

1 CORINTHIANS 7:12–13

November 27, 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 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 10–11 Paul began talking to married people. In these verses he said, “To the married I give this command—not I, but the Lord—a wife is not to leave her husband. 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 in these verses Paul gave married people some commands. He said that a wife is not to leave her husband and that a husband is not to divorce his wife. Now at first it sounds like Paul was talking about two different actions here. But most likely he was using the verbs “leave” and “divorce” interchangeably in this passage. After all, he said that if a wife does leave her husband, she must remain unmarried. So Paul was not talking about the modern-day concept of marital separation, because in that situation the man and the woman are still married. He must have been talking about a wife leaving her husband in the sense of divorcing him.

Now in the middle of this passage Paul made a parenthetical remark. He acknowledged the possibility that a wife might not obey the command that he just gave. And in this case he said that the wife has only two choices. She must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. Now we might wonder why Paul even gave a divorced woman the option of remaining unmarried. Wouldn't it be better for her to 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 and be reunited as husband and wife.

But we need to keep in mind that a divorced woman can't just snap her fingers and be 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 action will trigger the other person to repent as well and get reconciled. But if that doesn't happen, then the divorced person needs to remain unmarried.

Now this doesn't mean that remarriage to a new spouse is never allowed after divorce. Paul didn't mention any exceptions here, but he did say that his commands ultimately came from the Lord Jesus. And we know from Matthew's gospel that Jesus gave one exception for divorce and remarriage. In Matthew 19:9 he said that "whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery." So Jesus permitted a husband to divorce his wife and remarry if she is unfaithful to him sexually. And I think it's safe to assume that the reverse is true as well. If a husband commits sexual immorality, his wife can divorce him and get remarried. But I think we should limit this exception to unrepentant sexual immorality. After all, Jesus taught that we need to forgive people who sin against us when they repent. And we need to forgive the way God forgave us in Christ, which means that forgiveness leads to reconciliation. So it would be wrong to forgive someone and refuse to be reconciled to that person. That's not true forgiveness.

Now Mark and Luke's gospels also give us some teaching from Jesus about divorce and remarriage. But they don't record this exception of unrepentant sexual immorality for divorce and remarriage. And I think the reason is that 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!

So I think Paul was just following the same approach that Mark and Luke used in their gospels. He didn't mention the exception of unrepentant sexual immorality for divorce and remarriage because it was understood. He was writing to the Corinthian church, which was of course made up of mostly Gentile believers. So they didn't need to be reminded about this obvious exception. But if a husband and wife get divorced apart from this exception, then Paul said that they need to remain unmarried and try to get reconciled. Now if one of them refuses to get reconciled and marries someone else instead, then I do believe that the other spouse can get remarried as well. But until that happens, there's a duty to remain single and pursue reconciliation. This duty is certainly difficult and requires great patience, but with God's help it can be done.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:12. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "But I (not the Lord) say to the rest: If any brother has an unbelieving wife and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her." Paul started this verse by giving us the word "but," which introduces a contrast. In verses 10–11 he gave some commands that summarized the teaching of

Jesus. But here in verse 12 he said that he was giving his own words and not the words of Jesus. And once again he referred to Jesus as “the Lord,” just like he did in verse 10. The Greek word for Lord is a title that stresses the idea of authority. It usually refers to Jesus and shows that we must submit to him. Scripture teaches that we can’t just trust in Jesus as our Savior. We must submit to him as our Lord as well. Acts 16:31 tells us that we must believe in the Lord Jesus to be saved. So we can’t be saved from eternal punishment unless we submit to his lordship over our lives.

But Jesus didn’t give instructions about every possible situation in his teaching. He certainly covered a variety of topics, as we can see in the gospels. But some important issues just didn’t come up, and so there was a need for God to give additional revelation. And Jesus had already prepared for this situation by choosing apostles to represent him and carry his authority. After he ascended to heaven, they certainly passed along his teaching to people. But they also gave additional instructions that were not covered by Jesus. And their commands carried the same authority as the commands of Jesus. So Paul wasn’t saying in verse 12 that the Corinthian believers were free to reject his words here and ignore them. They needed to submit to his instructions because God was speaking through him.

And Paul stressed his role in giving authoritative instructions by using a first person singular pronoun in the original Greek. It’s of course translated with the word “I,” and it’s the subject of the Greek verb for say. Now this probably sounds pretty normal, because in English we have separate words for the subject and the verb. But in Greek that’s not always the case, because Greek verbs have suffixes to indicate person and number. Now when a Greek verb is third person, there’s often a separate word that serves as the subject. But when a Greek verb is first or second person, there’s no need for a subject. That’s because there’s only one word that could be the subject. For a first person singular verb like we have here, the subject would have to be the first person singular pronoun. And so there was no need to have a pronoun in these cases, and normally it wasn’t there. But on rare occasions an author might choose to include the pronoun anyway, and that’s exactly what Paul did here in verse 12. So we should conclude that he was emphasizing the instructions he was about to give.

