

1 CORINTHIANS 7:11

November 20, 2022

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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 verses 1–6 Paul said that a husband and wife have a marital duty to give sexual intimacy to each other. They're under each other's authority in this area. They're not allowed to abstain from sexual relations unless it's for the purpose of being devoted to prayer. But they have to agree on it and choose a specific length of time. Then in verse 7 Paul said that both singleness and marriage are gifts from God that we should appreciate. And in verses 8–9 he talked to widows and widowers about these two gifts. In verse 8 he recommended that they remain single like he was. But in verse 9 he commanded them to get married if they didn't have the self-control to resist sexual temptation.

Then in verses 10 and following Paul began talking to married people. In verse 10 he said, “To the married I give this command—not I, but the Lord—a wife is not to leave her husband.” So in this verse Paul gave married people a command. But he said that this command ultimately came from the Lord Jesus. Now Paul didn't mean that this command carried more authority than his other commands. As an apostle Paul was an official representative of Jesus. So whenever 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. But Paul wanted the Corinthian believers to know that this command here was given by Jesus while he was on earth. And this command was that “a wife is not to leave her husband.”

The Greek word for leave just means “to separate by departing from someone.” And so some people think that Paul 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're going to cover this statement in more detail shortly, 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, what he meant was that she was divorcing him. But Paul commanded wives not to do that, and this command came from the Lord Jesus. So 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. Last week we started with the gospel of Matthew, which has the most extensive teaching on this subject. Let's review what we learned in this gospel before we move on to 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 people were misinterpreting the passage. And in verse 31 we can see that some 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 committed 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 can 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. Now 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 all the way 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 24:1–4, where Moses regulated the practice of divorce. In verse 1 he permitted a man to divorce his wife if he found something indecent about her. The Hebrew text has a word there that literally means “nakedness,” and it implies that she committed sexual immorality. She was unfaithful to her husband, and as a result he could divorce her. So in Matthew 19 Jesus acknowledged that Moses did indeed 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 sexual immorality. That's why Jesus said in verse 9 that “whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery.”

So Jesus said that the people who thought they could get divorced for any reason were wrong. He gave only one exception: sexual immorality. And he made it clear that this exception covered both divorce and remarriage. After all, the whole point of getting a divorce certificate was to give a person permission 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.

Now let's cover some new material and turn to the other two gospels that record the teaching of Jesus on divorce. Look at Mark 10:1–12: “He set out from there and went to the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Then crowds converged on him again, and as was his custom he taught them again. Some Pharisees came to test him, asking, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ He replied to them, ‘What did Moses command you?’ They said, ‘Moses permitted us to write divorce papers and send her away.’ But Jesus told them, ‘He wrote this command for you because of the hardness of your hearts. But from the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother 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.’ When they were in the house again, the disciples questioned him about this matter. He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. Also, if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.’”

Did this passage sound familiar to you? It should have, because it's very similar to the one that we just read in Matthew 19. Now these passages don't match each other perfectly, but that's not a problem. I think it's safe to say that neither gospel records every detail of this story. They're not giving us a precise description of what took place. They're just giving us an accurate summary of this event. But there is one difference here that has generated a lot of controversy. In verses 11–12 the statements from Jesus against divorce and remarriage are absolute. There is no exception given for sexual immorality like we saw in Matthew's gospel. He just said that a husband who gets divorced and remarried committed adultery, and so does a wife who gets divorced and remarried. So it sounds like Jesus didn't allow for divorce and remarriage in any situation at all.

And we have the same situation in the gospel of Luke. This is the third and final gospel that records the teaching of Jesus on divorce. Now Luke didn't record the full story that we have in Matthew and Mark. But he did give the conclusion of the story. Look at what Jesus said in Luke 16:18: "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and everyone who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." So once again the statements against divorce and remarriage are absolute. There is no exception given for sexual immorality. Jesus said that a husband who gets divorced and remarried commits adultery, and so does a man who gets married to a divorced woman. There doesn't seem to be any wiggle room here.

So how should we handle this apparent contradiction? There are many approaches that have been suggested by Bible scholars, but I'll just mention three of them. The first one is that Jesus didn't really give an exception for sexual immorality. Instead Matthew added that part. This view is held by Bible scholars who are more liberal. Most of them believe that Matthew wrote his gospel after Mark and Luke wrote theirs. They also believe that Matthew copied large portions of Mark and that he made changes when he disagreed with Mark. In fact, many of them don't even think that Matthew wrote this gospel but that someone else wrote it several decades after his death.

But this view has some major flaws. First of all, no Bible scholar rejected Matthew's authorship of this gospel until the last few hundred years. In fact, no Bible scholar before the 1800s even believed that Matthew's gospel was written after Mark or Luke's gospels. Everyone believed that Matthew was the first gospel to be written. It was the universal view of early church leaders. That's why it's the first gospel in our New Testament! The earliest church leaders also believed that the gospel writers did not copy each other but that they worked independently. The similarities between the gospels are simply based on the accurate reporting of multiple eyewitnesses. And the differences can be explained by different emphases or different levels of thoroughness.

