

COVENANT KEEPERS

"Dedicated To Strengthening Marriages Through Biblical Principles"

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Understanding marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Over the years I have spoken to many individuals who have struggled with marriage, divorce, and remarriage. No wonder these issues draw both controversy and very diverse opinions within the Christian community. I would like to ask you to begin this study by first reading 1 Corinthians 7:10-16. This is an excellent passage to help you begin to sort out these important issues in your life.

Paul addresses three specific issues in this passage: the command to Christians not to divorce, the command to Christians who have divorced, and his instruction to Christians who are married to unbelievers.

The Command Against Divorce

We first need to define the word *depart*, which is used a number of times throughout this passage of Scripture. The word *depart* means to divorce. This word does not refer to a casual or legal separation where two people live apart from each other. Paul's meaning is quite clear when you examine the context. Notice in verse 11, when the word *depart* is used again, that Paul declares this action to result in an individual becoming unmarried. Paul also uses the specific word *divorce* in verse 11 when he encourages husbands not to make this same mistake. In addition, in Matthew 19:6, this word *depart* is translated *put asunder or separate*, which clearly refers to divorce. Therefore, God's ideal for every married couple does not include divorce.

Why should you obey this command not to divorce? Let me give you three good reasons.

(1) First, Jesus said you shouldn't divorce. Jesus said: "Have you not read... 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matt. 19:4-6). If Jesus commanded you not to divorce, that should hold great weight in your decision making. Do His commands have this kind of influence over you? They should! Jesus challenged His own disciples to consider their actions: "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I

say?" (Luke 6:46). To call Jesus Lord means that you must do what He says. This means that you should not seek a divorce.

(2) You should not divorce because it breaks the covenant you made before God. Consider God's command: "The LORD has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously; yet she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But did He not make them one...? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. For the LORD God of Israel says that 'He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence.' ... Therefore take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously" (Mal. 2:14-16). Note that God calls the marriage relationship a covenant between a man and his wife. A covenant is more than just a contract. A covenant is to be a binding commitment made before God that is not to be broken willingly as long as two people live. A covenant is to last a lifetime. According to Malachi, to break the covenant of marriage was to deal treacherously with your mate and to cover one's garment with violence. The word *treacherously* means to be deceitful or unfaithful. The word *violence* is a Hebrew word that means to do injustice or to show cruelty. In other words, if you divorce your mate you are acting with cruelty and injustice, which is why God describes this action as unfaithful and deceitful. God declares that He hates divorce because it's a cruel and unjust thing to do to anyone and it scars all who touch it.

However, note also Malachi's counsel concerning the way to save your marriage from divorce. He declares, "Therefore take heed to your spirit." Each partner must first be concerned with his or her own spirit and heart attitude. Why must you consider your own heart first? Because people love to point the finger at their mate and fail to examine their own heart in the process. They say, "She did _____." Or, "He's so _____." I usually say, "But what about you? What is your fault in this problem? Where are you failing?" Jesus said, "First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matt. 7:5). Are you willing to start here? Will you take heed to your own spirit and examine your own faults?

(3) You should not divorce because of the extreme harm it causes to everyone involved. Divorce is as hurtful and destructive as rip-

ping a person's body apart while they are still alive. The Bible declares that a marriage begins when two people are united as "one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). This phrase literally means one body or one person. Therefore, if you divorce you rip apart something that God has joined together. Remember, "What God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matt. 19:6).

Even though I have never been divorced, I do have personal experience with the devastation of divorce. I grew up in a family where I saw my father leave my mother, and I watched the anguish, tears, and destruction first-hand. I know what it's like being used as a bargaining chip between parents. I know the struggles of growing up in a single parent family with no father. I've personally lived through this destruction. I can say without a doubt, that it is a cruel and harmful experience that you don't want. God knows that divorce is not just one person's problem, it's an entire family's crisis.

My point is this, God calls us to keep our commitments. I know some of you are in difficult marriages right now. But remember, Paul declared, "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men" (Rom. 12:18). I quote this passage often when I do marriage counseling. Notice again, Scripture always makes *your* personal responsibility the primary issue. Paul says, "as much as depends on you." In other words, you are responsible to do all you can to honor your commitments. Are you taking heed to your spirit? Are you doing all that is within your power to live peaceably with your spouse? Are you seeking God for His grace to keep your vow of love?

