

LOCATION: East Evangelical Free Church
 SERIES: Christ is the Answer When the Church Faces Challenges
 SERMON: **For Better or Worse, Unless . . .**
 SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 7:10-17
 SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus
 DATE: March 11, 2012

The best known futurist of our generation, Alvin Toffler, has described contemporary America as the **“throw-away society.”** Whereas Americans once held on to their possessions as long as possible, now the abundance of goods and rapidly changing fashions mean that things like clothes, kitchens, and cars have a built-in obsolescence, to say nothing of electronics. Things are kept only a short time and then thrown away.

This attitude has even extended to personal relationships, as we now have **“the disposable person,”** as seen in the widespread acceptance of **abortion** and the increasing tolerance toward **euthanasia**. Applying this disposability idea to marriage, Toffler suggests that in the future a person will normally have a **series of marriage partners**, each one suited to a different stage of life.¹

Such opinions are treated with **great seriousness, even enthusiasm**, by many in our secular progressive society, but they are **diametrically opposed** to the teaching of Scripture, where marriage is portrayed as a lifelong commitment and a beautiful picture of the **divine romance** between God and His people. Barely two generations ago, at least in the Christian community, nearly everybody got married **“for life.”** At the wedding ceremony they vowed **“for better or for worse”** and committed themselves permanently to each other with the words **“till death do us part.”**

Today, however, marriage is in serious trouble, **even** in the Church. I won't bother you with the latest statistics except to observe that the percentage of marriages among that end in divorce is not greatly different in the church than in the secular world. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to consider carefully what the Bible has to say about it. There are, as you may be aware, a number of Bible passages that tackle the subject of marriage and divorce, and I want us to examine a few of these passages for some **important biblical background** before we look at our text for today.

The general principle in Scripture is that marriage is permanent. God hates divorce.
 (Deut. 24:1-4; Mal. 2:10-16)

In Genesis 2:24 we are given the **very foundation** of marriage, as God establishes **the norm** of one man and one woman becoming one flesh for life. Already by the time of Moses (Deut. 24) God acknowledges the **existence of divorce** but rejects the cavalier attitude toward it that was beginning to infect Israel. He states clearly that if one chooses to divorce, and marries someone else, he or she cannot go back to the first spouse; there can be no musical chairs in marriage.

¹ Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*, 1971, 51, 74, 97, 251-56. David J. MacLeod, *The Problem of Divorce*, Emmaus Journal 3 (1994), 111.

Nearly a thousand years later, when divorce had become a terrible plague on Israelite society, the prophet Malachi quotes God as saying, **“I hate divorce.”** Some people have taken this as the totality of what God says about divorce and try to make it say more than it does. But please note that God doesn’t say, **“I hate divorced people.”** And He doesn’t say, **“I hate divorce more than anything else.”** In fact, of the top seven things God hates, according to Proverbs 6:16-19, divorce is not even listed. But He does hate divorce, and I believe there are at least four reasons why:

1. Because it violates His perfect plan for His highest creation.
2. Because it involves the breaking of a covenant, and He is a covenant-keeping God.
3. Because He loves people and doesn’t want them to suffer the pain divorce inevitably produces.
4. Because He loves children, and children are devastated by divorce.

And because God hates divorce, we should also hate it and reject it as the **easy solution** to the trials we face in marriage.

But that’s **not all** the Bible says about divorce. So I would like to ask two questions this morning. The first deals with **divorce in a Christian marriage**; the other with **divorce in a mixed marriage**. Regarding each we are going to examine two case studies. These four case studies probably won’t address every question you have, but they will answer a lot.

Let’s turn in our Bibles to 1 Cor. 7, and we’ll be reading verses 10-17. Last Sunday we began our study of 1 Corinthians 7—one of the most extensive passages in all of Scripture on sex, marriage, celibacy, divorce and remarriage. Paul began by pointing out that **singleness** is a good life, but *only* if celibacy is practiced. At the same time he affirms that **marriage** is also a good life, but *not* if celibacy was practiced. **Both** singleness and marriage **are gifts** from God, *as is sex itself*. Now he moves to the subject of divorce. As I read I want you to watch for the key words, **“must not.”**

1 Corinthians 7:10-17

¹⁰To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife **must not separate** from her husband. ¹¹But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband **must not divorce** his wife.

