

# 1 CORINTHIANS 7:15A

December 18, 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 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 his focus from 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 verse 14, where Paul gave two reasons that a believer in a mixed marriage should not pursue a divorce. First he said that the unbelieving spouse is made holy by the believing spouse. But the word "holy" is not a good translation here, and that's because unbelievers simply cannot have the status of being holy in God's sight. After all, 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.

But the Greek word for holy in 1 Corinthians 7:14 does not always refer to holiness. Sometimes it just has the broader sense of being set apart for a special purpose. And in this verse I think Paul was talking about being set apart to receive a special Christian witness and influence. So the point here is that the believer in a mixed marriage has a unique opportunity to have a powerful Christian testimony to the unbelieving spouse. The unbeliever can see the evidence of God's work in the believer on a daily basis. Now the believer should certainly talk about the gospel with the unbelieving spouse. But 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. Now certainly the unbeliever could have a negative influence on the believer in a mixed marriage. And so 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. A believer in a mixed marriage has a special opportunity to be a strong Christian witness to the unbelieving spouse.

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." The Greek word for unclean probably refers to being ceremonially unclean instead of morally unclean. During Old Testament times God's people were not to touch things that he told them were unclean, like certain kinds of food. 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 is minimized to some degree if there's a divorce.

But if the parents in a mixed marriage stay married, then their children have the status of being holy. The Greek word here for holy comes from the same root as the word for holy that we saw earlier in this verse. And so I think that Paul was saying the same thing 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. 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.

Now let's move on to 1 Corinthians 7:15. We're ready to cover some new material. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "But if the unbeliever leaves, let him leave. A brother or a sister is not bound in such cases. God has called you to live in peace." Paul started this verse with the word "but," which introduces a contrast. In verses 12–14 he commanded believers who were in a mixed marriage not get divorced. But here in verse 15 he gave an exception to this rule. And he presented it in the form of a conditional statement. A conditional statement has two parts: one that starts with the word "if," and one that starts with the word "then." Sometimes the word "then" is not used, but it's still implied even when it's not there. We've already seen several conditional sentences in this chapter. In fact, there are four conditional statements in the previous six verses. And now we have another one here in verse 15.

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. So the condition here is that the unbeliever leaves. The Greek word for unbeliever is the same one that we saw four times in verses 12–14. In each case it refers to a person who does not believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. It refers twice to an unbelieving husband twice and twice to an unbelieving wife. But here in verse 15 the words "husband" and "wife" are not used. And that's because Paul was using the word "unbeliever" to refer to either spouse.

So Paul was talking an unbelieving spouse, and he considered the possibility that this person leaves. The Greek word for leaves 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. We al-

ready saw two of them in verses 10–11, and the other two are here in verse 15. 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 leave us or depart from us.

But here in 1 Corinthians 7:15 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 verse 11 makes it clear that this is not what Paul was talking about. He said in the beginning of verse 11 that if a wife leaves her husband, “she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband.” So Paul stated plainly that a wife was unmarried if she left her husband. In other words, she was no longer married but single.

So when Paul talked about the possibility of an unbeliever leaving in verse 15, he was talking about divorce. That’s why the NET Bible actually has the word “divorce” here. Now I don’t have a big problem with the word “leaves,” which is in a variety of translations like the Christian Standard Bible, the Legacy Standard Bible, the New American Standard Bible, and the New International Version. After all, the word “leaves” certainly hints at the idea of divorce. But I find the English Standard Version to be misleading here. This translation has the word “separates,” 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 talking about the possibility of an unbeliever initiating a divorce.

So in verses 12–14 Paul taught very clearly that a believer should not initiate a divorce from an unbeliever. But what if an unbeliever initiates a divorce from a believer? This is the situation that Paul was addressing here in verse 15. And in this situation Paul said that the believer should let the unbeliever leave. Now once again the Greek verb for leave refers to divorce, but this time Paul put it in the form of a command. Now usually commands are given in the second person. I give these kinds of commands to my kids all the time. For example, just recently I told one of them to set the table. And that command was in the second person because the word “you” was implied. So a second person command is given directly to the listener or the reader.

