

Series: 1 Corinthians

Title: Christ's Word for Believers Married to Unbelievers

Text: 1 Corinthians 7: 12-16

Date: March 3, 2016

Place: SGBC, New Jersey

1 Corinthians 7: 12: But to the rest speak I, not the Lord:

Paul said this earlier in the chapter: it means our Lord Jesus did not give this word when he walked this earth—it is not in the 4 gospels. Yet, now, right here in 1 Corinthians 7, through the apostle Paul, the Lord is giving his word. This is the inspired word. This is where you find “Christ's Word for Believers' Married to Unbelievers.”

1 Corinthians 7: 12: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. 13: And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. 14: For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy. 15: But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace. 16: For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save *thy* husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save *thy* wife?

When God makes a sinner a new creation there is a new desire to do nothing in our lives to bring reproach on Christ who redeemed us. It does not avail to attempt to keep the old covenant law of God. Nor does it avail if you hold the true doctrine that sinners are saved by grace yet there has been no new heart created within so as to obey and honor Christ in your life. The only thing that avails is God making his child a new creation by his grace.

Galatians 6: 15: For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.

Believers may fail but God's successful grace makes us new creatures: with new motives, new loves, new desires and new fruit. God makes his child trust and obey and honor Christ! The saints at Corinth understood that “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” (2 Cor 5: 17) But they thought it applied even to civil unions in their various stations in everyday life—even their marriages.

In our text, the Holy Spirit used Paul to declare that when two unbelievers are married and one is later regenerated to faith in Christ, the believer should continue honoring the covenant of marriage with the unbelieving spouse because they married that unbeliever to themselves.

STAY MARRIED

First, we are given the exhortation to stay married—**1 Corinthians 7: 12...If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. 13: And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him.**

The scenario is not of a believer marrying an unbeliever. The scriptures are clear that a believer should not marry an unbeliever.

2 Corinthians 6: 14: Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?

It is best if a believer does not tell an unbeliever that this is a qualification before they will marry them. If you do, the unbeliever is likely to make a false profession just to marry you. The best counsel I have heard on this came from Pastor Mahan, “Marry someone who knew the Lord before they knew you.”

Our text is speaking of two people who married while in unbelief. Then later, God regenerated one of them and gave them faith in Christ. If the unbelieving spouse is pleased to abide with the believer then the believer is not to put the unbelieving spouse away—stay married.

LAWFULLY MARRIED

The first reason why the believer is to stay married to the unbeliever is because the unbeliever is legitimately, lawfully married unto the believer—**1 Corinthians 7: 14: For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy.**

This passage has been badly abused to teach that the unbeliever and their children are brought into a covenant before God by the believer. This they use to support infant baptism.

Only God can sanctify a sinner—circumcising the heart and bringing us into the everlasting covenant of Christ in God’s house. That is what was pictured under the old covenant when a believing father circumcised a helpless infant and brought them into covenant in his house. In Romans 2: 28-29, the Spirit of God tells us plainly that is what it typified when he tells us what true circumcision is and who it is that performs it:

Romans 2: 28 For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither *is that* circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: 29 But he *is* a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision *is that* of the heart, in the spirit, *and* not in the letter; whose praise *is* not of men, but of God.

In our text, the word “sanctified by” might be better translated for our understanding “married unto”—“For the unbelieving husband is married unto the wife, and the unbelieving wife is “married unto” the husband:” He is simply saying that the reason a newly regenerated believer should not divorce his unbelieving wife is because the believer lawfully, legitimately married the unbeliever unto himself.

Later, Paul shows us that if one is a servant when God saves him then he is not to rebel against his master. Though he is the Lord’s freeman, he is still lawfully, legitimately the earthly servant of his earthly master. He is stating the same thing in our text.

Some object that marriage is not legitimate while husband and wife were unbelievers but now it is holy by one of them being regenerated. But the scripture says that whether a couple are believers or not “Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled:” (Heb 13: 4) The unbelieving couple are not holy. They certainly will not have spiritual discernment to know how marriage honors Christ. But marriage is still legitimate because it was ordained by God. And their act of marrying one another still carries the same honor as it does for believers.

So why does our text use the word “sanctified by”? In Hebrew language, it would be “espoused unto.”—“For the unbelieving husband is “espoused unto” the wife, and the unbelieving wife is “espoused unto” the husband:.” The Jews use the words which are translated “espoused”, “betrothed” and “sanctified” almost interchangeably when it comes the ceremony of their marriages.

First, a man “espouses” or “engages” a woman to himself—he sanctifies her in the sense that he separated her out from among all other women unto himself.

At the point he espouses her unto himself, he also gives her a pledge as a token that this is a contract that could not be broken. This is “betrothing” her unto himself. (David espoused his wife Michal to himself by a pledge in 2 Samuel 3: 14)

In some cases, they did not marry for a long time afterward. Yet, due to this unbreakable pledge the spouse was considered “sanctified unto him or sanctified by him.” It meant she was legally, lawfully his wife.

The best example we have is Christ and his bride, the elect of God. God the Father espoused his elect unto Christ to be his bride. Christ betrothed us unto himself in eternity—entering covenant to give us his pledge on the cross and in our hearts. He said,

Hosea 2: 19: And I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. 20 I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the LORD.

From eternity, by his covenant promise, Christ betrothed us to himself promising to establish righteousness and in judgment by justifying us on the cross while making his lovingkindness and mercies kiss in harmony with his righteousness. In his perfect faithfulness and fidelity he performed this on the cross and then he reveals it to each one for whom he died.

