



Catalog No. 790

1 Corinthians 7:10-24

Twelfth Message

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August 26, 1990

CULTIVATING COMMITMENT IN MARRIAGE

SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

First Corinthians is a very practical book. We will see evidence of that once again today as the apostle Paul's words confront one of the most pressing social problems of our day, the breakup of marriages.

Listen to a powerful description of lost love. As I read it, ask yourself if there are any parallels to your own marriage:

Their wedding picture mocks them from the table, these two whose minds no longer touched each other. They lived with such a heavy barricade between them that neither a battering ram of words nor artilleries of touch could break it down. Somewhere between the oldest child's first tooth and the youngest daughter's graduation they had lost each other. Throughout the years, each slowly unraveled the tangled ball of string called self. And as they tugged at stubborn knots, each hid his searching from the other. Sometimes she cried at night and begged the whispering darkness to tell her who she was. He lay beside her unaware of her winter, for she warmed herself in self-pity. He climbed into a tomb called the office, wrapped his mind in a shroud of paper figures, and buried himself in customers. And slowly the wall between them rose, cemented by a wall of indifference. And one day, reaching out to touch each other, they found a barrier they could not penetrate. And recoiling from the coldness of the stone, each retreated from the stranger on the other side. For when love dies, it is not in a moment of angry battle; it lies panting and exhausted, expiring at the bottom of a carefully built wall that it could not penetrate.

What is God's answer to an unhappy marriage? The passage we will look at today will show us how God wants us deal with difficult relationships.

Last week we saw that there was a group of extremists who reacted to the sexual immorality in Corinth by advocating sexual abstinence, even within marriage. Their conviction was summed up in 7:1, "It is not good for a man to have sexual relations with a woman." As a result, many conclusions were being drawn. A certain group of women rejected their husbands sexually on that basis, even to the point of divorce. Paul is responding to that situation. Let me say that it is important to understand that these verses address a specific situation in Corinth—the apparent rejection of marriage on ascetic grounds. That is important for us to see as we seek to understand what Paul is saying to us.

Having said that, I realize there may be some couples listening to me who, having committed themselves "for better or worse," now feel they don't need marriage, that they made a mistake in getting married, or that they would be far more effective in serving the Lord without the responsibilities of marriage. In these verses, Paul gives a strong charge to those who see little hope for their marriage.

Let's read what the apostle says, in 7:10-16:

But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not send his wife away. But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an

unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. 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 7:10-16 NASB)

The structure of these verses is easy to follow. Paul gives his instructions to married couples in verses 10-16; and he elaborates on the principle behind his instructions in verses 17-24.

I. A word to the married: Stay as you are (7:10-16)

A. Addressing Christian couples

Verses 10-11:

But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not send his wife away. (7:10-11)

Addressing those who are married, Paul is presupposing they are believers. This becomes obvious when we see that he addresses believers who are married to unbelievers as "the rest" in verses 12-16. Thus Paul addresses Christian couples in verses 10-11; and in verses 12-15 he addresses believers who are married to unbelievers. Along with the imperatives in verse 2-5, the command in 10-11 is the only command in the chapter. While Paul is ambivalent about the remarriage of widows, there is no ambivalence as to whether married couples ought to dissolve their marriages. There the apostle begins with the fundamental position of Scripture on marriage, and that is that marriage is intended to be for life.

In the words, "I give instructions," Paul remembers that Jesus himself spoke to this question, thus he appeals to his authority. It is important to understand the phrase, "not I, but the Lord." Paul reverses the language in v. 12 and says, "I say, not the Lord."

Where Paul had actual sayings of Jesus, he quoted them. We need to remember that 1 Corinthians was written before any of the gospels, thus Paul would not necessarily have many of the sayings of Jesus. He quotes just a few of them. But there is no conflict between Paul's words and those of Jesus. His words are as authoritative as the words of Jesus because they both are the "word of the Lord." One is the direct word of Jesus which he spoke when he was here on earth; the other is the indirect word of the Lord which he spoke through his apostles.

Jesus spoke to this issue directly. We have his words recorded for us in the fifth and nineteenth chapters of Matthew and the tenth

chapter of Mark. The passage is very clear; there is no debate as to what these verses are saying. The commitment to marriage by a man and a woman is lifelong. It is underwritten by God himself and may not to be undermined by mere humans.