But in verse 15 we don’t have a command in the second person. Instead Paul used a third person command. We’ve already seen a few third person commands in this chapter. They’re not super common in Greek, but in English they’re even more rare. So it’s actually not very easy to think of a good example. The only one that I could come up with is this statement: “Somebody help me!” So this command is not directed to a specific person. Instead it’s given more indirectly to people in general. Now I don’t like the way most Bible translations usually handle third person commands, because they tend to be too weak. For example, in verses 2–3 the Christian Standard Bible has the word “should,” which is not a very strong word. So I prefer using the word “must,” and thankfully that’s what the Christian Standard Bible has in verses 11–13.

But here in verse 15 the Christian Standard Bible and most other Bible translations have the word “let.” And normally I would oppose using this word to translate a third person command. But in this case I have to make an exception, because we’re looking at an unusual situation. First of all, we need to notice that Paul was giving this command indirectly to an unbelieving spouse. And that’s pretty strange, because Paul almost always gave his commands to believers. He would have had very little reason to think that any unbelieving spouses would have heard this letter when it was read to the Corinthian church. And it’s doubtful that any unbelieving spouses would have cared about what he had to say to them anyway.

But there’s another reason that this third person command in verse 15 is so strange. It sounds like Paul was commanding the unbeliever to get divorced! But that interpretation just doesn’t make any sense. After all, Paul just presented the possibility that an unbeliever would get divorced. So why would Paul command this person to get divorced? Why would he say, “If the unbeliever leaves, he must leave?” That’s pretty redundant, isn’t it? So this is one of the rare cases in which a command has the nuance of permission. A good example of this nuance is found in Matthew 8, where Jesus encountered a man who was possessed by a bunch of demons. In verse 31 they said to Jesus, “If you drive us out, ... send us into the herd of pigs.” And in verse 32 Jesus said, “Go!” The word “go” is a command, but Jesus was just giving the demons permission to do what they requested.

And I think we have a similar situation here in 1 Corinthians 7:15. Just like Jesus gave some demons permission to enter a bunch of pigs, Paul gave unbelieving spouses permission to get divorced. And I think Paul’s point here was that he wanted the believing spouses to have the same approach. He wanted them to permit their unbelieving spouse’s divorce. So if an unbeliever in a mixed marriage initiates a divorce, the believer should not resist it or fight against it. Instead the believer should tolerate the divorce and go along with it. Now certainly the believer should not provoke the divorce in any way, outside of simply living like a Christian of course. But there is no need for the believer to offer any resistance if the unbeliever pursues a divorce.

Now what if two professing Christians get married, and later one of them rejects the Lord and turns away from the faith? Then we should treat that person like an unbeliever who was never saved in the first place. That person was just a pretender like Judas Iscariot. And if that unbeliever wants a divorce, then this passage applies to that situation. The believer should grant the divorce. But if the person who initiates a divorce still professes to be a Christian, then the church discipline process should take place. The steps that Jesus gave us in Matthew 18 should be followed. And if the person doesn’t repent and eventually gets excommunicated from the church, then 1 Corinthians 7:15 essentially applies at that point. The person is not giving sufficient evidence of being a Christian and should basically be treated like an unbeliever. And so at that point the believer should tolerate the divorce.

But once an unbeliever has gotten divorced from a believer, then what? Is the believer free to get remarried to someone else? Paul addressed that issue in the middle of verse 15. He said, “A brother or a sister is not bound in such cases.” Notice that Paul referred to the believer as a brother or a sister. Back in verse 12 Paul referred to the believing husband as a brother, and he actually did the same thing in verse 14, even though our translations aren’t very literal there. But here in verse 15 he didn’t just use the same Greek

word for brother. He also used the Greek word for sister as well. He wanted to be thorough here and refer to both a believing husband and a believing wife. Obviously he was using these words to describe a spiritual relationship, not a physical relationship. He was talking about a Christian brother or sister.