However, there is a balance within this passage. Paul also said, "If it is possible." That phrase obviously implies that sometimes it is *not* possible to live at peace with someone. That is a sad situation, but it happens. Let me make this clear, it takes two people to make a marriage work. If you are reading this and your spouse has run off with someone else and divorced you, I don't want you to feel condemned by these statements. All you should consider is, did you do all *you* could to save the marriage? Remember, God only holds you responsible for your actions. If your spouse chooses to resist reconciliation there is very little you can do about it. However, whenever I make statements like this, people usually ask, "Are you saying that there are some cases where divorce and remarriage may be permissible?" My answer is, yes, there are

"She is your companion and your wife by covenant" Mal. 2:14

reasons given in Scripture for divorce and remarriage. Then people say, "But isn't this a contradiction of what you've just said?" No it isn't. Let me explain.

Let me give you two biblical reasons for divorce and remarriage. Jesus gives the first reason when He answers the Pharisees' question in Matthew 19: "*The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?'*" (vs. 3). The question is, can someone divorce for *any* reason. Jesus plainly teaches that you can't divorce for *any* reason, because God's desire from the beginning was for one woman to be married to one man for life (vs. 4-6). The Pharisees responded with another question. "*Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?*" (vs. 7). Jesus explains that Moses did not command people to divorce; it was only permitted or allowed because of the hardness of men's hearts (vs. 8). Jesus admits that divorce is permitted in Scripture. Then Jesus gives the reason it is permitted: "*I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery*" (vs.9).

Note that Jesus is the one who gives the exception to the rule, not me. He said, "*except for sexual immorality.*" This exception is not a command; it's an allowable release. I have seen many couples where adultery took place, and the offended partner chose not to divorce because of the humility and repentance of the offending spouse. Many of these marriages have reconciled and become stronger as a result of their reconciliation. However, when a person continues to practice sexual immorality and refuses to repent of his or her offense, or he or she runs off to marry into the adulterous relationship, I believe that this is evidence of a hardened heart -- the reason Jesus gave this exception.

Regardless, there are many Christians who believe that there are no exceptions allowing divorce. I believe that this position is indefensible based on the teachings of Christ in Matthew 19. Judging from the letters and e-mails I get from people on this topic, many Christians are confused about what Scripture teaches. For any teacher to deny the exception of sexual immorality as an option for a Christian, I believe, is to take away from God's Word. Scripture clearly states that adding to or taking away from His Word is a very serious offense (Deut. 4:2; Prov. 30:5-6; Rev. 22:18-19).

Paul also gives a second reason for divorce and remarriage: when an unbeliever abandons and wants to divorce a believing spouse. We will cover this issue later in this study. This reason is found in 1 Cor. 7:15.

However, before we go any further I know many people reading these words are having problems with the idea of exceptions. Many

people have said to me, "When you give an exception to the marriage covenant, you give people an easy out. They look for a loophole and simply run from their responsibility. They take this option as their first choice instead of as a last resort."

First, let me say that divorce never offers an easy out. It harms and scars all concerned because it rips apart a marriage and a family. Unfortunately, I have to agree that some people do look for loopholes and don't take responsibility for themselves and the commitment they have made. This is his or her own loss. But, I can't change God's Word and remove an option because I want to force someone to be responsible. No one has the right to put his or her own opinions into Scripture just because he or she has gone through a messy divorce. Yes, I do believe you should work with everything you have to seek reconciliation with your mate. But, if he or she refuses to reconcile, continues in an adulterous relationship, or determines to abandon you, divorce is an available option.

Others say, "But shouldn't you continue to strive to make the marriage work?" Yes, you should strive for reconciliation, but there is a point at which you can strive contrary to reality. Even God Himself has said, "*My Spirit shall not strive with man forever*" (Gen. 6:3). God saw the reality, "*that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*" (Gen. 6:5). God made this statement concerning mankind and then brought the flood upon the earth. The Lord took the same action with the Jews who were unfaithful to Him. He pursued them, striving to bring them to repentance. But, when it was clear that they would not turn from their idolatry, He sent them into captivity and turned away from them (2 Chronicles 36:16; Deut. 32:15-20). There are husbands and wives just like the Jews, who harden their hearts and stiffen their necks, who will not respond. No matter what overture of love you make toward them, they reject it. In these situations you need to understand that you can't force someone to do what they willfully refuse to do.

