

CGYG & LIFE Bible Study: 1 Corinthians 7:10-24

Riley and Jun had been among your closest friends in church ever since they came to faith back in high school. You were in their wedding party, but have since drifted away from them in the years since, as things got busier and as they seemed to withdraw from their former friends and retreat into their marriage. One day, they ask to have dinner with you, where they tell you that they have separated and are planning to file for divorce. "We've not been unfaithful in our marriage, but it seems like we've been arguing and fighting almost since day one, and we're both just tired and fed up. We just don't have the same feelings for each other that we used to... we've tried counseling, but that hasn't helped, and each day is more and more of a struggle. We've both reached the conclusion that getting divorced is really the only way forward, and it's actually the only thing we seem to be able to agree on." How would you counsel Riley & Jun?

Review – Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-9

-What does Paul teach about marriage and singleness in these verses?

- Marriage is a good gift from God (v.6-7)
 - is between 1 man and 1 woman (v.2), and involves husband and wife belonging to each other (v.3-4)
- Singleness is also a gift from God
 - and is preferable to marriage, for those who are able to exercise self-control in the area of sexual temptation (v.7-9)

Read 1 Corinthians 7:10-24

-What does Paul mean by "not I, but the Lord" in v.10, and "I, not the Lord" in v.12?

- “not I, but the Lord” – Paul is citing Jesus Christ’s teachings on marriage and divorce (e.g. Matthew 5:31-32 & 19:1-12; see below for more discussion on Christ’s teachings)
- “I, not the Lord” – Paul is speaking here on an issue Jesus didn’t speak to directly (i.e. a believer married to an unbeliever)
 - Christ’s ministry was to Israel; may not have encountered this specific issue, which would be more likely in the context of a Gentile who became a believer in Christ whereas his/her spouse did not
 - However, Paul continues to speak with the authority he had as an apostle of Christ, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. 7:40b)
 - his words are binding, not just an opinion that could be disregarded
 - Christ had never spoken to this specific situation, but Paul extends & applies the principles embodied in Christ’s teachings on marriage & divorce to the situation

-What instructions does Paul give to married couples about divorce in v.10-13 (cf. v.39), and why might he have felt the need to address the issue? What exception does Paul make in v.15-16?

- Paul’s reason for addressing divorce may have related to the Corinthians’ question(s) about whether they should be having sexual relations at all (7:1)
 - perhaps some felt they should not be marrying (e.g. ascetics – see previous study)
 - or perhaps some were wondering if they should divorce unbelieving spouses
- His instruction: in general, husbands and wives must not separate/divorce from each other (v.10-11)
 - v.39 – marriage is binding on husband & wife for life, until one spouse dies
 - ‘the wife should not separate from her husband’ – in some cultures, including the Jewish culture of that time, women did not have the right to divorce their husbands (only the husbands could initiate divorce)
 - husbands should not divorce their wives
 - if separation/divorce occurred, the husband & wife should remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to each other (v.11)
 - i.e. remarriage not permitted where separation/divorce is not permitted
 - these 2 verses likely address a marriage between 2 believers (with v.12-16 addressing believer married to unbeliever)
- in situation of a believer married to an unbeliever (v.12-16), the believing spouse also should not divorce/separate from an unbelieving spouse, if the unbelieving spouse wants to stay in the marriage
 - Not an endorsement of believers marrying unbelievers – Paul says a believer should only marry another believer (v.39)
 - more likely, a situation where someone already married comes to believe in Christ whereas his/her spouse does not
- the only exception Paul mentions is if an unbelieving spouse wishes to leave (i.e. divorce the believing spouse)
 - Paul says to let the unbelieving spouse leave – the believing spouse is “not enslaved” or not “in bondage” in this situation
 - not obligated to fight to preserve the marriage
 - presumption being that remarriage in this situation is also permissible
 - “not enslaved/in bondage” – cf. v.39 – a wife bound to husband as long as he lives → no longer bound if he dies
 - seems to indicate a similar dynamic at play when an unbelieving spouse leaves

-What does Jesus teach about marriage and divorce (Matthew 5:31-32; 19:1-12; cf. Genesis 2:20-25)? How do Paul’s teachings on divorce build on Jesus’ teachings? How do these teachings apply to us today?

