married to someone that day. They shouldn’t rush into a sinful marriage or even an unwise marriage. But they need to be pursuing marriage diligently and make it a high priority to get married soon.

And Paul finished verse 9 by giving a reason for these people to obey his command. He said that they must marry “since it is better to marry than to burn with desire.” Now the phrase “with desire” at the end of the verse doesn’t actually come from the Greek text. And so the word “burn” could be a reference to God’s judgment. The point would be that it’s better for widows and widowers without self-control to get married than to continue committing sexual sin and end up being judged in hell. After all, back in chapter 6 and verse 9 Paul said that the unrighteous will not inherit God’s kingdom. And when he listed some prominent examples of unrighteous people, the first ones in his list were sexually immoral people. So professing Christians who continue living in sexual sin are not truly saved. They’re not going to reign

with Jesus when he comes back to rule on earth for a thousand years. Instead they're going to be punished in hell for all eternity.

So Paul could have been talking about burning in God's judgment in chapter 7 and verse 9. But I agree with most Bible translations that Paul was talking about burning with desire or passion. He wasn't saying that the desire for sexual intimacy is wrong. But if we lack self-control, we will be consumed by that desire and commit sexual immorality. So what we see here is that marriage provides a measure of protection against sexual sin. After all, marriage is the only setting in which we can have sexual relations and be pleasing to God. Now of course marriage isn't just about enjoying sexual intimacy, but it's certainly a big part of marriage. It's a good gift from God that helps us to avoid sinning against him.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:10. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "To the married I give this command—not I, but the Lord—a wife is not to leave her husband." So in verses 8–9 Paul was addressing single people and specifically widows and widowers. But in verses 10 and following he was talking to married people. And in the Greek text this verse actually starts with a conjunction that emphasizes this contrast. It's the same conjunction that Paul used at the beginning of verse 9, and there it's translated with the word "but" in almost every Bible version. Now most Bible translations don't have the word "but" at the beginning of verse 10. But the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible have this word, and I believe that they're correct.

So Paul was talking to the married here in verse 10, and he used the same Greek word for marry that we just saw in verse 9. It's a verb that refers to a man and woman becoming husband and wife. Now in verse 9 Paul was giving a command for certain single people to get married, but here in verse 10 he was talking about people who were already married. And he did that by using the Greek perfect tense. The perfect tense in Greek refers to a completed action with continuing results. So Paul was addressing people who got married in the past, and they continued to be married in the present. Their marital status had not changed since the time they got married. And what Paul did was give married people a command.

Now the Christian Standard Bible has the phrase "give this command" in verse 10, but in the Greek text there's just one word here. It's a verb that means "to command." So Paul wasn't implying that he was giving just one command here. There is only one command in verse 10, but next week we're going to see a few more commands in verse 11. And all these commands flow from this statement at the beginning of verse 10 about Paul commanding married people. Now it's important to note that Paul was talking about Christian marriages here. In other words, he was referring to marriages in which both the husband and the wife are believers. He didn't make a clear statement to that effect, but when we get to verse 12, we're going to see that he started talking about mixed marriages in which only one spouse is a believer. So this must mean that he was talking Christian marriages in verses 10–11. After all, he gave commands to both the husband and the wife in these verses, and he didn't give commands to unbelievers in his letters.

But before we look at Paul's command at the end of verse 10, we need to examine Paul's statement in the middle of the verse. He said, "Not I, but the Lord." So the commands that Paul gave in verses 10–11 were not really his commands but the Lord's commands. Now we need to make sure that we don't misunder-

stand this statement. This doesn't mean that Paul didn't write these commands in verses 10–11. It's not like he set his pen down, and all of a sudden Jesus appeared and wrote these verses. Paul was just saying that Jesus was the one who originally gave these commands. Paul was certainly writing them down here, but Jesus was the ultimate source of these commands.

Now does this mean that these commands carried more authority than Paul's other commands? I believe the answer to this question is no. Paul was an apostle, and as an apostle he was an official representative of Jesus. So when Paul gave commands in his letters, those commands carried the same authority as the commands of Jesus. Paul didn't have to repeat the commands of Jesus for his commands to have full authority. And Paul understood this point very well. Look at what he said later in chapter 14 and verse 37: "If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, he should recognize that what I write to you is the Lord's command." In this passage Paul was giving commands about public worship, but there's no reason to think that he was repeating any commands given by Jesus. Instead he was saying that his commands should be viewed as though they were coming from Jesus. When Paul gave commands, the Lord Jesus was speaking through him.

The Greek word for Lord is a title that's used over 700 times in the New Testament. We've already seen it 23 times in this letter, and in most of those cases it's clearly referring to Jesus. For example, in chapter 1 and verse 3 Paul wrote, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." But even when this word is used by itself, we've seen that it normally refers to Jesus. In chapter 2 and verse 8 Paul said, "None of the rulers of this age knew this wisdom, because if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." That verse is clearly referring to the crucifixion of Jesus. In chapter 6 and verse 14 Paul said, "God raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by his power." That verse is clearly referring to the resurrection of Jesus.

