

# 1 CORINTHIANS 7:14

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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. He commanded husbands and wives not to divorce each other. But if a divorce does take place, then they need to reverse course and get reconciled. And they need to remain unmarried while they pursue reconciliation. Marriage to anyone else is off limits. Now Paul didn't mention any exceptions to this rule, but we know from Matthew 19:9 that sexual immorality was an exception. Jesus permitted a husband to divorce his wife and marry someone else if she is unfaithful to him sexually. And I think it's safe to assume that the same thing is true for a wife whose husband commits sexual sin. But I believe that Jesus was talking about unrepentant sexual immorality. After all, he taught that we need to forgive people who sin against us when they repent. And Scripture teaches that true forgiveness leads to reconciliation.

Now Paul did not include this exception here in 1 Corinthians 7, but he didn't need to because it was understood. Most people at that time believed that divorce and remarriage were permitted for sexual immorality, and so Paul didn't need to mention 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.

Then in verse 12 Paul switched from talking Christian marriages to mixed marriages. He addressed the situation of a believer being married to an unbeliever. Now this doesn't mean that he approved of a believer getting married to an unbeliever. Instead he was talking about a believer who was already married to an unbeliever. The idea is that both of them were unbelievers when they got married, but then one of them became a Christian. And in verse 12 Paul commanded a Christian husband not to get divorced

from his unbelieving wife if she was willing to live with him. Then in verse 13 he said the same thing to a Christian wife. She is not to get divorced from her husband if he's willing to live with her. The idea is that the unbeliever wants to stay married. So Paul basically wanted the continuation of the marriage to be left up to the unbelieving spouse. 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 this exception 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.

And that leads us to 1 Corinthians 7:14. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "For the unbelieving husband is made holy by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy by the husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is they are holy." Paul started this verse with the word "for," which introduces an explanation for what he just wrote. In verses 12–13 he commanded the believer in a mixed marriage not to pursue divorce, and in verse 14 he gave the reason for staying in the marriage. And notice that Paul once again said the same thing to both the husband and the wife. In verses 12–13 he gave the same command to each of them, and in verse 14 he gave the same reason to both of them. Paul was careful not to pick on one of them over the other. He listed both of them side by side and taught them the same thing.

But it's interesting that Paul switched the order in verse 14. In verses 12–13 he addressed the believing husband first and then the believing wife. But then in verse 14 he mentioned the believing wife first and then the believing husband. We saw this same pattern in verses 3–4, and in both places Paul was using a beautiful literary device called a chiasm. Basically a chiasm is just repetition in reverse order. It's a very common literary device in Old Testament poetry, but sometimes we see it in the New Testament as well. The word "chiasm" is based on the Greek letter chi, which is shaped just like the English letter X. And this letter provides a visual illustration of what happens with a chiasm.

So let's pretend that the top of the X represents verses 12–13 and that the bottom of the X represents verse 14. In verse 12 the believing husband comes first and represents the top left part of the X. And he's called a brother here in the spiritual sense. Then in verse 13 the focus is on the believing wife, who represents the top right part of the X. But in verse 14 the believing wife comes first, and that statement represents the bottom left part of the X. Then Paul focused on the believing husband, and that statement represents the bottom right part of the X. But once again Paul referred to the husband as a brother in the spiritual sense. Now I didn't find the word "brother" in any of the standard conservative translations. I think the translators were afraid to imply the idea of incest here. But it's true that Paul used the Greek word for

brother, and there's a footnote in the Christian Standard Bible that alerts us to this fact. So what we have here is that the two lines in the X connect the matching ideas together.

But let's focus on what Paul said in verse 14 to the believing wife and the believing husband about why they should stay married to their unbelieving spouse. He said that the unbelieving husband is made holy by the wife and that the unbelieving wife is made holy by the husband. The Greek word for holy is a verb that's used 28 times in the New Testament. Paul wrote nine of them, and four out of those nine are in this letter. Two of them are right here in this verse, and we've already seen the other two. The first one was in chapter 1 and verse 2, where Paul said that he was writing "to the church of God at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus." Our Greek verb is translated with the word "sanctified" in that verse.

