

Introduction

As I have been reading through the book of Acts the last couple weeks, it has struck me how explosive were the circumstances in each of the towns where the gospel was taken. Everyday life in those locations was confronted and turned upside down. As numbers of folks were being converted, the rest were responding in hostility. Their cities were taken by storm. The gospel brought with it a stark distinction between the way of the world and living in a manner worthy of Christ's calling. One of the areas of stark contrast was in relation to all things marital. The Corinthian culture was sexually decadent. Sex, marriage, and divorce were insidiously impacted by the darkness of the culture. Sin corrupts God's good gifts. So, not surprisingly, the new believers had questions related to these matters. This morning we are going to look at their questions and the apostle's answers.

[Read Text and Pray]

You might be wondering why I am jumping from the end of James last week in to the middle of 1 Corinthians this morning. To be completely transparent, our church, like all others, is not immune from having to deal with tough and challenging matters. Marriages are a concern for which we pray consistently. Some of you in this room face a real trial of suffering in your marriage. Marriage has a way of revealing sins bound up in our hearts. Satan never relents in his own efforts to destroy what is meant to display the beauty of Jesus Christ and his church.

Circumstances are ongoing in this fellowship to which biblical instruction and direction needs to be applied accurately. Couples which are struggling especially need biblical guidance for their situation. And these couples need proper input from us as a church body. For us to provide proper input we need to know what that input ought to be. It makes me especially thankful for 1 Corinthians 7. The Corinthians had questions about sex, singleness, and separation. We will look at how Paul answers their questions. And we will glean principles to guide us in our understanding of and ministry within these critical areas.

The main idea of the text is that both marriage and singleness are good life situations in which a person can glorify God, provided we make the most of our gift. In relation to these life-situations, three questions were put to the apostle. We don't have the questions, but on the basis of the answers, we can deduce pretty accurately what those questions were. Those questions are the points I am going to cover this morning.

The first question is:

I. Is it good to just avoid sex altogether?

In the middle of a city of nonstop immorality which went to every extreme, new believers found themselves confronted with the biblical sexual ethic. The difference was like night and day. Doubtless, the new believers were riddled with guilt over their previous perversions and found it difficult to navigate life with that in their past. As a result, some were asking whether it would just be better, would in fact be more spiritual, not to engage in sexual activity at all.

Paul's reply indicates that, yes, it would be good, BUT the reality is that for many if not most, it would be unhelpful to think that way. It is good not to have sexual relations but it is bad to sin as a result of temptation. In fact, sexual relations are right when enjoyed in the context of God's design.

The right setting for these relations is marriage. "Each man should have his own wife and each wife her own husband." There is no other right setting for sex.

Paul then unfolds for us the biblical model of the act of marriage within the context of marriage. Marriage involves conjugal rights. The body of the husband belongs to the wife and the body of the wife belongs to the husband. Each has authority over the other. The point here is actually one of duty. That is not the way sex is usually conceived; is it? By nature each person seeks his or her own pleasure. But God designed sex to be about giving. It is in the giving of pleasure that husbands and wives receive pleasure. Sex is God's good gift, but it is also an obligation that husbands and wives owe to one another. There is a duty here to serve one another and bless one another. For this reason, to deprive one another is sin. That is NOT to say that one ought to demand acts that make their spouse uncomfortable, but it IS to say that marriage involves the marriage act. It MUST NOT be used as a tool of bargaining or manipulation, punishment or reward. In this act couples serve one another. They each receive enjoyment as they give themselves to serve the other. Any period of abstinence should be agreed upon by both, lest they unnecessarily expose one another to temptation. These principles should guide husbands and wives.

A practical lesson for all of us comes as we consider the fact that the husband-wife relationship is a living picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. In the relationship between Christ and the church, we have an exclusive relational privilege. We are privy to intimate fellowship with him. He went to the cross to sacrifice himself in order to provide forgiveness, redemption, and fellowship with him. And he delights in serving us and thrilling us. We experience great delight as well, as we serve him. To deprive Christ of our fellowship and service is to withhold what belongs to him, what he bought and paid for on the cross. But it is also to deprive our own hearts of joy. Indulge deeply in fellowship with Christ and serve the Lord gladly, and you will be glad!

The Second question Paul answers is . . .

II. Is it good to be Single?

In short, Paul's answer is this: "Sure it is good. I could wish that everyone was unmarried as I myself am. However, not everyone has the gift of singleness. Everyone has their own gift from God. God's place for us in his body is his gift to us." Brothers and sisters, the Lord will withhold no good thing from his children. Neither being single nor being married is better or more spiritual than the other. We should appreciate and celebrate one another.

Paul explains his reasons for wishing for everyone to be single down in 1 Corinthians 7:32-34.

"The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. 33 But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, 34 and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband."