Now Paul said that he was directing his words in this verse to the rest. The Greek word for rest doesn’t refer to relaxing or sleeping. Instead it just refers to those who were not mentioned earlier. In verses 10–11 Paul said that he was talking to married people, and the implication of course is that he was referring to Christians. After all, he was writing a letter to the Corinthian church, which was made up of believers in Jesus. But now we can see clearly that Paul was not addressing all married believers in verses 10–11. He was only talking to some of them, and here in verse 12 he was talking to the rest of them. And if we keep reading, we can see which married believers he was talking to. He referred to someone who has an unbelieving wife. In other words, he was talking about a wife who did not believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. So this statement shows that in verses 10–11 he was talking about marriages in which both spouses were Christians. But here in verse 12 he was talking about marriages in which only one spouse was a Christian.

Now this doesn’t mean that Paul approved of a believer marrying an unbeliever. In verse 39 near the end of this chapter, Paul said that a widow “is free to be married to anyone she wants—only in the Lord.” The clear implication is that she was only allowed to marry a Christian. So in verse 12 Paul was talking about

believers who were already married to unbelievers. The idea is that both of them were unbelievers when they got married, but then one of them became a Christian. Now we know that sometimes God saves an entire household at the same time. That's what happened with the Philippian jailer's family in Acts 16. Verse 34 says that he "rejoiced because he had come to believe in God with his entire household." But other times God just saves one of the spouses in a household, and this is the situation that Paul was discussing in 1 Corinthians 7:12.

So in this verse Paul was talking about mixed marriages instead of Christian marriages. He referred to any situation in which a brother has an unbelieving wife. The Greek word for brother can be used to refer to either a physical relationship or a spiritual relationship. But in this letter it almost always refers to a spiritual relationship. Paul was emphasizing over and over that Christians are brothers and sisters in God's family. And Paul wasn't the first person who talked about this concept. It's a point that Jesus stressed during his earthly ministry. Turn to Mark 3, and let's look at what verses 31–35 say about Jesus: "His mother and brothers came, and standing outside, they sent word to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him and told him, 'Look, your mother, your brothers, and your sisters are outside asking for you.' He replied to them, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' Looking at those sitting in a circle around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'"

So what Jesus was saying here in this passage is that his followers make up his true family. In other words, our heavenly family takes priority over our earthly family. Now it's certainly a wonderful blessing when our earthly family members are part of our heavenly family as well. But that is often not the case. Turn to Matthew 10, and let's look at what Jesus said in verses 34–37: "Don't assume that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household. The one who loves a father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; the one who loves a son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." So the point here is that whether our earthly family members are believers or not, we must ultimately be loyal to Jesus. No one should be more important to us than him.

Now Jesus wasn't implying in these passages that we don't have any responsibilities to our blood relatives. In 1 Timothy 5:8 Paul said that a Christian man must provide for the members of his family. And those people include his parents if they need support. This is part of what it means to honor our parents, as Jesus taught us in Matthew 15:4–6. But as many believers have experienced, life can be difficult when we have family members who aren't saved. The closeness that we have with them is limited, because our bond is only physical and not spiritual. But as Christians we have the common bond of being adopted into God's family. We share a heavenly Father and an eternal destiny. We submit to the same Lord and read the same Scripture.

This is why it's so important for us to be part of a good church. If we're going to be together forever, then we should get started during this life! We should enjoy regular fellowship with our Christian brothers and sisters. We should pray together about our needs and concerns. And we should study God's word to-

gether and encourage each other to obey it. Those are all things that we do in this class! And they're just some of the reasons that gathering together for church is essential. We need to stay connected, especially as we face increasing opposition in this world. Paul told us in 2 Timothy 3:1 that "hard times will come in the last days," so we should expect things to keep getting worse for us in the future. And as that happens we need to keep encouraging each other to stand firm on God's Word.

So in 1 Corinthians 7:12 Paul referred to any brother who has an unbelieving wife. He had some instructions for any Christian man who has a non-Christian wife. But he wasn't just writing to these men as an apostle with authority over them. He also wanted them to understand that ultimately he was a fellow Christian. They were not his personal slaves but his spiritual siblings. But he did have some instructions to give to these men, and he communicated them in a conditional statement. A conditional statement has two parts: one that starts with the word "if," and one that starts with the word "then." And usually they come in that order, but often the word "then" is not used. However, it's still implied even when it's not there. Now the way a conditional statement works is that there's a condition that must be met for something to happen or be true. The part of the statement that starts with the word "if" is where the condition is given. And the other part of the statement is where we see what will happen if the condition is met.

Now in verse 12 we actually have two conditions in this statement that are joined together by the word "and." We've already looked at the first condition; it's that a brother has an unbelieving wife. So this condition is met if a Christian man has a non-Christian wife. But there's a second condition here as well; it's that "she is willing to live with him." The Greek word for willing means "to join in approval." It's a compound word that has two parts. The first part means "join," and the second part means "approval." This Greek word is used only six times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote three of them. One of them is of course in this verse, and we're going to see another one in the next verse.