So I think it's pretty obvious that Paul was referring to Jesus when he used the word "Lord" in chapter 7 and verse 10. The Greek word here is pronounced "kurios," and it usually just means "master." It normally stresses the idea of authority, and so it shows here that Jesus is in charge and that we must submit to him. Now some Christians think that we don't need to trust in Jesus as our Lord to be saved. We just need to trust in him as our Savior, and then maybe down the road we can submit ourselves to him as our Lord. But that's not what Scripture teaches. Acts 16:31 tells us that we must believe in the Lord Jesus to be saved. Romans 10:13 says that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." So we can't receive Jesus as our Savior without also recognizing him as our Lord. We can't be saved without submitting to his lordship over our lives.

So Paul was saying in 1 Corinthians 7:10 that the Lord Jesus gave some commands while he was on earth that were relevant for married people. And the first one that Paul covered is found at the end of this verse. He said that "a wife is not to leave her husband." The Greek word for leave is used 13 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote seven of them. Four of these occurrences are found in this letter, and all of them are used in verses 10–15 of this chapter. This Greek word just means "to separate by departing from someone." It's used in Acts 18:1, which says that Paul "left Athens and went to Corinth." He departed from some people in one place and went to visit people in another place. In Romans 8:39 Paul

used this word when he said that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” So Paul was saying that God’s love will never depart from us.

But here in 1 Corinthians 7:10 Paul was talking about separation in the context of marriage. Now we might think that he was talking about something less than divorce. These days married couples often separate if they’re unhappy with their marriage. They treat this separation as a trial run to see if they want to make it permanent and eventually get divorced. But the next verse makes it clear that this is not what Paul was talking about. He said in the beginning of verse 11 that if a wife does leave her husband, “she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband.” We will cover this statement in more detail next week, but Paul was clear that a wife was unmarried if she left her husband. In other words, she was not longer married but single.

So when Paul talked about a wife leaving her husband at the end of verse 10, he obviously meant that she was divorcing him. That’s why the NET Bible actually has the word “divorce” here. Now I don’t have a problem with the word “leave,” which is in the Christian Standard Bible, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible. This word certainly hints at the idea of divorce. But I find the English Standard Version and the New International Version to be misleading here. They have the word “separate,” and I think most people would interpret this word to refer to something less than divorce, as I was just talking about. But the context makes it clear that Paul was talking about divorce here. He was saying that he had a command from the Lord Jesus that a wife should not divorce her husband.

Now at this point we should see if we can locate any material from Jesus in the gospels that’s related to divorce. And indeed there are several passages for us to consider. We can find some teaching on divorce from Jesus in three of the four gospels. Let’s start with the gospel of Matthew, which has the most extensive teaching on this subject. And next week we’ll look at the other two gospels. In Matthew the first comments that we have from Jesus about divorce are found in the Sermon on the Mount. Look at what he said in chapter 5 and verses 31–32: “It was also said, Whoever divorces his wife must give her a written notice of divorce. But I tell you, everyone who divorces his wife, except in a case of sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

In chapter 5 Jesus repeatedly used this phrase “it was said” or “it was also said.” And then he went on to quote a common statement used at that time. Sometimes it was even based on a passage of Scripture, but the problem was that the people were misinterpreting the passage. And in verse 31 we can see that many people thought divorce was okay in a variety of circumstances. But in verse 32 Jesus corrected this faulty view. He said that if a man divorces his wife, he causes her to commit adultery. The point here is that she would need to get remarried to avoid being destitute in that culture. And Jesus said that she was committing adultery when she got married, because she was sleeping with someone she wasn’t supposed to be married to. And Jesus also said that the man she married was also committing adultery, because he was sleeping with someone who was supposed to be married to someone else.

But Jesus did give an exception here in verse 32. He didn’t say that divorce was always wrong. He said that it was wrong “except in a case of sexual immorality.” So a husband could divorce his wife if she commit-

ted sexual immorality and was unfaithful to him. Then when she got remarried, she wasn't committing adultery, because the divorce was acceptable in God's sight. Now this doesn't mean that God commanded divorce in this situation. He was just giving permission for divorce. And I think we should limit this exception to unrepentant sexual immorality. After all, Jesus said in Luke 17:4 that if someone sins against us seven times in a day and repents each time, we need to forgive that person. And Ephesians 4:32 says that we need to forgive each other just as God forgave us in Christ. But when God forgave us, he didn't just wash away our sins. He also reconciled us to himself and made us part of his family. So forgiveness implies reconciliation. It would be wrong to forgive someone and refuse to be reconciled to that person. That's not true forgiveness.