There is less distraction and more opportunity for singles to be fully engaged in serving Christ directly. But again, being married is not bad and not wrong. When Paul says it is better to marry than to burn, he warns against being ruled by sexual desire such that you are making yourself subject to judgment due to your out-of-control passions.

It is good to remain single, but it is not bad to be married. Each person should rejoice in God's good gift. Thank God for the married couples that make up Grace Community Church. Thank God for the

singles that make up this church family. God has formed this body according to his will. We need to properly appreciate one another and serve one another well.

Thus we come to question number three . . .

III. Is it Good to Separate or Divorce?

Paul's unequivocal answer is, "No!" It is not good to separate or divorce. In fact here is a CHARGE in verse 10. He says this charge comes ultimately from the Lord. Paul is noting that Jesus had already directly spoken to this question. His reference to the Lord does not mean that the spoken word directly through the mouth of Jesus has more authority than what was spoken by Paul as inspired by the Holy Spirit. It simply indicates that this is a topic that Jesus had specifically addressed. In fact, considering what Jesus said about the matter will help us to grasp what Paul is teaching here. So for a moment, let's go back to the gospels to observe what it is that Jesus said.

In Matthew 5:32, Jesus stated, "everyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." According to Jesus adultery happens when divorce is followed by remarriage.

Matthew 19 reveals Jesus' response to those who came to test him in regard to divorce. He took the occasion to explain that when a couple is married, God joins them together and they are not to separate. He said, "I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." These same words are found in Mark 10. Verses 11-12 record this statement from Jesus: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, 12 and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." Luke 16:18 says the same: "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery."

From what Jesus instructs, we learn that adultery is committed through a sexual union outside an existing marriage. A marriage covenant is broken when a spouse is involved in the act of marriage with someone other than their spouse. It happens in an illicit encounter and it happens by remarriage. Adultery is not committed by divorce alone but by the double act of divorce AND remarriage. Biblically and before God a marriage covenant is SEALED by the act of marriage. It is BROKEN by the act of marriage outside the marriage that has been sealed.

Now let's bring that understanding into the charge that Paul issues. He says "no" to separation and divorce. And let us be clear, "God hates divorce." All of us should join the Lord in this hatred. It is a bad thing. It is ugly. It is sinful. There can be no denying it. But for some, divorce is a reality. The Corinthian church was facing the reality of divorce in its midst. Commentator Gordon Fee states that "Divorce in the Greco-Roman culture could be 'legalized' by means of documents; but more often it simply happened. In this culture, divorce was divorce whether established by a document or not. Either the man sent his wife away (divorce) or either of them left the other (to separate)." (294) Paul's point is whether a woman leaves or a man goes and gets a legal document, legally parting is NOT a good thing. It is prohibited. "No divorce" is the ideal.

However, what is striking in the text is that Paul places an exception to what is commanded. We notice that Paul actually is following the pattern he has employed from the beginning of the chapter. In each of the situations he addresses, Paul states an ideal and follows it with an exception. Not to touch a woman is good, BUT. Singleness is good, but. Here, divorce is prohibited, BUT. Paul is presenting "no divorce" as the ideal but admits an exception. He conceives of certain circumstances in which separation or divorce is nevertheless the route that is taken in a marriage despite the

charge to not divorce. It occurs not as a good thing, but seemingly a choice between two bad things—the divorce itself and the sin that fills the relationship with dissension. Divorce is conceived as an evil, as a wrong. But so is whatever evil and sin that are involved in a spouse's decision to seek divorce. The assumption is when divorce is pursued, it is because of dissension—marital conflict, irreconciliation. For Paul indicates that what the couple needs is to be reconciled. So while divorce is something God hates, he also hates ongoing dissension that dismantles peace and harmony in the home. Proverbs 6:19 tells us the Lord hates one who sows discord among brothers. Paul's exception then relates to circumstances which are so bad that the sin of parting through divorce or separation is a lesser evil than the evil of remaining in the same household. It is a disturbing choice that is made, but so also is the sinful behavior that sows discord in the home.

The exception placed here by Paul presents a very narrow set of options. If a woman or a man does separate or if they do divorce, they must choose between two options. Either remain unmarried or be reconciled. Either be reconciled to each other OR remain unmarried. When we consider what Jesus said, this instruction makes perfect sense. According to Jesus, when is adultery committed? Adultery is committed when a divorced person remarries, or of course if they commit sexual immorality. Adultery happens when the marital covenant is broken sexually. The underlying principle is that what a couple does in a court of law or just by their action of separating does not put asunder what God has joined together. God still sees the couple as joined before him. They therefore abide under the continuing covenant to keep one another for the other. Under God the couple still bears responsibility for one another even though the law may see them as separate. In effect, then, Paul is saying: Do not divorce, but if you do, remember that divorce itself does not free you from conjugal exclusivity. Live apart if you absolutely must. Let the courts sort out how that works. But before God you are still joined and still responsible for your sinful dealings with one another.