We also saw this verb in chapter 6 and verse 11. In verses 9–10 Paul gave a list of different unrighteous people and said that none of them would inherit God's kingdom. Then in verse 11 he wrote, "And some of you used to be like this. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." So once again our Greek verb is translated with the word "sanctified." And this is the word that most Bible translations give us in chapter 7 and verse 14 as well. It's found in the Legacy Standard Bible, the New American Standard Bible, the NET Bible, and the New International Version.

But the Christian Standard Bible and the English Standard Version have the word "holy" instead. And that's understandable, because the Greek verb here usually has the idea of holiness or being separate from sin. Look at Ephesians 5:25–26: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word." So one of the reasons that Jesus died on the cross was to sanctify us or make us holy. This is something that he's in the process of doing right now! But there's another sense in which we're already holy. That's why Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6:11 that the believers in Corinth were sanctified. He used a verb in the past tense to talk about what happened when we were saved.

Now this concept of sanctification is confusing for many Christians. Many of us have been taught that sanctification is not a reference to conversion but to spiritual growth. Perhaps you learned that justification is what happens to us at the moment of salvation, sanctification is what happens during our Christian lives on earth, and glorification is what happens when Jesus returns and we become perfect. And that's good, sound theology. This kind of sanctification is called progressive sanctification because it progresses slowly over a long period of time. That's what Paul was talking about in Ephesians 5:26, and it's also what Jesus was talking about in John 17 when he prayed for his disciples. In verse 17 he said, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." So even though the disciples were already believers, they still needed to be sanctified. In other words, they needed to grow spiritually. And the way that we're sanctified is through the Word of God. As we study the Bible and apply it to our lives, we will progress in our sanctification and become more holy.

But there's another kind of sanctification taught in Scripture, and it's called positional sanctification. Theologians call it positional sanctification because it's not pointing to our behavior but our position be-

fore God. It doesn't describe what happens during our present lives as Christians but what happened in the past when we were saved. It doesn't refer to a long period of time but to a single moment. So the idea here is that when we were converted, there's a sense in which we became perfectly holy in God's sight. He no longer sees our sin because he has forgiven us. Now of course we do still sin, and that's where progressive sanctification comes into play. Progressive sanctification is simply the process by which our practice slowly begins to match our position before God. With positional sanctification God declares us holy, and with progressive sanctification we grow in holiness.

So the Greek word for sanctified usually refers to holiness or being separate from sin. And it can refer to positional sanctification or progressive sanctification. But sometimes this word for sanctified does not refer to holiness. In John 10:36 Jesus referred to himself as "the one the Father set apart and sent into the world." That phrase "set apart" comes from the same Greek word for sanctified that we've been looking at. But in that verse it's clearly not referring to holiness. After all, Jesus has always been holy, and so there's no way for him to become holy or grow in holiness. He was just as holy before he came to earth as he was when he was on earth. And that's why the Christian Standard Bible uses the phrase "set apart" instead of the word "sanctified." The Greek word for sanctified in the broadest sense just means "to set apart for a special purpose." It usually refers to being set apart from sin, but in this case Jesus was set apart to enter the world and die for our sins.

Now let's return to 1 Corinthians 7:14 and consider how Paul was using the Greek verb for sanctified in this verse. But first we need to note that this verb is in the perfect tense and the passive voice in both of its occurrences here. The passive voice indicates that the subject of the verb does not perform the action but receives the action. Here's a simple example in English: Billy was hit by the ball. Billy is the subject of the verb, but he didn't do the action. He didn't hit the ball; instead the ball hit him! He received the action of the verb. But what is the subject of the Greek verb for sanctified in our verse? Well, in the first statement the subject is the unbelieving husband, and in the second statement the subject is the unbelieving wife. So the unbelieving husband and the unbelieving wife are not doing the sanctifying. Instead they're being sanctified. They're receiving the action of the verb.

But who did the action of this verb then? Earlier I gave you the statement that "Billy was hit by the ball." And in this statement we know what did the action of the verb. It's communicated in the phrase "by the ball." And in verse 14 we have similar phrases. Paul said that the unbelieving husband is made holy or sanctified by the wife. And he said that the unbelieving wife is made holy or sanctified by the husband. So the believer in a mixed marriage is the one who is sanctifying the unbelieving spouse. Now the Christian Standard Bible makes it sound like the verbs are in the present tense here. But they're actually in the perfect tense, as I already mentioned. In biblical Greek the perfect tense refers to a completed action with ongoing results. So the idea here is that the believer in a mixed marriage sanctified the unbelieving spouse in the past, and the results of this sanctification continue throughout the marriage.

