

# COVENANT KEEPERS

"Dedicated To Strengthening Marriages Through Biblical Principles"

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## Living with your non-Christian spouse.

Is it possible to live peaceably with your unbelieving mate? This is a question that many believers wrestle with on a regular basis. If you are married to an unbeliever, what does God want you to do? Are there clear directives revealed in God's Word to help you live at peace with your non-Christian spouse? As you read these words of encouragement ask God to give you an open and willing heart to hear what He will personally say to you.

**1. Don't look for a way out.** Many times when one partner receives Christ and begins to struggle in his marriage he will begin to view divorce as the easiest solution to his marital trouble. However, divorce is never a quick or easy solution for any troubled marriage. In fact, many times divorce will create even more difficulties and turmoil than if a person chose to stay and work out the problems. Over the years many couples have confessed to me in counseling that they regretted not having tried harder to resolve the issues in their marriages. For this reason Paul clearly instructs Christians who are married to non-Christians not to divorce: *"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).

You must understand that it is by God's design and not by some

chance that you were saved while married to your spouse. If your unbelieving spouse is willing to live with you, then be assured God is working out His plan in and through your life. Paul encouraged the Ephesian church that God had saved them and that He wanted to fulfill His work through them: *"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them"* (Eph. 2:10). Therefore, don't look for a way out of the marriage. Instead, ask God to show you how He wants to fulfill His work through you in your present circumstances. Then do it.

Now, some of you are thinking, *Aren't there exceptions to what you've just said?* Of course. If you read the entire context of 1 Corinthians 7:12-16, you will find that Paul also addresses these concerns. He clearly states that, *"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). What does Paul mean? The word translated *depart* in this passage means to divorce and is clearly used in this context in 1 Corinthians 7:11. Therefore, if your non-Christian spouse is unwilling to live with you and demonstrates his or her refusal to abide in the covenant of marriage by abandoning or divorcing you, this behavior sets you free from the relationship.

Likewise, if your spouse is physically abusive toward you, this behavior demonstrates that your mate is unwilling to dwell with you in a peaceable manner. Remember, God is very concerned about the peace and safety of you and your children. God clear-

ly communicated this concern for His people when He encouraged them in Deuteronomy 12:10: *"The Lord your God is giving you...rest from all your enemies round about, so that you dwell in safety."* God also promises: *"I will set him in the safety for which he yearns"* (Ps. 12:5). Therefore, you should never allow yourself to be physically abused by your mate. God doesn't want you to remain in a dangerous relationship. If God told Jacob to remove himself from a relationship with his father-in-law because of unfair wages, how much more should you remove yourself from an abusive spouse who is endangering your life (Gen. 31:3)? Of course, the only exception to this counsel is if your spouse is sincerely seeking help for his or her abusive behavior through counseling and developing a right relationship with God.



**Consider your responsibilities!**

However, if the above circumstances are not occurring and your spouse is willing to dwell with you, consider the following counsel to help you live peaceably with your unbelieving spouse.

**2. Be realistic.** Unrealistic expectations act as one of the greatest hindrances in any marriage. Refusal to

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

adopt a realistic outlook toward your spouse results in tremendous anger, frustration, and depression. If you are already frustrated, examine realistically your current expectations concerning your mate. What are some unrealistic expectations that you should avoid?

First, ask yourself how you expect your mate to behave. Is it realistic to think that your unsaved mate will act like a Christian? You would probably respond, "Of course not. I would never expect this!" But, have you ever heard yourself say "Why doesn't he or she do \_\_\_\_\_?" Ask yourself; would the fruit of the Holy Spirit in his or her life produce this desired behavior? If you answer yes, then your expectation is not realistic because your spouse is not a Christian nor does he or she have access to the power of the Spirit. Therefore, continuing to hold on to this expectation in your heart will only bring you frustration.

