

1 CORINTHIANS 7:15B–16

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Turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7. In the first 24 verses of this chapter Paul was focused on the theme of marriage. First he talked about the need for a husband and wife to give sexual intimacy to each other. Then in verses 10–11 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 here, but we know from Matthew 19:9 that sexual immorality was an exception. If either spouse was sexually unfaithful and didn't repent, then Jesus allowed for divorce and remarriage. Paul just didn't mention this exception because everyone in that culture would have understood that it was implied.

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. And he 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.

And in verse 14 Paul gave two reasons that a believer should stay in a mixed marriage. First he said that the unbelieving spouse is made holy by the believing spouse. But sometimes the Greek word for holy doesn't refer to being separate from sin. Instead 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. But if the believer gets divorced from the unbeliever, then that special Christian witness and influence is basically removed. 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 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 the point here is that the Christian influence of the believing parent is minimized if there's a divorce. But if the parents in a mixed marriage stay married, then their children have the status of being holy. And once again Paul was talking about being set apart for a special purpose. He was saying that the children receive a special Christian witness and influence from their believing parent. So the best way for a believer in a mixed marriage to lead the spouse and kids to the Lord is to stay married.

But in verse 15 Paul gave an exception to this rule. He said, "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." So Paul didn't want the believer in a mixed marriage to initiate a divorce. But if the unbeliever wanted to leave the marriage, that was a different story. Paul said that the believer should let the unbeliever leave. 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 go along with 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." The Greek verb for bound just refers to being a slave, and so 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. Yet the New Testament states very clearly that all believers are God's slaves. 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 this chapter, 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 the chapter. In verse 39 he said that “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 for the believer 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 God doesn’t require the believer to wait for that remote possibility to happen. Instead he allows the believer to get remarried to someone else.

Now we’re ready to cover some new material. We didn’t finish verse 15 last week, so let’s look at the last statement in this verse. Paul said, “God has called you to live in peace.” Now the Christian Standard Bible and most translations are missing a key word at the beginning of this statement. But we do see this word in the Legacy Standard Bible and the New American Standard Bible. It’s the word “but,” and it comes from the same Greek word that we saw at the beginning of the verse. In both places Paul was introducing a contrast with what he had just written. But at first glance it’s not easy to figure out exactly what Paul meant with this second contrast. How is there a contrast between allowing an unbeliever to get divorced and living in peace? It seems like these statements complement each other nicely. After all, if the believer resists the divorce, then that’s not a peaceful relationship.

So I don’t think that Paul was talking about divorce when he referred to peace here. In other words, he wasn’t talking about ending a marriage peacefully. Instead we should view this statement as a contrast with the rest of verse 15. In the beginning of this verse Paul was giving an exception to his rule that a believer and an unbeliever should stay married. But now at the end of the verse he was done talking about that exception. Instead he started a new sentence and returned to the theme of verses 12–14. He was focused on the need for a believer to stay committed to a mixed marriage and not initiate a divorce. So he used a contrast at the beginning of verse 15 to mention the exception to his rule, and at the end of verse 15 he used another contrast to talk about his general rule once again.

So when Paul said that God has called us to live in peace, he was talking about remaining married. Now let’s talk about some of the Greek words in this statement. The Greek word for called is very common in the New Testament. It’s used 148 times, but Paul wrote only 33 of them. However, 12 of them are in this letter, and nine of them are right here in this chapter. In fact, all nine of them are found in verses 15–24. But we’ve already seen this word once before in the letter. In chapter 1 and verse 9 Paul wrote, “God is

faithful; you were called by him into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” So Christians are people who have been called by God, and one of the purposes of this call is to bring them into fellowship with Jesus.

Now when the word “called” is connected to salvation, it can have two different nuances. The first one is the external call of the gospel that goes out to people in general. When we share the gospel with people, we’re inviting them or calling them to turn from their sins and trust in Jesus to save them. But the word “called” can also refer to the internal call by which God draws certain people to himself and enables them to put their faith in Jesus. Listen to what Jesus himself said in John 6:44: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up on the last day.” Then a little later in verse 65 Jesus said something very similar: “No one can come to me unless it is granted to him by the Father.”

