

Christian Marriage

1 Corinthians 7: 1 – 17

*Warning: Marriage may be an emotive or difficult topic for some.

Perhaps some of us, as children, dreamed of a 'fairytale' marriage. A young, beautiful woman meets a young, beautiful man. Their eyes meet. It is love at first sight. They marry, have beautiful children and live happily ever after.

Perhaps some of us, as adults, had that dream shattered. The beautiful marriage relationship turned ugly. There were money difficulties, drug abuse, infidelity, physical abuse, emotional abuse or merely estrangement and a falling out of love. It all led to one day receiving a piece of paper with the words 'degree absolute' on it. 'Marriage dissolved.' As if all hopes for the future could disappear like a tablet in water, without impact or consequence.

Perhaps some of us, as adults, had a marriage dream shattered, due to being separated by death. No choice made. Just a loved one being taken. Memories remaining.

Perhaps some of us, as adults, have never been married. Maybe there was a desire to one day be married or still is a desire to be; a certain loneliness in the current situation. Or maybe there is a contentment in singleness: fulfilment from friends, family, work, volunteering.

Pastor Paul writes to the church at Corinth about people in all these different situations: single, married, contemplating separation or divorce, engaged, widowed. Jesus had spoken on the subject of marriage and divorce and Paul draws on this teaching. But he is nevertheless put in the challenging situation (as all ministers are) of applying this to the messiness of people's real lives.

Paul was responding to questions that the Corinthians had asked him in their letter to him. As we saw previously, there had been the issue of one Corinthian man having a sexual relationship with his mother-in-law, as well as some men's previous involvement with prostitutes. Therefore, it might well have been that the Corinthians asked Paul some safer questions about sexual behaviour to try and distract him from these more embarrassing incidents! Having given them a good telling off about these, Paul is content to move on to their questions.

The Corinthians ask if sex is a good thing, or should it be avoided? Corinth was a city filled with sexual temptations and it seemed that some of the new Christians had responded by going to the other extreme and giving up sex altogether, even if they were married. But Paul is clear that, although sex outside marriage is forbidden, within marriage it plays an important part. A marriage where the couple are not intimate in this way, he argues, is more likely to get into difficulty, due to temptations from outside. Praying together is also crucial for spouses and Paul stresses that time should be made for this. The most shocking thing that Paul writes on the topic of sex within marriage, for a man of his day, is that it should be mutually giving: the man should put the woman's needs before his own and she should put the man's before her own.

Paul often refers to the fact that he is not married. However, for a Jewish man and particularly a Jewish leader, it would have been unheard of for him not to have been married. So we can assume that Paul was either a widower or that his wife had separated from him when he came to faith in Jesus. Certainly, Paul believes that his current single situation is the best for an apostle of the Lord. He comments that those who are not yet married or find themselves single once again may happily remain so, to give all their energy to discipleship and not be distracted by the demands of family life. The church, historically, may have held up marriage as the ideal situation for Christians. But the New Testament holds both marriage and singleness up as gifts and worthy callings. If anything, singleness is given even higher value. Nevertheless, Paul stresses that, if sexual desire is strongly felt, it is 'better to marry than burn'. This avoids both the discomfort and risk of unsatisfied desire and the temptation to a sinful expression of sexuality outside of marriage.

Next Paul addresses the issue of separation and divorce. He is drawing on the teaching of Jesus; although it is possible that he may not have received all of this, as the written gospels were probably not fully in circulation yet.

In the Gospels of Mark and Luke, Jesus gives a blanket ban on God's people divorcing. The law given by Moses in the Hebrew Bible had allowed men to divorce their wives by issuing her with a certificate. The certificate gave her some protection in her new situation, but very little. Husbands could dismiss their wives (but not wives dismiss their husbands) for the most trivial of reasons, which left these women destitute. Therefore, Jesus' condemnation of divorce gave women both dignity and protection in their harsh patriarchal society.

In the Gospel of Matthew, however, Jesus gives one reason why a husband may divorce his wife (but not a wife divorce her husband) and that is for adultery. However, some commentators have seen a problem here. As we know from the story of 'the woman caught

in adultery' in the Gospel of John, adultery for a Jewish woman usually carried the penalty of death by stoning. So why would divorce be mentioned for this? It may be that what Matthew is actually talking about is when a woman has been sexually active *before* her marriage. At the start of his gospel, we see Joseph considering breaking off his engagement to Mary when he suspects her of having been unfaithful to him. However, many Christians have considered that this passage from Matthew gives one situation where divorce is permissible.

The passage from 1 Corinthians that we have just heard appears to provide Christians for a second grounds for divorce: if the believer is married to an unbeliever.

Mixed marriages were probably very common in Corinth, as individuals came to faith in Jesus and therefore reassessed their life situations. Although elsewhere Paul forbids Christians making a new marriage with somebody who doesn't have a faith, in the situation where circumstances have changed after marriage, he is more open. It is for the Christian to do his or her best not only to preserve the marriage, if possible, but also to hold out hope that their spouse will be inspired by them to accept Jesus themselves. Children of mixed marriages, he stresses, are part of the community of faith until they are old enough to make a choice for themselves. If a non-believer is happy to continue to live with his or her believing spouse, then they should remain together. But if the non-believer leaves the home, then the Christian should accept the separation, but still be reconciled later if possible.

For Paul, the ethic underpinning these complex situations is to 'live in peace'. Existing marriages should always be continued if possible, as God intended. But Paul seems to recognise that this is not always possible. Therefore, the most 'peaceful' response is to separate. Christians today are divided in their opinion of whether this separation would allow a new marriage to someone else whilst the first spouse was still alive.

This section of Paul's letter to the Corinthians shows great pastoral sensitivity. It moves beyond merely looking for exemption clauses as to why a union for life might, in certain circumstances, be brought to an end. Peace is the ultimate objective in tricky human situations. I wonder whether this focus on peace may even answer the question that the Bible doesn't seem to answer about what somebody in a violent or abusive marriage should do. If we take Paul's plea for peace seriously, then this would seem to mandate separation to prevent further violence or abuse. This also fits in with Jesus' concern to provide protection for women (and men). As regards Paul's failure to mention adultery as a valid reason for couples separating, perhaps Paul did not have access to or did not accept the teaching in Matthew's Gospel. Or perhaps adultery was so common amongst the Corinthians, that Paul wanted to bring healing rather than potentially encouraging widespread resentment.

Marriage, like bringing up children, is not easy and needs the support of the whole community. As followers of Jesus, we need to support existing marriages and support those who are single.

When marriages break down, love can quickly turn to hate and damaging behaviours can ensue. It is also our responsibility as Christians to support people through the fallout of broken relationships and help them to form subsequent healthy friendships or marriages.

For those of us who are married, we must strive to put all our spouse's needs before our own, to pray together, to forgive one another and to continually seek peaceful solutions.

God has called us to live in peace.