Paul was aware that certain Corinthian women had already left their husbands. His command to them is precisely what we find in the teachings of Jesus: that is, there must be no adultery. Remain unmarried or be reconciled to your husband. The marriage is not broken just because it has become impossible to live with. If the woman leaves for a time, or if it is a long continued problem, even if she gains a divorce, in God's sight the marriage is not broken.

The principle applies even in our world. Though I have not met many women who have left their husbands for ascetic reasons, I have counseled scores of women married to men who were destroying their families physically, sexually, or financially through their addictive and abusive behavior. In certain situations it is not only proper, but important for the wife to leave temporarily in order to bring her husband to his senses. But the purpose of the separation is not for remarriage. Therefore, while her mate lives and remains unmarried (or while his mate lives and remains unmarried because this would equally apply to husbands) she is not to remarry, for there is always the possibility that the grace of God can work to bring healing, restoration and reconciliation to that marriage.

In Matthew's gospel, there is one and only one basis given for divorce, and that is adultery, fornication (*porneia*). Paul does not refer to this here. We might ask why. Perhaps the rampant immorality and temple prostitution in Corinth would have introduced that factor into so many marriages in the church that the mere mention of it, without the opportunity for counsel face-to-face, might have destroyed many marriages that ought not be ended. Even infidelity, as destructive as it is in marriage, can be repented of and forgiven. There are marriages represented here this morning where couples have been on the verge of a divorce because of infidelity, but repentance and forgiveness has taken place, and with it reconciliation and healing. But if this is a continuing problem, and there is no repentance, Jesus recognized that that indeed ended a marriage.

Paul's advice to those contemplating divorce is simple: Don't! The Lord has expressly forbidden it, so don't even allow yourself the luxury of entertaining it as a possibility. If this is the command of the Lord, it does no good to even contemplate what is clearly beyond limits.

I would like to remind you of an important truth that we have already learned in this book: Our purpose in life is not happiness, but the development of character. We are to glorify God. We are not our own. We have been bought with a price. That concept will change your entire perspective of yourself, your mate, and your marriage. We enter marriage at a time in our lives when we know very little about love. God would have arranged it another way if the objective in life was happiness. But the purpose of life is to learn how to love. That is why God puts couples in a locked room, as he seeks to have us learn how to love in the security of the marriage commitment. Paul's counsel to married couples is, work out your differences. These verses pulsate with commitment: "Do not leave...be reconciled...do not send her away."

Next, Paul tackles a problem that must have been common in Corinth and in every place where the gospel was proclaimed with power—the problem of a newly converted Christian married to a non-Christian spouse.

B. Addressing mixed marriages

Verses 12-16:

But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but know they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. 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? (7:12-16)

One partner's conversion can severely strain a relationship. The Christian partner has now discovered a totally new way of life. He or she is committed to new standards, new loyalties, new priorities, new desires. They are a new creation. The necessary adjustments are immense. Misunderstandings arise. At times, the Christian can feel like he is torn in two.

It is no less an adjustment for the unbeliever. Statistics show that it is usually the husband who most often finds himself now living with a "holy woman." One man who was married to a new believer indicated that he found two things most difficult about his wife's new faith: she was no longer the person he had originally fallen in love with and decided to marry; and there was another Man in the house to whom she was deferring her every decision and to whom she went for advice and instructions. The husband was no longer the boss in his own house. Jesus gave the orders and set the pace.

Paul was aware of those strains in many homes in Corinth. He also recognized that several external factors, including his own preference for the single life, put strong pressure on the believing partner to call it a day and to start a new life without the added burden of an unequal yoke. Perhaps the Christian partners were tending to look down on, and even write off their non-Christian spouses. In the Corinthian's mind this pagan partner contaminated the marriage.

Recognizing these realities, Paul stresses the need for these couples to work on their relationship, just as Christian couples need to work on theirs. He gives two reasons for his advice:

1. The present fact of your family's condition

The Corinthians felt that the unbelief of the one cancelled out the belief of the other. Paul insists on the exact opposite, saying that the belief of the one leads to a distinctive relationship between the unbelieving partner and the Lord. When one partner responds to God's call and is converted to Christ, the other becomes consecrated in a special way. That word "consecrated" is the perfect passive form of the word "sanctify," used in 6:11 to describe our position as believers. Though the relationship is not one of being saved, it is one that is specially marked out by God. Just as Laban's household was blessed because of Jacob, and Potiphar's because of Joseph, so non-Christian mates are blessed because of their Christian spouses. Remember Paul is addressing a group of extremists who have a distorted view of sex. He not only defends sexual relations in marriage, but he refers to the children in a marriage of Christians and non-Christians as "holy." The apostle poses the only other alternative to children not being regarded as holy is that they are unclean. That word describes not only a non-relationship with the Lord, but an actual state of uncleanness

which Paul does not regard to be an accurate description of children who are brought up in the Christian community. Calvin says of this passage: “The godliness of the one does more to ‘sanctify’ the marriage than the ungodly does to make it unclean.”