But what did Paul mean by these two statements in verse 14? Was he saying that the believer in a mixed marriage made the unbelieving spouse holy in some sense? That's what the Christian Standard Bible and the English Standard Version are basically saying here. But I just don't see any way that this interpretation

can be valid. Unbelievers simply cannot have the status of being holy in God's sight. That's because he hasn't forgiven them of their sins. Now on a practical level some unbelievers may seem like they're pretty holy, because they don't commit a lot of outward sins. But Isaiah 64:6 says that the righteous deeds of unbelievers are like a polluted garment. After all, Hebrews 11:6 says that it's impossible to please God without faith in him.

So I don't agree with the interpretation of the Christian Standard Bible in 1 Corinthians 7:14. I don't think that Paul was talking about holiness or being separate from sin here. We need to get back to the underlying meaning of the Greek verb in this verse. Remember that this verb basically means "to set apart for a special purpose." But what is this special purpose that the unbelieving husband and the unbelieving wife are set apart for? The old Holman Christian Standard Bible says that they're set apart for God, but I don't think that's quite right. I think the best explanation is that they're set apart to receive a special Christian witness and influence from their believing spouse. They were set apart for this purpose when their spouse got saved, and the results of being set apart continue for as long as they're married.

So Paul's focus here is on the salvation of the unbelieving spouse. And that's exactly what we see in the context here. Look at what he wrote in verse 16: "Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife." The point here is that the believer in a mixed marriage has a unique opportunity to be a powerful Christian witness to the unbelieving spouse. The unbeliever can see the evidence of God's work in the believer on a daily basis. That's exactly what Peter was talking about in 1 Peter 3:1–2. Listen to what he said in that passage: "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, even if some disobey the word, they may be won over without a word by the way their wives live when they observe your pure, reverent lives."

Now I don't think Peter was saying that believers in mixed marriages should never talk about the gospel and Christian truth with their unbelieving spouses. But it's not a good idea to do that nonstop, because it could become annoying to the unbelieving spouses. And the good news is that speaking the gospel isn't the only way to be a gospel witness. We can also be a gospel witness by the way we live. As we grow in obedience to the Lord, unbelievers can see the change in our lives. They can see that God has saved us and is transforming us to be more and more holy. But if a believer in a mixed marriage gets divorced, then that special Christian witness and influence is basically removed from the unbeliever's life. God could still save that person using other means, but from a human perspective that unique opportunity is gone. And so this is a very powerful motivation for a believer to stay married to an unbeliever.

But apparently the Christians in Corinth were concerned about the negative influence that an unbeliever might have on the believer in a mixed marriage. And this is a valid concern that is certainly found in Scripture. We can even see it taught later in this letter. In chapter 15 and verse 33 Paul said that "bad company corrupts good morals." And this statement certainly applies to marriage. This is why God commanded the Israelites through Moses not to intermarry with the Canaanites. Listen to what Moses said in Deuteronomy 7:3–4: "You must not intermarry with them, and you must not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, because they will turn your sons away from me to worship other gods."

But of course the Israelites disobeyed this command at various times. One of them is found in Ezra 10. Listen to what a man named Shecaniah said to Ezra in verses 2–3: “We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the surrounding peoples, but there is still hope for Israel in spite of this. Let us therefore make a covenant before our God to send away all the foreign wives and their children.” And that’s exactly what happened on this occasion. The Israelite men divorced their foreign wives. But we shouldn’t conclude that what they did was right. And we can get confirmation of this point by observing that Nehemiah found himself in the same situation a short time later. Nehemiah 13:23 says that he saw Jews who had married foreign women. And he certainly confronted them over this sin. But there’s no indication that he told them to divorce their wives. That would be trying to correct one wrong deed with another wrong deed, but two wrongs don’t make a right!