Now the Christian Standard Bible has the English indefinite article in front of these two words. But in the original text the Greek article is used, which is roughly equivalent to the English definite article. That's why most translations have the English definite article here, like the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, the New American Standard Bible, and the New International Version. I think the reason Paul used the article here is that he already mentioned the believing husband and wife several times in the last few verses. And when you've already talked about something, it's natural to use the definite article when you refer to it again. Paul was just pointing back to the previous few verses and continuing his discussion about the believer in a mixed marriage.

But what Paul said here in verse 15 was that the Christian brother or sister was not bound in such cases. The phrase "in such cases" is a reference back to the beginning of the verse, where Paul was talking about the unbeliever's divorce from the believer. When an unbeliever gets divorced in those cases, the believer is not bound. The Greek verb for bound is used eight times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote six of them. It's used one more time in 1 Corinthians, and we can find it in chapter 9 and verse 19. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: "Although I am free from all and not anyone's slave, I have made myself a slave to everyone, in order to win more people." In that verse our Greek verb is translated with the word "slave," because that's basically what the word means. It comes from the same root as the Greek noun for slave.

So when Paul said in chapter 7 and verse 15 that the Christian brother or sister is not bound, he was saying that they were no longer a slave. He was basically referring to marriage as slavery. Now I know that concept sounds offensive in our culture, but that's because we've been trained to think that slavery is inherently wrong. However, the New Testament states very clearly that all believers are God's slaves. Paul said in Romans 6:22 that we "have been set free from sin and have become enslaved to God." We're God's slaves because he's our Lord and master now. We belong to him, and so we owe him our absolute allegiance. And in a lesser sense husbands and wives belong to each other. As we saw earlier in 1 Corinthians 7, husbands and wives have a marital duty to each other, and they have authority over each other's body in terms of sexuality.

But if an unbeliever gets divorced from a believer, then the believer no longer has any marital obligations to the unbeliever. The believer is not bound in marriage anymore to that person. Paul was basically saying that God recognized and approved the divorce. And what this means is that the believer has God's permission to get remarried to someone else. There's nothing in Scripture to indicate that someone who has God's approval to get divorced does not have God's approval to get remarried. Instead there's an assumption that a biblically sanctioned divorce entailed the right to remarry. In fact, that's exactly what was indicated on a Jewish divorce certificate. It stated that the divorced person was free to get remarried.

Paul used this same language later in 1 Corinthians 7. Look at what he wrote in verse 39: "A wife is bound as long as her husband is living. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to anyone she wants—

only in the Lord.” Now in this verse Paul was talking about a woman whose husband died and not a woman whose husband divorced her. But in both places he used the language of being bound. The Greek verb is different than the one that he used in verse 15, but they have very similar meanings. So in verse 39 Paul made it clear that when a wife is no longer bound to her husband, she is free to get remarried to someone else, as long as he’s a believer. And we should apply the same principle in verse 15 as well. Paul didn’t spell it out as clearly here in verse 15, but he didn’t need to because it was obvious what he meant. Readers in the first century would have understood that he was allowing for remarriage.

Now Paul was not commanding the Christian brother or sister in verse 15 to get remarried. If an unbeliever gets divorced from a believer, there’s no obligation to remarry anyone. But there’s also no need to wait around and hope that the unbeliever has a change of heart. In fact, as long as that person remains an unbeliever, the believer can’t remarry that person, because a believer is only supposed to marry a fellow Christian. The divorce terminates that marriage for good unless the unbeliever gets saved, and the likelihood of that happening is much lower than before the divorce. So God does not require a believer in that situation to remain single. For most divorced women to remain single in the first century would have involved being destitute. That may not be the case anymore, but divorced people are still deprived of marital intimacy and companionship if they can’t get remarried. And our Lord is not a cruel God who prohibits his children from enjoying the blessings of marriage. Let’s close in prayer and thank God for providing the gift of marriage for us.