The Command To Christians Who Do Divorce

Paul now turns his attention to Christians who do choose to divorce without biblical grounds. He declares, "*But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife*" (vs. 11). Paul first states the ideal in verse 10 that Christians should not get divorced, but then turns right around and acknowledges that he knows some will depart from each other.

If you have divorced without the biblical grounds of adultery or the abandonment of your unbelieving spouse, what does Scripture command you to do? Paul makes it absolutely clear that you have only two options: You

must remain unmarried or be reconciled to your mate. Notice again that this instruction continues to communicate the overall biblical priority of being faithful to your marriage vows.

What should you do if you have already disobeyed this command and have divorced your spouse and remarried another? This question is usually followed by two additional questions. Have I committed an unpardonable sin and should I divorce the new spouse and remarry my previous partner?

Let's deal with the second question first. Should you divorce your new spouse and remarry the one you divorced? Absolutely not! This would be total confusion and would only tear apart more lives. You should simply ask God for His forgiveness and remain in the marriage you're in now. Let me explain the biblical principles upon which I base this counsel.

(1) Remain in the state you are in. After Paul explained the principles of marriage and divorce in 1 Cor. 7:1-16, he then encouraged all believers not to try to escape their present circumstances. He gave two examples: That of circumcision and being a servant of another person. He concluded with the general principle: "*Brethren, let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called*" (1 Cor. 7:24). Paul then applied this same principle to marriage. "*I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress-- that it is good for a man to remain as he is: Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife*" (1 Cor. 7:26-27). In other words, Paul was explaining that they should simply stay in whatever relationship they were in.

(2) In the Old Testament, Moses commanded the people not to return to a wife they had divorced after marrying another because that would be an abomination. "*When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some uncleanness in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, when she has departed from his house, and goes and becomes another man's wife, if the latter husband detests her and writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her as his wife, then her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD*" (Deut. 24:1-4). People often ask if this concept can or should be brought into the New Testament. I believe that you should accept this principle because this is the same passage Jesus used to allow someone to divorce in Matthew 19. Therefore, if Jesus used this passage to allow for divorce due to moral uncleanness in a wife, shouldn't you also consider the rest of the passage concerning returning to a previous marriage partner?

To answer the second question: When people divorce and marry another without biblical grounds, is this an unpardonable sin? It surely is sin, but it is not an unpardonable sin. Jesus said, *“Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men”* (Matt. 12:31). I would emphasize the word *every* in this text. I bring this issue up because there are those who would deny forgiveness for this sin. However, I can not do that! If I did declare this sin was unforgivable, then I would be adding to the Word of God again. Let me be absolutely clear. There is only one unpardonable sin, which is the rejection of the Spirit of God and the testimony concerning Christ until the day of a person’s death. That is the only unpardonable sin. See Heb. 10:29 and 1 John 5:10-16.

Consequently, when I make these statements about forgiveness people have said to me, *“With this philosophy of forgiveness, you are giving people the license to sin.”* My response is this: If someone takes God’s grace, mercy, and forgiveness and uses it as a license to sin that would obviously be wrong. I can’t keep people from doing that. However, I will not give people incorrect or unbiblical counsel to try and keep them from sinning or scare them into obedience. That would be equally wrong on my part.

In addition, if you were divorced and remarried before you became a Christian, then you can also be assured that you have a new and cleansed standing in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Paul declared, *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new”* (2 Cor. 5:17). He does not say some things become new, but *all* things become new. All your failures and sins are washed away and you have a new start with God. Praise Him for His grace.

However, just because the sin of divorce and remarriage without biblical grounds is forgivable, it does not mean there are no consequences. Sin always has consequences. God commands us to take specific actions because He knows how destructive sin is to our lives and to those around us. There will be consequences such as: the hurt you experience by dissolving your marriage, the anger and loss your children experience, the disruption to your extended family, and the added financial pressure of trying to make it alone. Therefore, it’s always best to obey God’s commands and save yourself from these heartaches.