So we need to make sure that we’re balanced on this issue. Scripture is clear that a Christian shouldn’t get married to an unbeliever. But if it does happen, then the Christian should not seek a divorce. That’s what Paul was clearly teaching in 1 Corinthians 7:14. Now this is certainly a dangerous position for a believer to be in. Any Christian who is in a mixed marriage needs to be very careful to guard against temptation. Being married to an unbeliever means that the world’s influence in the home will probably be strong. But there’s also a lot of potential for good to come from this situation as well. And that was Paul’s focus in this passage. God doesn’t just take us home to be with him in heaven when he saves us. Instead he leaves us on earth to be his witnesses. And a mixed marriage is a special opportunity to do that.

But at the end of verse 14 Paul gave another reason that a believer in a mixed marriage shouldn’t pursue a divorce. He said, “Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is they are holy.” Now in the Christian Standard Bible this sentence starts with the word “otherwise.” But the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible give us the word “for” before the word “otherwise.” And this is a more literal translation. Now the Greek word here that means “for” is not the same one that we saw at the beginning of this verse. But it has the same meaning and the same function. It’s introducing an explanation for what Paul wrote in verses 12–13. He was giving another reason that a Christian shouldn’t get divorced from an unbeliever. And Paul did that by focusing on the children in the family.

Now this doesn’t mean that all mixed marriages result in children. But certainly most of them do, and in that case the children provide an additional reason for a believer to persevere in the marriage. Even many unbelievers recognize that children are better off when their biological parents stay married. But Paul’s focus here at the end of verse 14 was more specifically on the spiritual benefits for the children. He made a contrast between the statuses of the children based on the marital status of their biological parents. If their parents stay married, then they are holy. But if their parents get divorced, then they would be unclean. Now a more literal translation here is actually that they “are unclean.” That’s what we see in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. But Paul was talking about a hypothetical situation here, and that’s why he used the word “otherwise.” So the Christian Standard Bible is just using the phrase “would be” to reflect the hypothetical nature of the situation.

Now the Greek word for unclean often refers to moral impurity, but I don’t think that’s how Paul was using it here. This word can also refer to something that was ceremonially unclean. During Old Testament

times God's people were not to touch things that he told them were unclean, like certain kinds of food. This is why Peter said in Acts 10:14 that he had never eaten anything impure and ritually unclean. So I think Paul was using an Old Testament illustration here in verse 14 to talk about what would happen to the children if their parents got divorced. His point was that the Christian influence of the believing parent will probably be minimized to some degree if there's a divorce. After all, any time that the children spend with their unbelieving parent is unlikely to be positive from a spiritual perspective.

But if the parents in a mixed marriage stay married, then their biological children have the status of being holy. The Christian Standard Bible has the phrase "as it is" here, which comes from a Greek word that just means "now." So Paul was talking about the current situation for the Corinthian believers who were in mixed marriages. Now the Greek word for holy is very common in the New Testament. It's used over 200 times, and Paul wrote almost 80 of them. We see 12 of them right here in our letter. And usually this word refers to being separate from sin. It has this meaning in chapter 6 and verse 19, where it refers to the Holy Spirit. The point there is that Spirit is completely separate from sin. But this Greek noun comes from the same root as the Greek verb for holy or sanctified that Paul used earlier in the verse. And so I think that Paul was saying the same thing here about the children that he was saying about the unbelieving spouse. His point was that these children are set apart for a special purpose. And that purpose is to receive a special Christian witness and influence from their believing parent.

So in 1 Corinthians 7:14 Paul said that Christian parents have two reasons for staying married to an unbeliever and not pursuing a divorce. And this goes beyond the simple fact that it's the right thing to do in God's eyes. The first reason is to be a gospel witness and a godly influence on their spouse. And the second reason is to be a gospel witness and a godly influence on their children. You know, I've often heard Christian leaders say that relationship evangelism is the most effective way to evangelize people. Well, Paul was talking about the ultimate form of relationship evangelism in this verse! The two strongest human relationships are the husband-wife relationship and the parent-child relationship. So any Christian who has an unsaved spouse or unsaved children should want desperately for them to get saved. And the best way for that to happen is to stay married. It's certainly a difficult situation to face, but God gives us the strength to do what he has commanded. Let's close in prayer.