So there's no good reason to think that Matthew included anything in his gospel that wasn't an accurate representation of what really happened. The writers of the New Testament were very concerned about reporting the truth. They didn't shy away from exposing the flaws of the apostles or disagreements among leaders. They didn't hesitate to preserve the most difficult teachings of Jesus. And we know that the Holy Spirit protected them from making any errors as they wrote Scripture. Jesus said in John 14:26 that the Holy Spirit would help the apostles remember everything he taught them. In John 16:13 Jesus

said that the Spirit of truth would guide them into all the truth. So we should accept the view that the exception to get divorced and remarried for sexual immorality really came from Jesus. It wasn't something that Matthew invented.

But we're still left with the problem of how to resolve this apparent contradiction with Mark and Luke. And so let's consider a second approach for how to handle this issue. The second view is that Jesus wasn't actually talking about married people in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. When he gave the exception for sexual immorality in these verses, he was talking about people who were betrothed or engaged. This is the view held by John Piper as well as a few other scholars. And they get this view from a comparison with Matthew 1. Look at verses 18–19: “The birth of Jesus Christ came about this way: After his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant from the Holy Spirit. So her husband Joseph, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her publicly, decided to divorce her secretly.”

So we can see here that Joseph was already considered to be Mary's husband even though they hadn't gotten married yet. Jewish engagement was treated much more seriously than engagement in our culture today. You couldn't just break off an engagement on a whim in those days. You actually had to get divorced. And Joseph decided to get divorced from Mary because he assumed that she had committed sexual immorality. Now we know that he didn't go through with the divorce, because the next verse tells us that an angel spoke to him in a dream and brought him up to speed with what was going on. He found out that Mary was still a virgin and hadn't been unfaithful to him. But clearly Joseph believed that he had a right to divorce Mary for sexual immorality.

So this view says that Jesus was commenting on this kind of situation in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. He was basically offering a defense for Joseph's intentions. He was saying that it would not have been a sin for Joseph to get divorced from Mary before they were married if she had actually committed sexual immorality. But once people are married, there is no longer permission from God to get divorced. So this view is essentially saying that there is no exception for divorce and remarriage. The only exception is for engaged people when one of them commits sexual immorality. But in our culture and most other cultures there's no need to get divorced in those circumstances. Only married people get divorced, but this view argues that all divorce and subsequent remarriage is sinful.

However, there are some glaring problems with this view. The biggest one is that it doesn't fit the immediate context in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. There is no mention in those two passages about engaged couples. Instead it's clear that Jesus was talking about married couples. In Matthew 19:10 his disciples responded by saying, “If the relationship of a man with his wife is like this, it's better not to marry.” So the original listeners understood Jesus to be teaching about marriage. But even if we still think that he was talking about engaged couples, we haven't solved the contradiction with Mark's gospel. Now we just have a different kind of contradiction. In Matthew Jesus was supposedly talking about engaged couples, and in Mark Jesus was talking about married couples. But clearly both gospels are recording the same incident, and so Jesus had to be talking about the same kind of people in both gospels. And I think it's clear that he was talking about married people, not engaged people.

But we still have a third view to cover, and it's the best solution to this apparent contradiction between Matthew's gospel and Mark and Luke's gospels. It's also the most popular view among conservative Bible scholars. This view is that Jesus was talking about married people and that he actually spoke the exception to get divorced and remarried for sexual immorality. But Mark and Luke just didn't record it because they were writing primarily to Gentiles, who universally agreed that divorce and remarriage were permitted for sexual unfaithfulness. So Mark and Luke didn't need to include the exception because it was understood. We do this sort of thing regularly. For example, we have a rule at our house that we have to eat all the food on our plate or in our bowl. But there's an obvious exceptions to that rule that we don't usually talk about. If we get sick and vomit during the meal, then we don't have to finish. Otherwise our sickness would get worse!

Now let's return to 1 Corinthians 7. In verse 10 we've seen that Paul commanded a wife not to leave or divorce her husband, and he said that this command came from the Lord Jesus. Now he didn't mention the exception that Jesus gave in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. But Paul was writing mainly to Gentiles, and so this exception was understood. It didn't have to be stated explicitly. Now technically there is no command from Jesus in any of the gospels about this matter of divorce. But Paul was accurately summarizing the teaching of Jesus on this point. Jesus said that 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 let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:11. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "But if she does leave, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband—and a husband is not to divorce his wife." So Paul started this verse with a contrast. He ended verse 10 by saying that a wife is not to leave her husband, but then he discussed the possibility that a wife does leave her husband. What he did here was give a conditional statement that starts with the word "if." He was presenting a scenario in which a wife disobeys the command that he just gave. In fact, he even used the same Greek verb for leave that we saw in verse 10. He was connecting these two statements together and contrasting them.