The Command To Christians Who Are Married To Non-believers

What should you do if you are married to an unbeliever? Should you divorce your non-Christian mate or remain in the marriage? The key to understanding Paul’s encouragement is the *willingness* of your unbelieving spouse: *“If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. And a woman who has a*

husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him” (1 Cor. 7:12-13).

How do you determine if your mate is willing to live with you? Consider these facts: The word *willing* is in the present tense and the active voice, which is extremely important to correctly understand this passage. The active voice means that a person performs an action. The present tense describes this action as being done continually. Therefore, if an unbeliever is willing to live with you, he or she will demonstrate this willingness by continual practical actions, not just words. In addition, the word *willing* literally means, that they take pleasure in dwelling with you. By words and actions an unbeliever must demonstrate that he or she takes pleasure in living with you.

The reason I bring these definitions up is because I have counseled numerous individuals who struggle with the contradictions they see in their unbelieving mate. Let me give you four examples where this definition of willingness needs to be considered: (1) When a wife declares, *“My spouse verbally declares that he is willing to live with me, but he is presently sleeping with another woman.”* (2) When a man announces, *“I am willing to live with you, but I really don’t want to provide for you.”* (3) When a wife says, *“I am willing to live with you, but I don’t want to have any sexual relations with you.”* (4) When a husband declares, *“I am willing to live with you,”* but then physically abuses you on a regular basis. What do all these actions reveal? Obviously, they show that a person is not willing to live with you, nor do they take pleasure in you as their spouse.

It is important to note that even God does not accept simply what a person says; He only recognizes what a person does. The little phrase that we use so often, *“actions speak louder than words”* is very biblical. Jesus said, *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven”* (Matt. 7:21). You can’t give lip service by using spiritual language and then fail to live what you profess to believe. There must be action to prove your commitment to the Lordship of Christ. You will only be allowed into the Kingdom of heaven if you do the will of the Father.

Another passage that establishes this principle is found in Proverbs. Most of the modern translations confuse the meaning of this verse; however, the Old King James Version renders it best. *“A naughty person, a wicked man, walketh with a froward mouth. He winketh with his eyes, he speaketh with his feet, he teacheth with his fingers”* (Prov. 6:13). Solomon is explaining to his son how to determine a wicked man. He declared that a wicked man *speaks with his feet*. In other words, look at what a person does and observe closely his or her actions, not just the speech.

This is Paul’s point: If your non-Christian mate is not willing by their words *and* deeds to dwell with you, and he or she chooses to leave, let them depart. Paul makes it clear when he declares, *“But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace”* (1 Cor. 7:15). It is important to note that the word *depart* is an imperative in the Greek. The imperative mood corresponds to the English imperative, and expresses a command to the hearer to perform a certain action by the authority of the one commanding. Thus, when Jesus gives the imperative, *“Repent, and believe the Gospel”* (Mark 1:15), He is not merely giving an invitation, but a command requiring full obedience on the part of all hearers. Therefore, when Paul declares *“Let him depart,”* he is not simply giving an idea to consider. He is giving a command, *let them go!*

The reason I bring up this issue is that many Christians have been given erroneous counsel on this subject. In most cases, to persevere and seek reconciliation with a wayward mate is the godly thing to do. However, it is cruel and unbiblical when people are told to hold on to their marriages when their adulterous spouses have already married someone else or have made it continually clear that they want nothing to do with the faithful partner. Christian men and women have written me telling of the counsel they were given to pray that God would destroy a second marriage, to restore their own. This is clearly contrary to 1 Cor. 7:15. Counsel such as this only torments a person, causing them to hope and pray for something that is evil and destructive. When your spouse makes it clear by his or her words and actions that he (she) is not pleased to dwell with you, or when he (she) has already married someone else, I would encourage you to *let your spouse depart* as Scripture teaches. Note that Paul explains that, *“A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace”* (Vs. 15). A person in such circumstances is no longer bound by the marriage vows because the unfaithful spouse’s actions have demonstrated his or her total disregard for the marriage. Following this counsel is God’s method to bring some measure of peace to the offended mate.

Now let’s consider the flip side of this issue. What if your non-Christian spouse is pleased to live with you? Paul teaches clearly, *“If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy”* (1 Cor 7:12-13). God’s Word is clear, don’t divorce this person. Why? Because, as a believer, you sanctify your non-Christian mate. What does it mean to sanctify your spouse?

