

Title: Till Death do us Part

Text: 1 Corinthians 7.10-16

Theme: The Priority of oneness in marriage

Series: 1 Corinthians #27

Prop Stmt. God's default settings for marriage is to stay and grow.

John was a successful surgeon. He and Jennifer had been married for about 15 years and they had 2 children. After getting involved in a Bible study with a friend, Jennifer became a follower of Jesus Christ. John was shell-shocked. His life had been going along according to a rather predictable pattern, when all of a sudden it seemed that everything was turned upside down. For example, take Sundays. Sunday was his only day off in the week, and he wanted to sleep in, go out for brunch or lunch, whichever came first, take the boat out on the lake, maybe watch a movie and just chill. But now, Jennifer not only got up early and left to go to church with the children, but in addition to that, she did not want to stay out too late on Saturday night. She bowed her head and prayed before she ate. That was just the beginning. Frankly, the whole thing scared John to death. He thought that she was in some cult. It was bizarre, like someone had exchanged places with her. She looked like the same girl he had married, but she was definitely no longer the same person and he did not like it. In addition to that, there was now another man in her life that she was always talking about. She brought this man over to their home. Before she made any decisions, she always wanted to talk to this man and seek his advice. That man of course, was Jesus.

John was used to fixing people's bodies. He was trained to do it and he was very good at it. His skills earned him a wonderful reputation, but he did not know how to fix this. One day it seems that he woke up and discovered that he and his wife were living on two different planets. How was he supposed to do life with someone that he was so connected to, and yet now had become so disconnected to him? As far as he was concerned, Jesus and some church had stolen his wife.

I told you this story, so that you would listen to this text with the understanding that these truths are personal. God's Word calls us to make personal decisions that impact how we live in our homes with the people to whom we are most tightly connected.

Read Text;

How many of you have had divorce affect your immediate family? I know that this issue has had a significant impact in your life. I am aware that there is no way that we can deal with this subject in simply a theoretical way. This text is full of memories, names, faces, events, scars, and fears. All of us can tell stories about this subject. There is a time and a place to listen to and help each other with our stories, meaning our lives. But in order to do that, we must first listen to and order our thinking and living to God's truth.

God is a person and in our study of 1 Corinthians, we are discovering just how personal His Word is. So many of you have said how much you've needed this series. Straight talk from God about personal matters in life provides such a wonderful foundation upon

which to stand. In this chapter, the straight talk about marriage continues. God teaches us these truths because He is good. This is good stuff, from a good God who desires goodness from his children. In the text we are looking at this morning, Paul is dealing with the issue of marriage and divorce and in particular this passage focuses mostly upon a marriage, where one spouse is a follower of Christ and the other spouse is not. This passage is not the only place in the Bible that addresses divorce. In fact, when Paul says in v.10 “(not I, but the Lord)” as a parenthetical comment, he is acknowledging that Jesus himself spoke about this. Jesus spoke about marriage and divorce in Matthew 19. Paul repeats the command that Jesus gave in Matthew 19, here in verses 10 and 11, although Paul does not repeat the exception to the command. After Paul repeats the command that Jesus gives, Paul then gives another command that speaks to a specific situation that was in question in the church at Corinth and he also gives an exception to the command. The immediate situation that Paul is addressing in Corinth is a subject of much discussion. Was divorce a big problem in the church in Corinth? It was clearly a huge problem in Roman society as a whole. Were there some married men and women claiming sexual abstinence as a means to a higher spiritual plain and were therefore pursuing divorce so that they could be focused more on the Lord, instead of a spouse? How much influence did the very casual view of divorce and remarriage in the culture influence the church? Partly because girls were often married around the age of twelve and partly because one in five pregnancies was fatal, but also because divorce and remarriage was socially acceptable as a means to climbing the social ladder, the idea of one man and one woman married for life was almost unheard of in the Roman world. Seneca and his wife Paulina were a notable exception. In the Jewish world, women were generally not able to initiate the divorce, but a man could typically divorce his wife for a variety of reasons, including making a lousy dinner. The teaching of Jesus and Paul was radical! Today, a very similar culture exists. Life is measured by the number of spouses and ex-es. I asked Jeff to sing as a solo today, George Straight’s “All my ex’es live in Texas” (which is why I hang my hat in Tennessee). But Jeff said he wouldn’t do that.

We can combine the Matthew 19 passage with the 1 Corinthians 7 passage and summarize the commands by saying this: Marriage is intended by God to join a man and a woman together for life. Therefore, do not get a divorce, even if you are married to an unbeliever, do not get a divorce. There are only two exceptions to this. 1) If your spouse is unfaithful, (and I would argue is unrepentant) you can pursue a divorce (Matthew 19.9). 2) If your spouse leaves you, you can get a divorce. Divorce on these grounds brings with it the right for remarriage. The elders have written a position paper on this that you can view on the web page or get a copy of in the bookstore that gives a little more detail on this.