The Son of God married our nature to himself, making himself one with us, us one with him, when he took our nature, “For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren.” (Heb 2: 11)

In our experience, Christ gives the pledge and token of his love, when he gives the Holy Spirit in the new birth, “Which is the earnest [pledge] of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.” (Eph 1: 14) He engages us to himself, making his covenant in our hearts, “And I said unto her, Thou shalt abide for me many days; thou shalt not play the harlot, and thou shalt not be for *another* man: so *will* I also *be* for thee.” (Hos 3: 3)

Then at last, when the Lord brings home his bride to glory, it is called the marriage-supper of the Lamb.

Revelation 19: 7: Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. 8: And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. 9: And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God.

Yet, for a long time, we were the unbelieving spouse. But did Christ divorce his chosen bride because we were unbelieving? No. Why not? Because like a husband, Christ sanctified us to himself (separated his bride from all others) by espousing us to himself and by betrothing us unto himself. Therefore, though we were unfaithful and he faithful, he would not put us away because he married us unto himself. We were legally, lawfully married unto him in a contract that could not be broken so he was in bondage to his bride! That is why our text uses the word “bondage” when it says “believers are not in bondage in such *cases*.”

Now listen to how the LORD uses the same language as our text, when he speaks to unfaithful Israel. This is a picture of his true Israel in the garden before the fall.

Jeremiah 2: 1: Moreover the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 2 Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith the LORD; I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land *that was* not sown. 3: Israel *was* holiness unto the LORD...”

Christ’s bride was holiness unto the LORD—sanctified or separated unto him as his particular, legitimate, lawful bride—because he espoused us unto himself, he legally, lawfully married us unto himself. That did not change even though we fell and became the unbelieving spouse. It was unlawful for him to put us away because we were sanctified by him—espoused by him—married by him.

Our text is simply saying, “[Do not put your spouse away], For the unbelieving husband is [legally, lawfully married unto] the [believing] wife, and the unbelieving wife is [married unto] the [believing] husband:.” Look at the next word—1 Cor 7: 12:...else [if you were not lawfully, legitimately married] were your children unclean [illegitimate]; but now are they holy. [legitimate]

When the believer was an unbeliever, he entered covenant—marrying that unbelieving wife to himself—he pledged to love her till death parts them. So that is still binding though he now believes and she does not. Since his marriage is lawful, his children are legitimate children. But if a believer divorced an unbeliever, on the grounds that his marriage was illegitimate because they were both unbelievers when they married then he would also be saying his children are illegitimate. The Spirit of God says they are legitimate (holy) because the marriage is legitimate.

So believer, remember, you married that unbelieving spouse to yourself. You are in covenant with them. You have legitimate children to care for with them. If they are pleased to abide with you then stay with that unbelieving spouse. Now you can love them more than before because you have discernment to understand the marriage of Christ and his bride.

YOU NEVER KNOW

Another reason a believer is not to leave an unbeliever is because you never know whether God might use you as an instrument in his hand as God saves them—**1 Corinthians 7: 16 For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?**

Though we were the unbelieving bride of Christ, he yet loved us, he did not put his elect bride away. He provided for us. He loved us to himself. “He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” (Heb 13: 5) And God used believers to preach this gospel and draw us to Christ. Likewise, believer, God may use you as an instrument to draw that unbelieving spouse to himself.

1 Peter 3:1: Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; 2: While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear.

I know a couple who married as unbelievers. The Lord saved the wife but not the husband. But she stayed with her husband. She put out tracts for him to read, listened to sermons when she could and brought him to hear the gospel. They were married almost 40 years and the Lord saved him. That is the story of my dad and my mom!

Brethren, aren’t you glad Christ did not put us away when we were the unbelieving spouse. So Christ and his grace toward us is our motive for not putting away our unbelieving spouse. God may use you as God ministers grace to that unbelieving spouse.

IF THE UNBELIEVER DEPARTS

Fornication is one justifiable reason for divorce. Here is the other—abandonment by an unbeliever—**1 Corinthians 7: 15: But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace.**

As much as we can, we are to live peaceably with all men. It was in a peaceable manner that someone sowed the gospel to us.

Romans 14:19: Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.

James 3:18: And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

But if the unbeliever insists we forsake Christ or they will abandon us then we must side with Christ. Christ said,

Matthew 10: 36: a man's foes shall be they of his own household. 37: He that loveth [his nearest relations] more than me is not worthy of me.

The brother or sister is bound to the unbeliever by marrying unto themselves the unbeliever. But if the unbeliever departs, let them depart, because the believer is not bound in such cases. They may remarry justly. The two exceptions where divorce is justified are fornication and abandonment because of the gospel.

BUT GOD HATH CALLED US IN AND TO PEACE

Still, notice how the Spirit of God moved Paul to write this scripture, telling the believer to remember that God called us to or in peace. Because you never know, God may use that to begin drawing the departing spouse to Christ. Read it and see if you can see that being said—“But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to [or in] peace. For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?”

Even if an unbelieving spouse departs or if a believer is divorced for another reason, remember that it was in peace that another believer was used of God to sow the gospel to us. “The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.” (Ja 3: 18) Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.” (Rom 14: 19) “For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save *thy* husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save *thy* wife?” (1 Cor 7: 16)

So long as there is no compromise on the gospel, still try to interact as peaceably as you can with the departing spouse because that may be the time that God uses you to begin drawing that unbelieving spouse to Christ.

Brethren, it is easy to bear witness of Christ in our words and deeds when times are good. But when our will is crossed and we are offended it is a different story. Yet, never forget whose we are and who we represent even if a spouse is departing from us. Through your peaceable way, even in the most distressing situation like this, it may be used of God for the spiritual edification of the departing spouse.

Amen!