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### **God wants to fulfill His work through you in your present circumstances**

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Second, do you expect your mate to be saved immediately? Are you supposing that since you have come to Christ and have "seen the light," that he or she should too? Remember, every person comes to Christ in his or her own time. When the disciples asked Jesus when He would restore the kingdom to Israel He said, "*It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority*" (Acts 1:7). In other words, Jesus explained that the Father had times, seasons, and purposes that He was fulfilling in His own way. We have no concept of these purposes and therefore simply need to trust Him to complete His work as He sees fit. We know from history that this restoration of Israel didn't occur for another 1900 years.

Therefore, rest in the assurance that God is at work in your unsaved mate's life as He has promised. You must hold onto the promise God gave to the Prophet Habakkuk: "*Look...and watch--Be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you*" (Habakkuk 1:5). Beloved, believe that God is working that same work in your spouse that He did in you. He loves your unsaved mate just as much as He loves you. He is working!

Therefore, examine all your expectations and be sure that they are realistic and biblical. Compare your thinking with what God has promised and then leave the process to Him.

**3. Remember why you are married.** Why would God allow you to become a Christian while married to an unbeliever? This question is specifically answered in Scripture. You are in this marriage to sanctify your spouse. This is what Paul declared in 1 Corinthians 7:14: "*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.*" What does it mean to sanctify your spouse?

First, let me tell you what it *does not* mean. To sanctify your mate does not mean that you will automatically bring salvation to your spouse 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 "sanctified" or "holy" at the end of verse 14 in reference to your children. This word sanctify is first 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, let's tie it in with our subject of a believing spouse living with an unbeliever. When a Christian is living with a non-Christian, the unbeliever is being set apart and worked on by the Holy Spirit as a direct result of the believer's presence in the home. Remember, you are a light in the darkness of your mate's life (Matt. 5:14-16). Since your mate is willing to dwell with you, he or she will naturally have a greater potential for being saved than if you were not present in

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the home. Paul implies this with his question: “*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. According to 1 Corinthians 7:14, children living with a Christian parent are holy rather than unclean. 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 that was referred to above concerning your sanctifying influence over your unbelieving wife or husband. Therefore, since your presence has this sanctifying influence upon your spouse and your children, if your mate is willing it is best to stay in your marriage.

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 excellent reason! God is again trying to motivate you to stay and work out the problems. Do you realize that if you leave your spouse your children could end up living with a non-Christian parent or step-parent, which would put them in an unsanctified position? All the time, I counsel parents with children living in non-Christian homes. The believing parents and their children face tremendous struggles with the evil influence of an ungodly parent or step-parent. When the children come home from visiting the unsaved parent, the Christian spouse has to undo all the damage done over the weekend or summer.

Therefore, remember that your presence in your home has great beneficial influence.

**4. Concentrate on your conduct.** A terrible mistake that many Christians

make is to focus on what they say rather than their conduct. Are you the example God has called you to be: of how a believer loves, how a believer speaks to others, how a believer walks in faith and lives in purity (1 Tim. 4:12)? You need to be salt and light in your home (Matt. 5:13-16). Your behavior *will* affect your entire family. 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 triumphs and trials in your life. Therefore, be a good witness. Sanctify those around you first by your behavior. Peter specifically warned believing wives to take this action: “*Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct*” (1 Peter 3:1-2). In addition, Paul reminded the Corinthian church that they were a living epistle “*known and read by all men*” (2 Cor. 3:2). Your life may be the only Bible your spouse or children will ever read. Therefore, concentrate on having a conduct that is worthy of the Gospel (Phil. 1:27).

**5. Share your faith.** There does come a time when you must share your faith. There are two very appropriate situations when you should verbally witness to your unsaved mate:

(1) Your spouse may observe some attitude or behavior that exemplifies God’s work in your life, and he or she will express appreciation for you. At this moment, remind your spouse that this was not the way you were before coming to Christ. Explain how much better it would be if you could share these changes together in your marriage.

(2) Wait until your spouse is struggling with the emptiness in his or her own life or is experiencing relational difficulty with another person. Remind him or her that you once felt the same way, and this is why you surrendered your life to Christ.

As you share with your mate, don’t lecture or preach a long sermon. Work at being as brief as possible so you won’t begin to pressure or annoy your mate. Only continue sharing your faith if he or she continues the dialogue. Always endeavor to keep a two-way conversation. Otherwise, keep your statements to two or three sentences so you won’t begin to lecture.