- marriage is a permanent union, instituted by God, between 1 man and 1 woman (Matthew 19:1-12)
 - controversy among the Pharisees regarding how lax or strict the criteria for permitting divorce should be (“for any cause?”)
- Jesus replied to the Pharisees’ question by referring back to God’s intention & design for marriage, from Genesis 2:24-25
 - a man and a woman becoming one (Matt. 19:5-6)
 - intended by God to be a permanent union – “What therefore God has joined together, let man not separate” (19:6)
- in light of God’s design & intention for permanence, divorce is permitted only as a concession, not a command (Matt. 19:7-9)
 - Deuteronomy 24:1-4 – gives required process for a divorce – i.e. a certificate of divorce was to be given to the wife; if she then married someone else, the original husband who divorced her could not re-marry her if she were to be divorced again

- Some Pharisees took this as meaning that divorce was legitimate, as long as a certificate of divorce was issued
- Jesus clarified that Deut. 24:1-4 was a concession → divorce permitted due to the hardness of men's hearts
 - but never divorce was never commanded – “but from the beginning it was not so” (Matt. 19:8)
- Divorcing your spouse and marrying another constitutes adultery, which is forbidden (Matt. 19:9; Exod. 20:14)
 - because introducing another person into the ‘one flesh’ relationship violates it and constitutes adultery
 - whoever divorces his wife causes her to commit adultery (assuming she remarries), and the person who marries a divorced person commits adultery (Matt. 5:31-32)
 - The exception: “except on the ground of sexual immorality” (Matt. 5:32; 19:9)
 - i.e. divorce permissible on grounds of sexual immorality by one's spouse (e.g. adultery, but also other forms of sexual immorality → violation of the covenant and one-flesh relationship between husband and wife)
 - differing views of whether remarriage permissible in this case
 - similar to situation of an unbelieving spouse leaving, permission to divorce in Scripture seems to entail permission to remarry
- Jesus encourages those who are able to remain single for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven to do so (Matt. 19:10-12)
- Paul's teachings echo Jesus' teachings, in terms of the permanence of marriage – divorce not generally permitted
 - separated/divorced people should remain unmarried or be reconciled – they would be committing adultery if remarrying
 - but Paul did not repeat Jesus' exception for cases of sexual immorality
 - probably would have been known, and probably not the question he was addressing in chapter 7
 - extended Jesus' teaching to apply it to the situation of a believer married to an unbeliever
 - such a marriage is still a marriage that should be preserved as such → not to divorce (v.12-13)
 - if unbeliever leaves (presumably to marry another), divorce is acceptable
 - general tenor of 1 Cor. 7 encourages someone in this situation to remain single, although as noted above, remarriage seems to be an option if an unbelieving spouse leaves
- What do you think Paul means by an unbelieving spouse (and children) being made holy by a believing spouse (v.14)?
 - question may have arisen whether being married to an unbeliever might be defiling to the believer & to the Body
 - i.e. by uniting the members of Christ with an unbeliever
 - Paul argues that quite the opposite, the unbelieving spouse being ‘made holy’ by the believing spouse
 - multiple differing interpretations of what Paul meant by this
 - whatever it means, it cannot refer to an unbelieving spouse being made holy in the sense of being saved by the believing one
 - v.16 makes it clear that it's not speaking of salvation (“How do you know... whether you will save your [spouse]”?)
 - possible considerations could include the unbelieving spouse (& children) being ‘made holy’ in the sense of
 - living under the positive sanctifying moral/spiritual influence of the believing spouse/parent; or
 - the children gaining access to the covenant community through the believing parent; or
 - possibly an allusion back to Malachi 2:15 – in which God desires godly offspring in marriage?
 - having an opportunity through the believing spouse/parent to hear the Gospel & be saved
- How do Paul's instructions in v.17-24 apply to his teaching about marriage in v.10-16? How does it apply to the rest of life?
 - Paul instructs that each person should lead the life that God has assigned & called him to (v.17)
 - to remain in whatever condition s/he was in when called (v.20, 24)
 - in the context of marriage, for those who were married when called, to remain married (v.10-11)
 - includes those who became believers while married and are now married to an unbelieving spouse (v.12-13)
 - Paul in the rest of chapter 7 also encourages those who were single when called to Christ also to remain single if possible
 - Other applications
 - Those who were uncircumcised should not seek circumcision, or vice versa (v.18-19)
 - it's obedience to God's commands that's important, not the externals of circumcision (v.19)
 - For slaves, it's OK to remain in that position (though if able to get out of slavery, by all means do) (v.21-23)
 - Again, it's not the external circumstances of slavery or freedom that matters, but our status in Christ (v.22)
 - While on the topic of slavery, Paul warns to become slaves of men (likely referring to false teachers (v.23)
 - Speaks to a life that is centered on Christ and frames all of life in reference to Him; a life of contentment in Him

Reflection and application

We live in a fallen world in which marital strife and breakdown is unfortunately far too common an experience. And so Scripture, including today's passage in 1 Corinthians 7, recognizes and makes provision for the reality— and sometimes the necessity – of divorce in our broken world. And yet, as Jesus said in Matthew 19:8, “from the beginning it was not so.” From the beginning, marriage was intended by God to be a beautiful and lifelong covenant of companionship and love between husband and wife, that points to the love between Christ and His Church.

If you are married, what are some ways you can be building and strengthening your relationship with your spouse, so that you can more fully reflect the glory of Christ in His relationship with His Church? If you are experiencing difficulty in your marriage, what are some ways you can be working towards reconciliation with your spouse?

If you are unmarried, what are some ways you can be encouraging your married brothers and sisters, and helping them to strengthen their marriages?