So, basically, the text flows like this:

Command #1 - A believer may not divorce another believer. (10-11)

Command #2 – A believer may not divorce a spouse who is not a believer. (12-13)

- Reason #1 – Because of your influence on your spouse. (14ab)

- Reason #2 – Because of your influence on your children. (14c)

* Exception When the situation is beyond your control (15ab)

- Reason #3 – Because you are called to peace. (15c)
- Reason #4 – Because your spouse may become a believer. (16)

The Lord's Command is for you to stay married. That is the default setting for the home. That is the priority that God has for marriage. Develop your unity in marriage. Weave your lives together and guard your marriage from that which would seek to destroy the oneness. Satan's program is always to divide and conquer. God's program is to unite and be strong. The command to stay married in order to pursue unity governs this text. That is the big idea. Notice v.10a and 11b. "To the married" in v.10 is obviously speaking to those in the church at Corinth who were married. If you are married, you are to stay married. If there are problems, work them out. If you both are true followers of Christ, you can work them out. If you both are followers of Christ, there is no such thing as irreconcilable differences. Now, you are intelligent people, and you can appreciate the fact that there is no way that I can possibly construct every possible marriage scenario that would answer your questions about every specific situation. As you can see, the Bible does not do that. God gives us the commands and the principles that become the grid that we follow. But, in following that grid, I cannot emphasize enough how important it is that when dealing with this issue, we all do so with a heart that is fully committed to following Christ and being sensitive to what He wants to do in our lives, but also sensitive to what is going on the lives of others as well. Why is this text here? Why is there explanation and exceptions? It is here because this subject can get a little complicated. I like easy solutions that do not require much thinking and involvement. In the electronics world it is called "plug and play." The consumer just wants to plug it in and play it. But most of the important issues in life are not a simple matter of plug and play. So, while I acknowledge that every situation has its own specific dynamics and factors, here is the big idea that must govern how we approach it. Marriage is intended by God to be for life.

One more thing, before we work through the rest of the text and I am going to state the obvious: we are all frustrated with the divorce rate in our culture, and particularly in the arena of Christianity. No one that I know, who is a follower of Christ, treats this issue lightly. In fact, some of the people I know who are the strongest champions for unity in marriage are those who have gone through a divorce. Ok, you may be saying, I know that God wants a man and a woman to stay married till death do us part. But, what if....fill in the blank. The outline of this message reflects how the Bible deals with, what I am calling, the "but what if's".

1. **But what if two believers divorce (or separate)?** (11)

What if a girl who claims to be a follower of Christ divorces her husband anyway, now what? At the end of v.11 Paul switches the spouses so that it is clear that there is not a different command for women than there is for men. If you are a follower of Christ and you have divorced your spouse and you did not have biblical grounds, then you have two options; stay unmarried or be reconciled.

The Scripture is very clear isn't it? Now, here is where everything starts to get fuzzy. Someone will say.... Does God love you? Yes! Then, since God loves you, doesn't He want you to be happy? Sure! (After all, you love your kids and you want them to happy – don't you?) Well, then since God wants you to be happy and He knows that you are not happy in that marriage, surely God understands that you just can't be married to that guy or gal anymore. In fact, He would want you to get a divorce so that you would be happy. Now, if you are looking for an excuse or some rationalization, that sounds pretty good – doesn't it? What are the obvious flaws in that logic? First of all, can someone show me in the Bible where I have a God-given right to happiness? That stuff about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is in the constitution, not the Bible. The second flaw is the idea that you can only be happy if you are not married to that person anymore or that you will find happiness if you live in disobedience to our good God. In other words, happiness is dependent upon your circumstances being changed. The ultimate source of happiness is not circumstances, but God! Thirdly, the text is clear! Any rationalization that violates clear biblical truth is not rational.

Listen, if point #1 describes you, you belong here, because we want to help you. We know that God's grace is more than able to help and that a second chance does not have to mean second rate. We are all here in the family of God only because we all come together at the foot of the cross. What happened at the cross? Jesus died in our place so that we could be reconciled to God. Our reconciliation to God opens the door for us to be able to be reconciled to each other.

2. But, what if a spouse is unfaithful?

This scenario is not addressed in 1 Corinthians 7, but is addressed by Christ in Matthew 19.9. In that passage, after Christ makes it very clear that “what God has joined together, man must not separate” meaning that it is a violation of God's law to get a divorce, Christ does give an exception to that. That exception is “marital unfaithfulness.” That word (porneia) would include a number of sexual sins. That is what Jesus said in Matthew 19.9. Divorce is permitted in that circumstance, but it is not commanded. And I would argue that the unfaithful spouse is unrepentant. Keep in mind that Jesus teaching on divorce in Matthew 19 comes after his teaching on forgiveness in Matthew 18. If a spouse has been unfaithful and repents, the clear teaching of Jesus regarding repentance (Matthew 18) is that we forgive and reconcile. Forgiveness and reconciliation is part of our trademark as believers. Unrepentant immorality makes reconciliation impossible because it destroys the unity. That is why a divorce that has biblical grounds brings with it the right for remarriage. It is not my intent to go into much detail on the Matthew 19 passage. We do that more in the position paper that you can look at. But since it has been a while since I have addressed this subject on a Sunday morning, I did want to at least mention the exception clause that Jesus gave in Matthew 19.