¹²To the rest I say this (I, **not** the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he **must not divorce** her. ¹³And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she **must not divorce** him. ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. ¹⁶How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

¹⁷Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches.

**Is it ever permissible for a Christian to divorce a spouse who is a professing believer?
(Matt. 19, 1 Cor. 7:10-11)**

And my own conviction is that the answer to that question is **“yes.”** There are certain very restricted circumstances under which divorce is allowable, despite the fact that God hates it. Let’s start with what Jesus Himself taught in Matt. 19. I will read just verses 8-9: “Jesus replied, ‘Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.’”

Case study #1: When one’s partner is guilty of persistent, unrepentant adultery, permission for divorce is granted, along with the freedom to remarry. If we were to read the whole context of Matt. 19 we would discover that **the pendulum** is again very busily at work as the religious leaders confront Jesus.

The **conservatives** argued that there are *never* any grounds for divorce. The **liberals** held that a man could get divorced for *any reason* at all. Knowing that the issue was very controversial, they tried to impale Jesus on the horns of a dilemma by asking *His* opinion, knowing that whatever side He took, He would alienate half the people. But as usual, Jesus escapes their trap. He argues that the very existence of divorce was **a divine concession** to the hardness of men’s hearts. It was **never** the ideal, **always** a result of the sinful condition of humanity.

First, He deals a **blow to the liberals** by claiming that remarriage after divorce is actually an act of adultery. **But then** he deals a blow to the conservatives by adding **an exception**, namely that when one’s spouse has been guilty of sexual immorality, divorce and remarriage are **not forbidden**. He *doesn’t encourage* divorce, for forgiveness and reconciliation are always preferable. But when a spouse is guilty of **persistent and unrepentant immorality**, destroying the very fabric of the marriage, divorce is permissible and so is remarriage.

(I am aware, of course, that some Bible teachers argue against the interpretation I have just offered and loudly claim that there are **no biblical grounds** for divorce and remarriage—not even adultery. Several of my professors in seminary took that position and I know their arguments well. I believe they arrived at their conclusion because of certain unwarranted theological assumptions, *not* due to careful study of the text. And while I don’t have time to argue those fine points this morning, I have written a lengthy paper on the subject that I am willing to share with anyone who wants it. Just give me your email address and I’ll send it to you).

But now as we come to 1 Corinthians 7:10 we find a second case study:

Case study #2: When a marriage is deemed irretrievably broken but there has *not* been adultery, permission seems to be granted for divorce but *without* the freedom to remarry (at least until the spouse dies or remarries). Now you are going to have to put your **thinking caps** on for the next 20 minutes, because the issues are complex. By the way, if studying this makes you uncomfortable and causes you to say, **“I come to church for *encouragement and inspiration*, not to hear technical arguments about divorce and remarriage,”** I remind you that God is the One who put this here. He evidently wanted us to know this, if not for our own sakes, then for the sakes of family and friends who will surely face divorce and be leaning on us for advice.

Notice several important factors in Paul's initial instructions in verse 10. **First**, he clearly identifies **the source** of his teaching as Jesus Himself. If anyone wants to argue with him, they'll have to complain to the Lord, for that's where Paul got the information he is sharing. **Second**, his prohibition of divorce between Christians fits well with what the Bible says elsewhere in both Old and New Testaments to the effect that divorce is contrary to God's ideal plan for mankind.

Third, the prohibition is two-sided: neither the Christian wife nor the Christian husband is to initiate a divorce. This was **pretty revolutionary** in Paul's day, for men were given **much more leniency** in regard to divorce than were women. Paul puts them both on an **equal plane**—no divorce for either. Perhaps you noticed that two different words are used here for divorce ("**separate**" in v. 10 for the wife and "**divorce**" in v. 11 for the husband). Probably "**separate**" is used of the wife because she didn't have the same legal rights as the husband in that day, but Paul is talking about the same thing—taking action to end a marriage. Neither should **initiate divorce**.