First, let me tell you what it *doesn't* mean. To sanctify your mate does not mean that you automatically bring salvation to your husband or your children because you stay in the marriage. This is a complete misunderstanding of the meaning of sanctification. Let me explain briefly what sanctification means.

The word *sanctify* is the same root word that is translated "holy," "set apart," or "perfecting holiness." The same word is also translated "sanctify" or "holy" at the end of verse 13 in reference to your children. This word sanctify is used in the Old Testament of the utensils that were set apart for use in the Temple offerings. These utensils were holy and set apart for this service alone. Therefore, to sanctify means to set something apart or to set someone apart for God's purposes. Consider four ways you are sanctified:

(1) You were sanctified before you came to Christ. God set you apart and sanctified you by the Spirit of God as He drew you to Jesus Christ. In John 6:44 Jesus said, "*No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.*"

(2) At the point of salvation Scripture declares that you "*were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ*" (1 Cor. 6:11). Therefore, after you received Jesus you were then sanctified by God, washed from your sins, and placed in His kingdom (Col. 1:13).

(3) You are also sanctified as you walk with Christ and grow in personal holiness. This transformation of your life occurs as He sets you apart by conforming you into the image of the Son. Paul called this work, "*perfecting holiness*" (2 Cor. 7:1). This sanctifying work occurs as you trust and apply God's promises in your personal life.

(4) Finally, God's sanctifying work is completed at the moment you meet Jesus face to face at death or when He returns for His own. Paul referred to this completed work when he said, "*Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1 Thess. 5:23).

Now that you understand the purpose of sanctification, how do these truths relate to our subject of a believing spouse living with an unbeliever? When a believer is living in the same home with a non-Christian, the unbeliever is being set apart by the Holy Spirit just because of your influence and presence in the home. He or she will naturally have a greater potential to be saved than if the believer were absent. If a non-Christian is willing to dwell with you, the better chance you have of leading your non-Christian husband or wife to Jesus Christ. Paul makes this clear when he asks: "*For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife*" (1 Cor. 7:16)?

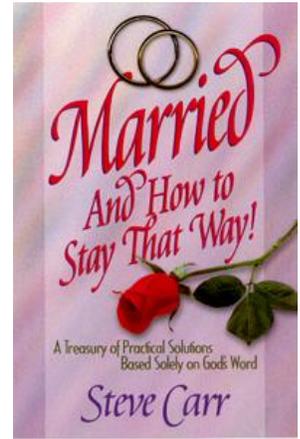
A further reason to stay in a marriage with an unbeliever is for the children's sake. "*For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy*" (1 Cor. 7:14). This word *unclean* is the same word translated "common" many places in the New Testament. Remember Peter said to Jesus, "*I have never eaten anything common or unclean*" (Acts 10:14). If your children are common it simply means that they are not in a sanctified position. This is the same principle referred to above concerning your sanctifying influence over your unbelieving wife or husband. Therefore, because your presence has this sanctifying influence upon your spouse and your children, it is best to stay in your marriage if your mate is willing.

However, people have said to me many times, "I don't want to stay with my unbelieving spouse just for the children." But, in light of this instruction, I think it's an important reason! God is again trying to motivate you to stay and work out the problems. Do you realize that if you leave your spouse that your children could possibly end up living permanently with a non-Christian parent or stepparent, which would put them in an unsanctified position? I counsel parents all the time that have their children living in non-Christian homes who have tremendous struggles with the unsupervised evil influence of ungodly parents. When the children come home from visiting the ungodly parent, the godly spouse has to undo all the damage done over the weekend or summer.

Finally, realize that you have a very powerful influence upon your spouse, your children, or anyone in your family. Use that influence. Be salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16). Be the example God has called you to be (1 Tim. 4:12). Are you the example you should be: of how a believer loves, how a believer speaks to others, how a believer walks in faith and lives in purity? Your behavior *will* affect all the people who live around you. You may not see an instant change, but I guarantee you that you will be sanctifying them by your life. Remember, your family is watching to see how you will handle the trials and triumphs in your life. Therefore, be a good witness. Sanctify those around you with your words and your behavior.

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