Now Jesus didn’t use the word “called” in these two verses, but he was clearly talking about the concept of the internal call. We also see this call taught in Romans 8, and in that chapter the word “called” is used. Look at what Paul wrote in verse 28: “We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” In this verse Paul described believers in two ways: those who love God and those who are called according to his purpose. So the word “called” here does not refer to the general call for all people to be saved, because Paul was talking only about believers. He had to be referring to a special call in which God draws to himself the people he’s chosen to save.

We can find confirmation of this view in verse 30. Look at what Paul said about God in this verse: “Those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified; and those he justified, he also glorified.” So in this verse it’s clear that Paul was still talking about believers. Christians are the only ones who are predestined and justified. But Paul said that those who have been predestined and justified are the same people who have been called. So Paul could not have been talking about the external call of the gospel, because that’s directed to anyone, including people who reject it. Instead Paul must have been talking about the internal call that is directed only to the elect.

Theologians refer to this concept as the effectual call because it’s always effective. When God calls people in this way and draws them to himself, he overcomes their natural inclination to rebel against him. And he enables them to turn from their sins and trust in Jesus to save them. This doctrine is so important that it’s included in the five points of Calvinism, which are represented in the acronym TULIP. The letter I in this acronym refers to irresistible grace, and it’s another way of referring to the effectual call. Sinners can resist the external call of the gospel, but they can’t resist the internal call to salvation. It’s always effective in bringing people to faith in Christ. After all, God is all-powerful and totally sovereign. He can do whatever he wants to do.

So in 1 Corinthians 1:9 Paul was talking about the effectual call to salvation because he was referring to believers. And that’s how Paul was using the word “called” in chapter 7 and verse 15 as well. The Greek word here for called is in the perfect tense, which means that it refers to a completed action with ongoing results. As Christians we’ve already been called by God to salvation, but that call has an impact on how we live the rest of our lives. And that’s what Paul talked about in the rest of this statement. He said that

God has called us to live in peace. Now the phrase “to live” doesn’t actually come from the Greek text. That’s why you won’t find it in the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, or the New American Standard Bible. But it doesn’t really make much sense to say that God called us in peace. Paul wasn’t saying that God called us in a peaceful manner. Instead he was saying that God called us to live in peace. That’s why the Christian Standard Bible and several other translations add this phrase “to live.” It’s just there for clarification.

Now let’s talk about the Greek word for peace. It’s used 92 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 43 of them. Four of them are found in our letter, and we’ve already seen the first one back in chapter 1 and verse 3. That’s where Paul gave his greeting to the Corinthian believers: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Now many people think of peace as an inner feeling, but that’s not how Scripture refers to peace. Instead this word is used to describe an absence of conflict. In Romans 5:1 Paul said that Christians have peace with God, and he could say that because we’re no longer his enemies. But Hebrews 12:14 says that we need to “pursue peace with everyone.” So all our relationships should be characterized by peace or an absence of conflict.

But of course it’s not always possible to live at peace with everyone. And Paul acknowledged that fact in Romans 12:18. Listen to what he said in this verse: “If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” So we can’t force other people to live at peace with us. We can only do our part and hope that other people do their part. A peaceful relationship requires the cooperation of both parties. And that’s true in marriage as well. This is exactly what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 7:15. He wanted the believer in a mixed marriage to do everything possible to live at peace with the unbeliever. And what this means is that the believer should not pursue a divorce. The best way to live at peace is to stay married, as long as the unbeliever is willing to do that.

Now let’s move on to verse 16. Look at what Paul wrote in this verse: “Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife.” Now the Christian Standard Bible doesn’t give us a very literal translation in this verse. First of all, it’s missing a conjunction at the beginning of the verse. But we can see it in the English Standard Version, the Legacy Standard Bible, and the New American Standard Bible. It’s the word “for,” which introduces an explanation for what Paul had just written. At the end of verse 15 Paul said that God has called us to live in peace, which means that a believer should not pursue a divorce from an unbeliever. Then in verse 16 Paul gave a reason for a believer to stay in a mixed marriage.