But Paul acknowledges that **this prohibition** of divorce *is* going to be violated at times, *even* by Christian couples. So he specifies the options in cases where divorce does occur: "**But if she does (divorce him), she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband.**" Presumably the same would go for the Christian husband who divorces his wife.

Now this is **very strange, almost shocking**. You generally don't find God offering us options in case we decide to disregard His commandments. In fact, I can't think of another example quite like this. God doesn't say, "**Thou shalt not murder, but if you do, you must give the victim a decent burial and pay his widow \$1000.**" Or, "**Thou shalt not commit adultery, but if you do, you must apologize publicly and do 100 hours of community service.**" God usually lays down His law this way: "**Thou shalt not, or else!**"

The very phrase "**but if she does**" in verse 11 seems to acknowledge that **some marriages, even** those between Christians, are so broken and so unwholesome and so degrading that **divorce is the lesser of two evils**. It is as though God is, regretfully, tolerating a violation of one of His own principles.

But here's the kicker. God also makes it clear that **in such a case, remarriage** to someone else is **not an option**. The only options are to remain single or be reconciled.

Notice the difference between this case and verse 8, where he said regarding the unmarried (which I think is talking about those previously married, those divorced before salvation) and the widowed, "**if they cannot control themselves, they should marry.**" Here, where both spouses are believers, they are **not allowed** to remarry someone else if they divorce.

Now please understand that Paul is **not here** discussing the case where there has been unfaithfulness and the victim has filed for divorce because of persistent, unrepentant immorality. Jesus has already established the **right of divorce and remarriage** in that case (Matt. 19:9). He is talking about divorce **for other causes**—perhaps alcoholism, physical or emotional abuse, or failure to provide support. I would call the permission granted in 1 Corinthians 7:10, 11, **the bare right to divorce** for causes other than immorality. Remarriage is not allowed.

But how do you know if your marriage is irretrievably broken? We are all masters at rationalization. With God in the equation **can anything be irretrievably broken?** Yet I know individuals who are **absolutely miserable** in their marriages, they've tried everything they know to do, and they say they can't go on. OK, but I am obligated to tell them that if they choose divorce, absent the grounds of sexual immorality, they must remain single or be reconciled to their spouse. I also tell them to **pray for the spouse they are leaving** that God will do a miracle in their hearts so that reconciliation can take place. It can happen, friends.

In the mid-90's I preached a sermon series on marriage and family at our church in St. Louis. After the first couple of sermons I received a letter, and I want to read it in its entirety:

Pastor Mike,

I wanted to drop you a note and let you know that I have really enjoyed the messages on the family the last couple of weeks. I also want to say that I appreciate your comments and your beliefs on the subject of divorce and how much God hates it! Having a degree in theology from a Christian college and having worked in another denomination, I have witnessed many ministers dancing around the subject. . .

Having been through a divorce I see the destruction that it does--not only to the two married individuals, but the children, the in-laws, brothers, sisters, brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, friends, associates--it seems to be a never ending "ripple" effect that touches so many people. It is a devastating move that cripples the families emotionally, spiritually, financially, educationally, etc. I have seen the effects on my 3 ½ year old son; it is so sad to see him grieve for our past mistakes. My wife and I are still moving in the direction of reconciliation. We both feel very comfortable with each other and have worked through a lot of garbage and hope to put our family back together the way God intended it to be. Our counseling has gone very well and we really enjoy each other. There have been some arguments, etc., but we have actually been able to work through the situations very well. It has been work but it has been fun--we are making it fun!! I look forward to getting our family whole and healed!

Please continue to preach God's Word as you have. I wish sometimes that I could stand on a mountain and shout a warning for people not to go down the road that we did. Thank God for giving us the opportunity to "make it right"--most don't get that chance. Mike, please continue to warn the families at E. Free that God hates divorce and it is not the "way out" that most people think it is. I know there are cases that people are in danger and they need to be removed from a situation, but our society has made divorce look like a cure-all for marriage problems--it's not! It just causes much more pain and destroyed lives.