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### **Remember, you are a light in the darkness of your mate’s life**

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In addition, always look for ways to respond to your mate’s preconceived ideas about why he or she can’t become a Christian, or why becoming a believer is undesirable. You must do your homework so that you will be able to speak concisely and effectively to these issues. Why? Because “*A word spoken in due season, how good it is*” (Prov. 15:23)! Isaiah also described this ability: “*The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary*” (Is. 50:4).

**6. Don’t hate them.** If your mate continues to resist your words and rejects Christ, you must be very careful not to become resentful or angry toward him or her. Why? The rejection of Christ is not a personal rejection of you. God comforted the Prophet Samuel clearing up his potential misunderstanding: “*They have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them*” (1 Samuel 8:7). Jesus told His disciples the same thing. “*He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me*” (Luke 10:16). Therefore, understand that your mate’s rejection is specifically a refusal to allow the Lord to have authority over his or her life.

In addition, you must realize that your mate is simply blinded to who God is and what He's done. Paul said, *"the god of this age has blinded"* the minds of those who don't believe (2 Cor. 4:4). This means that your spouse really doesn't understand what he or she is doing. Jesus similarly acknowledged this blindness when He cried out from the cross, *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do"* (Luke 23:34).

To better understand your mate's blindness and to help you with your resentment let me illustrate it this way. Place yourself for a moment in a very crowded line at the store, waiting to purchase some items. Everyone is pressed up against one another in a small space. The man in front of you suddenly backs up into you and steps on your toe. You quickly nudge him forward off of your toe. In a few moments he does the same thing, but steps on your other foot and crushes a few more toes. Your anger builds at this point, and you abruptly tell this man to be more careful. Not 30 seconds go by before he loses his balance and drives his elbow into your stomach. You instantly explode, grab the man, and swing him around, ready to yell at him. As you angrily turn the man around, you suddenly realize that he is blind. Now how do you feel? You understand that the man didn't purposely step on your toes to intentionally hurt you, but was hindered by his blindness. The most important thing to realize is that *you* are the one with the problem.

Therefore, give your unsaved mate a little consideration based on your knowledge of his or her condition. Give him or her some space and patience, and pray that God will open their eyes.

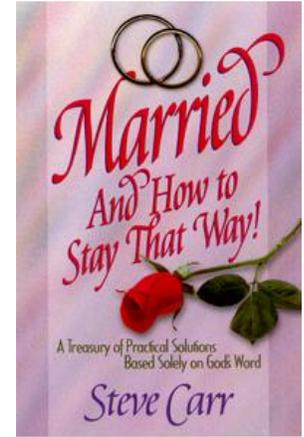
**7. Pray.** Prayer is your greatest and most powerful weapon in the struggle to maintain your marriage. James teaches us that *"the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much"* (James 5:16). The word *avails* means to have force and ex-

traordinary power. Do you want to exert extraordinary force and power upon your mate's heart and mind? If you do, then pray! Ask God continually to speak and to touch your mate's heart, to soften the hardness, and to bind Satan's blinding power in his or her life. When Jesus healed a demon possessed man He explained His method of setting people free from Satan's power: *"How can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house"* (Matthew 12:29). If your loved one is to be plundered from the kingdom of darkness you must continually fight this battle in prayer. Jesus has given you authority over all the supernatural power of the enemy. *"Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you"* (Luke 10:19). Your authority is not based on *your* power or ability, but on the powerful name of Jesus. Hold your loved one up before the throne of God and ask the Father to convict as well as to remove the blindness from your spouse. Pray, and pray again. Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17). Never give up!

Don't get discouraged if you don't see immediate results. Remember, your mate must respond to God's conviction and revelation of his or her own free will. You must simply do your part and leave the rest to Him. Remember to pray for yourself, that you may find the strength and courage for the path you are on today. David's counsel is absolutely essential for your endurance: *"Wait on the LORD; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the LORD"* (Ps. 27:14)!

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