Now let's look at the longest passage on divorce in Matthew's gospel. Look at chapter 19 and verses 1–9: “When Jesus had finished saying these things, he departed from Galilee and went to the region of Judea across the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. Some Pharisees approached him to test him. They asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife on any grounds?’ ‘Haven't you read,’ he replied, ‘that he who created them in the beginning made them male and female,’ and he also said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.’ ‘Why then,’ they asked him, ‘did Moses command us to give divorce papers and to send her away?’ He told them, ‘Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because of the hardness of your hearts, but it was not like that from the beginning. I tell you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery.’”

So in this passage we see that the Pharisees were up to their old tricks. They thought that they could trap Jesus by asking him about a very controversial subject. They asked him if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason. At that time there was a big debate among Bible scholars. Some of them thought that God permitted divorce for any reason at all, while others believed that we're only allowed to get divorced if our spouse commits sexual immorality. But Jesus began his response by pointing back to creation and giving the ideal situation. He referred to the creation of the woman in Genesis 2. And he quoted verse 24, which says that a man and a woman become one flesh when they get married. Then Jesus concluded on the basis of this statement that divorce really shouldn't be happening at all.

But the Pharisees weren't satisfied with this answer. They wanted to know why the Old Testament had a provision for divorce. They were referring to Deuteronomy 24, where Moses regulated the practice of divorce. Look at what he said in verses 1–4: “If a man marries a woman, but she becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, he may write her a divorce certificate, hand it to her, and send her away from his house. If after leaving his house she goes and becomes another man's wife, and the second man hates her, writes her a divorce certificate, hands it to her, and sends her away from his house or if he dies, the first husband who sent her away may not marry her again after she has been defiled, because that would be detestable to the LORD. You must not bring guilt on the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.”

So under divine inspiration Moses permitted a man to divorce his wife if he found something indecent

about her. The Hebrew text has a word here that literally means “nakedness,” and it implies that she committed sexual immorality. She was unfaithful to her husband, and so he could divorce her. But then the situation gets rather complicated. This woman ended up getting married to another man to avoid being destitute, but eventually he either died or divorced her. And Moses was focused here on what might happen next. He said that the woman’s first husband was not allowed to remarry her. He wasn’t saying that she couldn’t get remarried at all, but she couldn’t get married to her first husband. I think Moses was trying to discourage divorce and make a man think twice about getting divorced. If he divorced her, he couldn’t have her back once she got remarried!

So in Matthew 19 Jesus acknowledged that Moses did permit the people to get divorced, but he said that divorce was allowed because of the hardness of their hearts. In other words, it was only permitted because of unrepentant adultery. And so in verse 9 Jesus said that “whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery.” In other words, Jesus said that the people who thought they could get divorced for any reason were wrong. He gave only one exception: sexual immorality. And Jesus made it clear that this exception covered both divorce and remarriage. After all, the whole point of getting a divorce certificate was to allow a person to get remarried. The certificate provided the proof that a person was eligible to marry someone else.

But if a man divorced his wife for any other reason than unrepentant sexual immorality, then he was committing adultery when he got married to another woman. Now this doesn’t mean that he was committing perpetual adultery. It’s not like he was committing adultery every time he slept with his new wife. The point is simply that he committed adultery when he entered into this marriage, because that wasn’t supposed to happen. But once it does happen, the husband and wife need to stay married and remain faithful to each other. There’s no biblical evidence that people in this situation should get divorced. God has never commanded anyone to get divorced in any circumstance. Now God doesn’t recognize any same-sex marriages because they don’t fit his definition of marriage. But he does recognize every marriage between a man and a woman, even the ones that aren’t supposed to happen.

So in Matthew 5 and 19 Jesus allowed for divorce and remarriage under one condition: unrepentant sexual immorality. Now he didn’t technically give a command for a woman not to divorce her husband like Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:10. But Paul was accurately summarizing the teaching of Jesus on this point. Jesus said a husband and a wife were committing adultery if they got divorced and remarried under most circumstances. And of course adultery is wrong according to Scripture. So even though Jesus didn’t actually give a command not to get divorced, we can legitimately extrapolate a command from his teaching. That’s what Paul was doing when he said that a wife is not to leave or divorce her husband. Now Paul was only dealing with the wife’s perspective here in verse 10, but next week we’re going to see the husband’s perspective in verse 11. So both the husband and the wife need to stay committed to their marriage. If two believers get divorced for any other reason than unrepentant adultery, then at least one of them is committing sin!

Now sadly the divorce rate is about the same for professing Christians as it is for non-Christians. Studies show that about one-third of marriages end in divorce, and the rate is actually higher for nominal Chris-

tians. Now thankfully the divorce rate is significantly lower for committed Christians. But there are still way too many divorces happening among professing Christians who are probably saved. And so we shouldn't think that it can't happen to those of us who are married. We need to fight hard to protect our marriages. We should do everything we can to avoid divorce. Now both the husband and the wife need to be committed to the marriage if it's going to last. But we need to make sure that we're doing our part! So let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to strengthen our marriages.