God bless,

Brian

Five months after I received that letter, I had the privilege of remarrying Brian and Kathleen. He is now a graduate of Covenant Seminary and in full-time ministry. Kathleen is a teacher, and David, the 3 ½ year old is now 19, at college, and so grateful to have both parents in his life. Every year on the anniversary of their second marriage they send me a note and thank me for helping them reconcile. And *their* reconciliation was encouraged and helped by watching another couple in our church, Ben and Debbie Mudd, reconcile and remarry after a bitter divorce just a year earlier. Just a

couple of months ago I received a letter from them. They live in Florida, have two children and have been happily married for 17 years—this time.

Reconciliation can happen when both parties are willing to commit to repentance and forgiveness and reconciliation, even when their situation seems hopeless and all feeling for each other is gone. **The same God who raised Jesus** from the dead is powerful enough to resurrect a marriage!

Now beginning in verse 12 the Apostle Paul moves on to another question asked by members of the Corinthian church:

Is it permissible for a believer in a mixed marriage to divorce his or her unbelieving spouse?
(12-16)

The kind of mixed marriage he's talking about is not one between a Swede and a Norwegian (that is hopeless!) but between a believer and an unbeliever. This, Paul admits, is an issue which **Jesus did not address**. In fact, here's how he introduces the subject in verse 12: **“To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord).”** The instructions in verse 10 and 11 came directly from Christ, but starting in verse 12, and presumably extending through verse 16, Paul identifies the instructions as **his own opinion**. Does that mean we have **the right to disregard** it if we want? I don't think so. My own view is that Paul is **not** establishing a lesser level of authority here, but rather simply saying there are **two different sources for the information** he is giving. He is still an Apostle. Some of the time he quotes Jesus, but even when he's giving his own opinion he speaks under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Now it is very important for us to recognize that the mixed marriage Paul is addressing here is the **by-product of the conversion** of one of the partners. When these two individuals got married they were **both unbelievers**; *now* one of them has become a Christian. What Paul says here does not apply to a believer who violates God's law by **knowingly marrying an unbeliever**. For such a person to appeal to this passage as grounds for divorce would be **like a teenager** killing his parents and then appealing to the judge for leniency on the grounds that he's an orphan. (Let that sink in).

Paul's assumption is that the believer in a mixed marriage should stay where he or she is; if a divorce occurs, it **must be the choice** of the unbeliever, **not** the believer. To explain, Paul offers two case studies:

Case study #1: If the unbelieving partner is *willing* to stay in the marriage, divorce is *not* allowed. (12-13) The key word is **“willing.”** Look at verse 12-13: “If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is *willing* to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is *willing* to live with her, she must not divorce him.” Some of the Corinthians were apparently using the reasoning, “God wants a Christian to have a spiritual relationship with his or her spouse. I can't have that because my husband is a pagan. Therefore, I ought to divorce him and find someone with whom I can enjoy a spiritual relationship and so my children can have a Christian father.”

Just last week the Wall Street Journal had an article about the doubling of divorce among older Americans.

For years, 51-year-old Dawn and her husband of two decades, Tim, had buried their differences over finances, child-rearing and religion. But when the last of the Wisconsin couple's three daughters was finishing high school in 2009, those differences were all that Dawn could see... They had stayed together all those years because of the kids, but now nothing was left. "He was so uncompassionate, and I had turned to my religion, and he would never go to church with me," she says. "I realized that I was alone in the marriage and would be better off with someone whose values and interests were more like mine." She seized the moment and left, filing for divorce.

To Dawn's beautiful and persuasive argument Paul says, "Time out! You have **no grounds** for divorce simply because your spouse is an unbeliever. In fact, the whole basis of your argument is faulty. Instead of thinking you are being hurt and your children are being hurt by the presence of an unbeliever in the home, why not look at the other side? Your unbelieving partner is being sanctified by **your presence** in the home, and your children are viewed by God as holy rather than unclean."

What in the world is Paul talking about? To answer that we must recognize that the words "**sanctify**" and "**holy**" are synonyms from the exact same root in Greek, and **neither** is referring to salvation. The terms literally mean "**to be set apart,**" and the idea is that the unbelieving husband and the children in a mixed marriage are set apart to God **in the sense that** they experience **unusual exposure** to the Gospel and have **unique opportunities** to see Christianity lived out before their eyes because of the presence of **just one committed Christian** in the home.