There is a second reason which the apostle gives for working at this relationship:

2. The future possibility of your family’s conversion

Whatever the struggles and difficulties that are inherent in such an unequal relationship, Paul holds out the real possibility that the miracle of conversion can bring that family into genuine oneness in Christ. The fact that this does happen, and not infrequently, is cause to endure even lengthy periods of indifference. He phrases the question in such a way that leaves the matter completely open: “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?” No one does know, but we are encouraged to press on in hope. Michael Green put it this way: “If one of you has been converted since marriage, then there is every reason to suppose that the good Lord is at work in your family. And you pray, and you try to live a consistent life, so that if your partner is not won by your word, they may be won without a word having been said, by the godliness of your life.”

And this happens. Listen to one woman’s testimony, which she shared in a letter to Charles Swindoll:

God has restored a marriage and rekindled a love that was virtually dead. God used your ministry to break, bend, and finally remold me to be the person God wanted me to be, so I would be ready when God began his work in my husband’s life. As I sat in the last row, I thought surely you were talking to me as you told of Jesus’ love and forgiveness and hope for the despairing. As my tears quietly fell, I found God’s loving forgiveness, and a real hope in his strength. I went home that day with my one-year-old son to a husband who worked constantly, drank heavily, and was emotionally hurting. But this time, Jesus came, too. You will never know the strength God gave me over the months that followed through your insightful messages to go on each day, some days with peace and others by sheer endurance. How many times I wanted to run away and start over, only to walk into a church and have you say, ‘When you are between a rock and a hard place, you stay, because God is going to let you grow if you let him.’ So I stayed, and let God begin his work of changing me. I stopped praying for God to fix my marriage and change my husband, and started to consciously submit to God’s will, asking him to change me. Through the pain he sheltered me in the shadow of his wings, and I sang for joy. He brought me out of the pit of destruction and set my feet upon the rock. God was at work. Two years ago, God removed my husband’s desire for alcohol, and he did it overnight.

This past summer I decided to get off the fence and I committed my whole life to Christ. I gave him all of those areas that I had absolutely, stubbornly held onto. I said, ‘God, whatever it takes to bring me closer to you, you do it. I’m going to stay in this marriage and let you work out your will in my life.’ Well, three months later, through God’s gracious timing and his circumstances, my husband accepted Jesus as his Savior. Talk about an answer to prayer! I am married to a new man, one who now loves God, and wants our family to live according to God’s will. You have said on occasion how God can rekindle a dead love, well, my husband and I are proof of God’s caring, his power and ability to change hearts and to bring life into a dead relationship. I love my husband more now than ever before. Our priorities as a family are straight, with God first. God is so faithful. He has restored the years that the locusts have eaten. He has dealt wondrously with us. Our eyes fill with tears of joy when our six-year-old son says, ‘Thank you, Jesus,

for coming into my daddy’s heart and making him nice to me and not so mean. I love my daddy.’ As a family we now anticipate growing in the Lord, participating in fellowship, and, as God wills, being an encouragement to others.

That is why we wait. There are, of course, no guarantees that this will happen. But the Christian partner should never take the initiative to end the marriage. However obstinate the unbelieving partner may be toward spiritual things, the believing partner upholds the sanctity of the marriage and its lifelong permanence.

Paul recognizes, however, that the continuation of such a marriage is not completely up to the believing partner. The unbelieving partner may feel that continuing the marriage is impossible for him; he can no longer tolerate his spouse’s Christianity. Paul’s counsel in such a situation is: let the unbeliever leave. Don’t try to fight it. The overriding principle in Paul’s mind, expressed in v. 15, is that “God has called us to peace.” The calling of God is of paramount importance to Paul, as we will see in the next paragraph.