But this time Paul added another word that isn't represented in most Bible translations. It's normally translated with the word "and," which is exactly what we see in the King James Version. This translation has the phrase "but and if she depart," but the word "and" makes absolutely no sense here. It's very poor grammar to have the word "but" followed by the word "and." So the New King James Version gives us another way to translate the Greek word that normally means "and." This translation has the phrase "but even if she does depart." And the word "even" fits much better here. It adds some emphasis to this statement and shows that Paul was talking about something that he didn't want to happen. It's not a good thing for a wife to leave her husband!

But Paul wanted to give some instructions about a wife who does leave her husband. He completed the conditional statement in verse 11 by saying that "she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband." So Paul was very clear here that when he talked about a wife leaving her husband, he meant

that she was divorcing him and becoming single. He used the same word for unmarried that we saw in verse 8. There he used it to refer to widowers, but here he was referring to divorced women. And we get confirmation of this conclusion at the end of verse 11. Paul said, “And a husband is not to divorce his wife.” Paul was just reversing the command that he gave at the end of verse 10. There he said that a wife is not to leave her husband, and here he said that a husband is not to divorce his wife. So it’s pretty clear that Paul was giving the same requirement for both husbands and wives. He was using the words “leave” and “divorce” interchangeably.

Paul used the Greek word for divorce five times in his letters, and three of them are found right here in verses 11–13. So Paul continued to talk about divorce in the next few verses. Now the word “divorce” just basically refers to the termination of marriage. But it’s important to note that Paul was talking about Christian marriages here in verses 10–11. In other words, he was referring to marriages in which both the husband and the wife are believers. Now he didn’t make a clear statement to that effect in verses 10–11, 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 about 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.

So Paul was commanding Christian husbands and wives 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! And that’s why Paul said in the beginning of verse 11 that a divorced woman has only two choices. She must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. Now there are some Bible translations that put this statement in parentheses. That’s what we see in the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible. And these translations are handling the Greek text correctly. They’re showing us that the command at the end of verse 11 is parallel to the command at the end of verse 10. And so the statement at the beginning of verse 11 is a parenthetical remark that offers some clarification about the command at the end of verse 10.

But even this statement in parentheses has two parallel commands. The phrase “she must remain” comes from the same Greek verb that Paul used in verse 8. In both places he was talking about remaining single. In verse 11 this verb is a third person command in the original Greek, and so is the verb that’s translated with the phrase “be reconciled.” We’ve already seen several third person commands in this passage, but this is the first time that the Christian Standard Bible uses the word “must” in this situation. In my opinion this word is the best way to give a literal translation of a third person verb that preserves the strength of a command. Now obviously Paul wasn’t saying that a divorced woman needs to obey both of these commands. He joined these commands with the word “or,” which shows that he was giving alternatives. He was saying that that a divorced woman just needs to obey one of these two commands.

But why did Paul give two commands here? Why did he even give a divorced woman the option of remaining unmarried? Wouldn’t it be better for her to obey the second command and get reconciled to her husband? I think it’s obvious that the answer to this question is yes. They shouldn’t have gotten divorced in the first place, and so Paul wanted them to get reconciled. The Greek word for reconciled is used only

six times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote all of them. It's used only here in 1 Corinthians, and this is the only place where it's referring to marital reconciliation. Elsewhere it always refers to sinful people being reconciled to God.

Listen to what Paul wrote in Romans 5:10: "For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, then how much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life." So we were once God's enemies, but then he reconciled us to himself. Now listen to what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:18–20: "Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed the message of reconciliation to us. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ's behalf: 'Be reconciled to God.'"

So one of our jobs as Christians is to help unbelievers see that they're God's enemies and to plead with them to be reconciled to God. But we should also strive to live in unity with our fellow believers. We're part of the same family, and so we shouldn't be treating each other as enemies. Whenever we have disagreements or conflicts, we should try to get back on the same page and be reconciled to each other. And of course that principle applies to a Christian husband and wife as well. But we need to keep in mind that a divorced woman can't just snap her fingers and get reconciled to her husband. No matter how desperately she may want her marriage to be restored, she can't force her husband to be reconciled to her. And I think Paul was implying that what he said about divorced women is true for divorced men as well. A divorced man can't force his wife to be reconciled to him.

But divorced men and women should do everything that they can to get reconciled to their former spouse. That includes confessing any sin that they've committed against their spouse and asking for forgiveness. It's very rare that all the blame lies on one spouse when the marriage falls apart. But even if one person's sin was minimal, it's important to confess it and seek forgiveness. Hopefully that will trigger the other person to repent as well and get reconciled. But if that doesn't happen, the divorced person needs to remain unmarried. Now we've already seen that remarriage is allowed when a divorce takes place because of unrepentant sexual immorality. But Paul wasn't referring to that situation. He was talking about a divorce without biblical grounds. In that case the divorced person needs to remain unmarried, at least until the former spouse gets remarried. That way reconciliation remains an option. This is a difficult duty that requires great patience, but with God all things are possible. Let's close in prayer.