But this reason is presented in two parallel statements. The first one is given to a believing wife about her unbelieving husband, and the second one is given to a believing husband about his unbelieving wife. In both statements the focus is on the salvation of the unbeliever. But these statements are actually questions in the original Greek. The Christian Standard Bible is the only translation I looked at that doesn’t have questions here. Every other translation gives us two questions in this verse. And these questions start with the word “how.” The English Standard Version gives us a pretty literal translation here. It says, “For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?”

Now these questions sound kind of pessimistic when they're translated literally. But in the original Greek these questions can be either optimistic or pessimistic. And I think the optimistic interpretation makes more sense here. After all, Paul's main focus in verses 12–16 was to motivate believers in a mixed marriage not to get divorced. In verse 14 he talked about how the unbeliever is set apart by the believer. And now verse 16 is showing what he meant by that statement. He was talking about the unbeliever being set apart to receive a gospel witness from the believer. There's a possibility that the believer in a mixed marriage will save the unbeliever. There's no guarantee that it will happen, but Paul was saying that it could happen. And that's a good reason for the believer to stay in the marriage.

So even though the Christian Standard Bible is not very literal in verse 16, I like the fact that it gives us a more optimistic interpretation here. I just can't see how Paul would view the possibility of an unbeliever's salvation in a negative light. The main focus of his life was to present the gospel to as many unbelievers as he could! We should be spreading the seed of the gospel far and wide. Now it's certainly true that we don't know who will respond in saving faith. That's why Paul used the word "know" in each of these questions. God simply doesn't tell us whom he has chosen to save. That's part of his secret will, which he has decided not to reveal to us. Even Paul didn't know who was part of the elect. But his lack of knowledge never discouraged him from proclaiming the gospel.

We can see a good example of Paul's gospel mindset later in this letter. Look at what he wrote in chapter 9 and verse 22: "To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some." Paul was willing to do anything that didn't violate God's moral will in order to save unbelievers. He knew that he couldn't save everyone, but he was confident that he could save some people. Now Paul's language here seems pretty arrogant at first glance. Did he really think that he was the one who would save people? In fact, he used similar language in chapter 7 and verse 16. He talked about a believing wife saving her unbelieving husband and a believing husband saving his unbelieving wife. But isn't God the one who saves people?

Before I answer that question, let's talk about the Greek word for save. It's used 105 times in the New Testament, and Paul wrote 29 of them. It's used a total of nine times in 1 Corinthians, which is more than he used it in any of his other letters. Now sometimes this word refers to physical deliverance. For example, in Matthew 8 Jesus and his disciples were traveling in a boat when there was a huge storm. But Jesus was sleeping, and so verse 25 says that "the disciples came and woke him up, saying, 'Lord, save us! We're going to die!'" So it's obvious that the disciples were asking Jesus for physical deliverance there. But normally the Greek word for saved refers to spiritual deliverance in the New Testament. We've already seen this word four times in 1 Corinthians, and in all four cases it has this nuance. For example, in chapter 1 and verse 21 Paul said that "God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of what was preached."

So I think it's pretty obvious that Paul was referring to spiritual deliverance here in chapter 7 and verse 16 as well. But we just read in chapter 1 and verse 21 that God is the one who saves people. So was Paul contradicting himself in this letter? Does God save people, or do we save them? The answer is yes. There is no contradiction here. Both of these statements are true. God is ultimately the one who saves people, but

he's chosen to use us! Listen to what Paul wrote in Romans 10:13-14: "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing about him? And how can they hear without a preacher?" So unbelievers can't be saved unless they hear the gospel message proclaimed by someone or at least read someone's written gospel message. Even Scripture counts because God used people to write it down!

So when Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:16 that the believer in a mixed marriage might save his or her spouse, he was just saying that God might use the believer's gospel witness to save the unbeliever. God often chooses to use a close friend or relative to save people and draw them to repentance and faith. So whether you're in a mixed marriage or not, you need to be ready at all times to give a reason for the hope that's in you. We all need to be ready to tell people the good news of what Jesus has done for them when he died and rose again. He took our place on the cross and paid the penalty for our sins so that we can have eternal life! And when we live in consistent obedience to the Lord, unbelievers around us 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. And God can use that reality to draw unbelievers to himself. Let's close in prayer and ask God to help us shine as lights for him.