In this way while divorce is sinful, it is not an occasion for putting someone out of the church.

But the application for each of us who are married is that God holds married couples responsible to pursue marriages of reconciliation. Facts are facts and sin is sin and not one marriage in this room this morning has escaped the ugliness of sin. Husbands have sinned against our wives. Wives have sinned against your husbands. We have done this in innumerable ways. And, sadly, we will do it again. Selfishness, greed, bitterness, unforgiveness, uncontrolled tongues, insensitivity, unmet expectations—these happen every day. We must live with a drive to reconciliation every single day.

We also must remember that marriage is meant to point the world to Jesus and his church. Dissension and conflict, selfishness and envy, defensiveness, and judgmentalism mar that testimony unspeakably. Paul's charge to us through Ephesians 4:1-3 stands in contrast. He wrote: I ... urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. This spirit is the attitude that should characterize spouses in every Christian marriage.

Now, what is the role of the church when marriages in our midst are riddled with dissension when they proceed to divorce? It is the same—care given in a spirit of humility and gentleness with patience and love eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in peace. If we are aware, we need to encourage and exhort each spouse to pursue godliness and peace. We must counsel them and hold them both to the responsibility to be reconciled to one another. We must pray with them and for them.

And we need to keep the following in mind. Divorce is sinful. It is not allowed for Christian couples, but if they feel they MUST go there, they must go no further. Divorce is sin but it is not the unpardonable sin.

They may get some peace in their dwelling, but they are not by a divorce separated from the union God made when he brought them together to be one by covenant and by consummation. By itself divorce is not adultery. And it is not an occasion in and of itself for church discipline. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians does address a situation which calls for discipline. He is unambiguously clear about it in chapter 5. There is no mention of such discipline here.

There is one additional exception to these two options. Under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, Paul does allow divorce and remarriage in one kind of instance. Divorce and remarriage are permitted if a believing spouse is married to an unbeliever AND that unbeliever, in dissent with the believer, refuses to live with them. This person is one who denies the faith. Look at verses 12-16. (Read)

The believing spouse should not leave over concern of the impact of being married to an unbeliever. The family is blessed by the influence of the believer. They should not separate; they might just be the means God uses to bring the unbeliever to faith. However, if the unbelieving spouse separates, Paul directs to let them go. God has called us to peace.

Divorce is rampant in our society today. God's hatred for divorce arises out of his love for faithfulness. God is faithful. He keeps his word. He remains faithful even when we are not. In the context of this discussion, it is something to call to mind and about which to be comforted. He will never leave or forsake his people. No one is able to snatch us out of his hand. We need to have regard for the permanence of marriage because it reflects the permanence of the love of God for his people, the love of Christ for his bride, the care of the Shepherd for his sheep.

Conclusion

I am going to sum up basic principles of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

1. Marriage is the lifelong union of a man and woman by God through covenant and consummation.
2. The marriage covenant is ratified through the act of marriage.
3. The marriage covenant is broken through death or when a spouse engages in the act of marriage outside the bounds of that marriage.
4. Legal divorce does not separate what God has joined together.
5. Divorce and separation are sinful but may be less sinful than a couple's living together in dissension.
6. Divorce and remarriage while sinful do not by themselves call for church discipline although they do call for a church to engage in appropriate ministry of encouragement, admonition, and care.
7. Remarriage is permitted if one's spouse has died or committed adultery or is an unbeliever who does not consent to stay.

Before I close I also want to address a related question.

Is it to be considered "living in ongoing sin" if a man or woman remarries while their faithful spouse is still alive? No it is not. The Bible recognizes every single marriage between a man and a woman as a valid covenant. When Jesus spoke with the woman at the well, he said she had been in five marriages. He recognized each one of them. The sin in remarriage is the violation of the previous marital covenant through the act of marriage which ratifies the subsequent one. Once you have broken the marital covenant, it has been broken. It is like a shattered glass. Once it is broken, it is broken. It cannot be fixed. One can only move on from there.

We live in a world full of sin. Marital shrapnel is everywhere. It is sad and ugly. But I want to remind you this morning that we serve a God who forgives and restores. Just back in 1 Corinthians 6 Paul soberly declared that "the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God." "Do not be deceived," he wrote, "neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God." But then Paul sounded a glorious note of hope: "And such WERE some of you, but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

This message is not intended to divide this congregation into different classes based on what any of us was or has done in the past. God forgives past sins of which we repent. My concern for each of us is focused on the future. Wherever we are, from this point forward, let us be determined to live out our marriages faithfully for Christ.

And let us be resolved before God as a church to respect the reality of what God does when a man and a woman are united in marriage. We must not enter into the covenant of marriage lightly. Once we enter into it, we must endeavor to preserve it for the glory of God. As a church we must be united in the endeavor to strengthen troubled marriages in our midst, and even if there is separation or divorce, let us assist one another in responding rightly to the limited options before us.