The apostle reminds Christians who are experiencing stress and heartache at home that the essential nature of God’s calling to them is an invitation, indeed a summons, into a peace in which he wants them to dwell daily. And it is a peace that is not merely the absence of strife, but one that encompasses the healing and wholeness of all our relationships. Tragically, however, he realizes that there may be certain relationships where a Christian’s peace can never be realized. His counsel is that if an unbeliever takes the initiative and wants to leave, then do not weigh him or her down with restrictions that will prevent them from doing so. Let them leave, rather than continue chafing under an unequal yoke. That is the command.

Next, Paul shows the guiding principle behind the command.

II. The guiding principle: Stay as one was when called

Verses 17-24:

Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And thus I direct in all the churches. Was any man called already circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God. Let each man remain in that condition in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able to also become free, rather do that. For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord’s freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ’s slave. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. Brethren, let each man remain with God in that condition in which he was called. (7:17-24)

Paul now gives the general principle, repeated three times in these verses, upon which he has based his arguments: “let each man remain in that condition in which he was called.” Though it appears he is changing the subject, he is simply broadening his argument. But his concern is the same, that is: Christians need not change the social setting they were in when they came to Christ. These Corinthian Christians were seeking to make all kinds of changes. They felt that if they changed their marital status they would become more spiritual.

Paul is attempting to put their spirituality in a different perspective. We are to remain in whatever social setting we were in when we were converted because God’s call in Christ transcends those

settings and makes them irrelevant. The call to Christ has created such a change in one's essential relationship (with God), that one does not need to seek any change in other relationships. Conversion transforms all of them and gives them new meaning. Paul urges us to adopt an attitude of contentment with whatever lot God gives to us, even if this includes circumstances which cause friction and frustration.

To make his point the apostle illustrates from two other kinds of social settings. Circumcision and slavery represented the two most divisive phenomena in the world of the New Testament. Circumcision constituted the greatest religious barrier; and slavery the biggest social barrier. In each case, Paul is bold enough to assert that the salvation of God in Christ has rendered them null and void.

The apostle wants to encourage stability, and therefore he makes the same point three times: verse 17, "as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk"; verse 20, "Let each man remain in that condition in which he was called"; verse 24, "let each man remain with God in that condition in which he was called."

In this profound passage, Paul reminds the Corinthians (and us) that the key to making their present situation count is to let God change them daily, right where he had placed them. Your circumstances are no accident. God has placed you where you are. Circumcision does indeed present great barriers between Jews and Gentiles, but God can overcome these obstacles by working inside both Jewish and Gentile Christians. The gulf between slave and free is wide, but God can bridge that gulf by going to work inside both Christian slaves and Christian freemen. And, may I add, the differences between you and your spouse may be great, but God is able to meet you right where you are and fill you with love, joy and peace in the midst of the struggles.

If a starving man were asked to feed his hungry neighbor, he would understandably be less than eager to obey. If he could get some food, he would want to eat it himself. To give something away which you yourself desperately crave is a difficult assignment. I think that this is how many of us view what we are asked to do in marriage. When we read a passage such as this, we feel we are being asked to give up all our hopes for happiness in order to make our mates happy; to give up all our own desires for fulfillment so our mates can be spared the pain of divorce. Our immediate response is, no way!

But supposing we were to assure our starving friend that a lavish banquet had been prepared for him, and as a promise of the good things to come, he was given a generous appetizer of shrimp cocktail and a slice of a perfectly cooked prime rib. Imagine also that you assured him that there was plenty for everyone. As he looked across the fence at his emaciated neighbor, assume what struck him most was his neighbor's need, and that this awareness erased all his memories over their fights about borrowed tools and noisy parties.

Imagine a bit more. Supposing the one who gave the feast asked our friend to carry a slice of beef over to his neighbor and invite him to the meal. How would you respond in that situation? How do you think the neighbor would respond?

Viewed from God's perspective, Christian marriage is a lot like this parable. We were never meant to find our deepest needs being met by another person. We were meant to find them in Jesus Christ. All of our needs are completely met in him. The riches of heaven are ours, and to excite our faith he has given us a taste of what lies ahead. The problem is, many Christians have not tasted and seen that the Lord is good. Those who have know something of the joy and peace he can provide.

It is only as we discover that the answer to our deepest longings lies in Christ that we will be able to see past those longings and discern our mates' deep needs, and discover the deep desire to share with them the satisfaction we ourselves have found.

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