3. But, what if my spouse is not a believer? (12-16)

Ok, look at this paragraph and you can see that this issue occupies most of Paul's attention. If you are married to an unbeliever, do everything that you can to stay with

him, or stay with her. This is apparently a problem in Corinth. Let's go back to my opening story about John and Jennifer. What if Jennifer is at church talking with a man who appears to be a spiritually minded man, is single and shares her love of the Bible. Is it possible for her to start thinking of how much better her life would be if she was married to a soul-mate? It would be so great to be married to a man who would sit with me in church, who would pray with me, who would know the Bible and would be a spiritual leader. In her heart, Jennifer could start rehearsing all of John's failures, especially his complete lack of spiritual life and in contrast she could look with desire upon some other guys' apparent spirituality and wish – "if only." Don't even start down that road. If you don't want to go to Milwaukee, don't get on the bus.

In my own personal experience as a pastor, I have seen several situations where a wife considers herself to be more spiritual than her husband (believer or not) and uses her perceived spirituality as an excuse for plain disobedience. The thinking goes like this: "Since I am so spiritually superior to him, I do not need to honor him, respect or follow his leadership. In my case, obviously, I need to be the leader." That attitude is dead wrong! In this text we are given four reasons why if a believer is married to an unbeliever he or she needs to stay married and pursue the unity of that marriage.

A. The Fact of Consecration (14a)

What did Paul mean by this? It appears that some of the people in the church at Corinth believed that if you were a believer and your spouse was not, then somehow you were being defiled, or stained because you were married to an unbeliever. If you became a Christian and your spouse did not become a Christian, are you held back in your spirituality? Are you polluted? No! Not only are you not being defiled in any way, you in fact are having a sanctifying influence on your spouse. Your presence and your life is like salt and light. The word "sanctifies" is not being used to refer to salvation, although as we will see in v.16 it is hopeful that it will lead to this. This word means to set apart. Paul is saying that a believer helps to bring a sanctifying influence into the home. Your spouse in a very practical way is being set apart to see and hear the gospel as you live it, and as you speak it. A follower of Christ should be a better husband or a better wife. In that way your spouse is being blessed by Christ through you, even though he or she may not admit it. If you divorce your spouse, then this personal opportunity for living and modeling the gospel is lost.

B. The Future of the Children (14b)

In Corinth, if a woman divorces her husband, she forfeits her parental role to him. Therefore if a woman, married and with children, comes to faith in Christ, but her husband does not and she divorces him, she loses the opportunity to influence the children for Christ. The concept of being holy is the same as being set apart or sanctified. There is a wonderful benefit for the children to have a father or a mother who is a believer and who prays for the children, who witnesses to the children, who helps to form the values, priorities and beliefs of the children. If the believing spouse is not in the home, then that opportunity is lost.

C. The Importance of Peace (15c)

The third reason the believing spouse is to do everything to stay married is because of the importance of peace. “God has called us to live in peace.” Pursuing a divorce is like ripping your heart out. For a believer to divorce an unbeliever because he or she is not a follower of Christ violates the very manner in which we are called to live. We are called to live as people whose lives are characterized by peace.

D. The Hope of Future Conversion (16)

There is no guarantee that your unbelieving spouse will be saved or will not be saved. Only God knows and you do not. But, if you divorce, then so much of the opportunity to expose him or her to the gospel is lost.

4. But, what if he/she leaves? (15ab)

What if someone divorces you? Or what if your spouse, who is not a believer, leaves you? What do you do if your spouse deserts you? The text says that you are free. You are not bound. You are free. What does it mean to be free? You are free. It means that you are free to remarry, or free to stay single. Of course, if you would remarry, exercise incredible caution, patience, and counsel from the church. God may still be at work in the life of your former spouse and may bring him to Christ and perhaps back to you.

I believe that in this passage we are given the second basis given in Scripture for divorce. The first is unrepentant marital unfaithfulness. The second is desertion. What does ongoing marital unfaithfulness and desertion have in common? Both make the unity of a marriage impossible. God hates divorce. The fact that He hates it does not mean that He does not permit it under certain circumstances. Does God like to watch people die? No! Then why would He permit the death penalty? Only because He loves and values life so much that when someone murders (which is so incredibly offensive to God) this demands that most severe response that can be given. The fact that God hates divorce does not mean that He does not permit it. He permits it as a rare and strong response to the severity of destroying oneness through unfaithfulness or desertion. But, the fact that God permits divorce in certain circumstances, does not mean that we should seek to exploit those in anyway.

When I was in high school, I dated a girl for a while whose dad was a pastor. I liked her and her family. They were always nice to me. As it turned out, nicer than the girl. I was driving my mom’s 1965 Pontiac station wagon at the time, and the girl dumped me for a guy whose dad was a doctor, and this guy drove his own BMW. How do you compete against that? Years later, my mom met up with the girl’s mom. The dad had left the ministry and left the mom for someone else. The result was devastating to the family, the church and so many friends. But, this lady, lived on her own, prayed for her husband and chose to keep the front door open. One day, he came back home. She did not have to do

that, but she did. Just because you have a right, does not mean that you have to exercise it. But if you do, then the church should not treat you as if you did not have that right.