Paul is not denying that being unequally yoked with an unbeliever can be **frustrating, discouraging, heart-breaking, and very costly**. What he *is* saying is that **one Christian** in a home blesses the **entire home**. But, of course, that's only true if the Christian is being gracious and patient and Christ-like.

I want to encourage those of you who find yourselves in mixed marriages. Some of you came to faith in Christ long after you got married and now you long to share your spiritual values with your spouse. Others may have **thought** your spouse was a believer but that has turned out not to be the case. Hang in there, says Paul! Keep trusting God that in due time you may experience true spiritual unity in your home. In the meantime, look at the bright side: your children have two parents in the home, you have wonderful opportunities to encourage them in their faith, your spouse lets you bring them to Sunday School and youth group. God honors your perseverance.

Case study #2: If the unbelieving partner is *unwilling* to stay in the marriage, divorce *is* allowed, and probably also remarriage. (15,16). Paul's advice in the case where the unbelieving spouse is unwilling to remain in the marriage is **very different**. Paul says, "Don't try to keep the marriage together at all costs." Here are his words: "But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?"

What might make an unbeliever unwilling to stay in a marriage once the spouse has become a convert? Well, I can think of several reasons. Suppose this couple was used to a pagan lifestyle, and the new convert can no longer participate in carousing or wife-swapping, or whatever they used

to do. Suppose the husband is a radical Muslim who threatens to kill his spouse who has newly converted to Christianity? Or maybe the spouse is just an atheist who can't stand to see his or her spouse praying and reading the Bible?

Paul states that if the believer is sued for divorce by an unbelieving spouse, he or she should not feel obligated to fight it. Furthermore, I think **“not bound”** here means **“free to remarry,”** though there is some debate about that. When it says, **“God has called us to live in peace,”** the most natural interpretation is this: If the unbelieving husband or wife cannot tolerate the spouse's new-found faith and desires to be free from the union, it is better to let him go, because the fighting, turmoil, bickering, criticism, and frustration that will inevitably result disrupt the harmony and peace that God wants His people to enjoy. But be careful here! Be sure the conflict is **not** caused by the fact that the unbeliever now finds himself living with a self-righteous Pharisee!

Some argue on the basis of 1 Peter 3:1-2 that a submissive wife can win her husband to Christ as he sees the purity and reverence of her life. Peter makes it clear that while she can't *talk* him into the Kingdom, she may be able to *love* him in. That's **certainly possible**, and when it happens it's a beautiful thing to watch. But, Paul asks, **“How do you know”** that you will lead your spouse to Christ? Some men are very stubborn and may not bow the knee to Christ no matter *how* consistent the wife is in living the Christian life before him. The decision is up to the unbeliever.

Conclusion: Now what would God have us take away from here this morning? I don't think it's a list of rules and regulations regarding when divorce is allowed and when remarriage is possible. Yes, the rules are important and they cannot be violated with impunity. But I think what God would most have us take away is the **sanctity of marriage**.

Marriage is like a garden. Neglect it long enough and it will become a jungle. Friends, if your garden is looking a little shabby, now is the time to water it, fertilize it, cultivate it, and pull up some weeds. Get into an accountability group. If the difficulties seem beyond your ability, **hire a gardener.** (That is, get professional Christian counseling)). There is so much at stake.

The seriousness of divorce can hardly be overestimated.

The scars it leaves can never be removed.

The marks it leaves on children are both painful and long-lasting.

The fact that many previously divorced people are able to live meaningful, happy lives is due to **God's amazing grace and forgiveness**, *not* to the fact that divorce in their particular case was a trivial issue. But if God is able to take divorced people and make something beautiful out of their lives, then He is able also to take a messed-up marriage and make something beautiful out of it *before* it reaches the divorce court. He is a God who specializes in the impossible.

God sent his one and only Son to the Cross to pay the penalty for all our sin. When we put our faith and trust in Jesus' sacrifice, God extends to us the free gift of salvation, but then He also provides healing for relationships. Does your marriage need healing today? Does your soul need Christ's cure for the sickness of sin? Come to Him and He will give you rest for your weary soul and bring peace to your troubled home. **There is no such thing as a disposable person or a disposable marriage to God.** Will you trust Him to make your life and your marriage into something beautiful?