But the other place where Paul used this word is found in Romans 1:32. In the second half of Romans 1 Paul was focused on the wickedness of unbelievers. And he gave a long list of sins in verses 29–31 that characterize wicked people. He mentioned things like envy, deceit, gossip, and pride. Now listen to what he said in verse 32: "Although they know God's just sentence—that those who practice such things deserve to die—they not only do them, but even applaud others who practice them." So wicked people are not just characterized by practicing a variety of sins. They are also characterized by applauding others who practice these sins. The Greek word for applauding is the same one that Paul used in our passage. It just means that wicked people join together in approving these sinful practices.

So in Romans 1 Paul was using this Greek word negatively, but in 1 Corinthians 7 he was using it positively. In verse 12 he talked about an unbelieving wife being willing to live with her believing husband. So the idea is that he wants to do something, and she joins him in approving of this course of action. She agrees with him and consents to do what he wants to do. In fact, some Bible translations actually give us the word "consents" in this verse. The English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible both have this word, and it's a good translation. But the word "willing" is also a good choice. This is what we have in the Christian Standard Bible, the New International Version, and the New Living Translation.

But what is the unbelieving wife willing to do in this possible scenario? Paul said that she is willing to live with her husband. The Greek word for live is used nine times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote all of them. He used it three times in this letter: once in this verse, once in the next verse, and once back in chapter 3. Look at what Paul said in chapter 3 and verse 16: “Don’t you yourselves know that you are God’s temple and that the Spirit of God lives in you?” So in this verse Paul was saying that the Holy Spirit lives in every Christian. God’s Spirit doesn’t treat us like a hotel where he stays for a while and then leaves. He makes his home inside us, and he’s never going to leave or forsake us.

But in chapter 7 and verse 12 Paul was talking about a wife living with her husband. Notice that the preposition is different here. In chapter 3 it’s the word “in,” but in chapter 7 it’s the word “with.” So Paul wasn’t talking about a woman who makes her home in her husband. Instead he was talking about a woman who makes her home with her husband. In other words, they live in the same home. So if an unbelieving wife is willing to live with her husband, this means that she’s willing to stay married to him. She agrees to live under the same roof as him and have regular sexual relations with him. She’s not going to divorce him and find another husband.

So if both of these conditions in verse 12 are true—if a Christian man has an unbelieving wife and she is willing to stay married to him—then Paul’s instructions at the end of the verse went into effect. He said that the Christian man must not divorce his unbelieving wife. He wasn’t allowed to force her to stay married to him, but if she was willing to stay married to him, then he was not allowed to divorce her. The Greek word for divorce is the same one that we saw at the end of the previous verse. It’s used 143 times in the New Testament, and so it’s a pretty common word that can have different nuances. But the overarching meaning of this word is basically “to release someone from an obligation.” So this word often refers to canceling a debt or forgiving a sin. This is the word used in 1 John 1:9, where John said that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

But sometimes this Greek word has the nuance of releasing someone from the obligation of marriage. That’s basically what happens in a divorce. One spouse wants to get out of the marriage, and so that person releases the other spouse from all the obligations that come with marriage. But Paul said that a Christian man in a mixed marriage must not seek a divorce or initiate it. And he used a third person command in the original Greek to stress that he was not talking about an optional course of action. He required a Christian man to stay married to his unbelieving wife as long as she agreed to it. And I think Paul was implying that a Christian man should not treat her poorly or do anything unreasonable that would drive her away. Paul wanted the continuation of the marriage to be left up to the unbelieving wife.

Now let’s move on to 1 Corinthians 7:13. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: “Also, if any woman has an unbelieving husband and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce her husband.” Paul started this verse with the word “also,” but the Greek word here is normally translated with the word “and.” That’s what we see in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. But these two words have very similar meanings, and the point either way is simply that Paul was adding another statement in verse 13 to go with what he said in verse 12. In fact, these two verses are so similar so that almost all the words in verse 13 are repeated from verse 12. But this time Paul reversed the situation. Here he was talk-

ing about a Christian woman who had an unbelieving husband. And he gave the same requirements for her that he gave for a Christian man in a mixed marriage. He didn't give more leeway to the husband; instead he treated them the same way.

So what we see in verses 12–13 is that any Christian who is married to an unbeliever is forbidden from pursuing a divorce. But what if the unbeliever is willing to stay married but is not willing to remain sexually faithful? In other words, does the exception that Jesus gave in Matthew's gospel apply only to Christian marriages? Or does it apply to mixed marriages as well? Bible scholars disagree on this issue, but I'm inclined to think that it applies to mixed marriages as well. After all, if Paul assumed this exception in verses 10–11, then I think it's safe to say that he assumed it in verses 12–13 as well. Now certainly an unbelieving spouse is more likely to commit sexual immorality and not repent. But if the believing spouse is diligent to bring sexual pleasure to his or her spouse, then that person will be less likely to be unfaithful. And even if the unbelieving spouse is unfaithful and doesn't repent, there's no requirement to get divorced. It's certainly an option, but there are good reasons for staying in the marriage, as we're going to see next week. Staying married to an unbeliever is not easy, but it's a wonderful opportunity to show the love of Christ. Let's close in prayer.