

Instructions about Marriage

1 Corinthians 7:1–20

Paul had been admonishing the Corinthian church for their ungodly living in chapters 1–6. Factions had formed and groups were fighting. They were apparently also bringing church matters into the public sector by filing lawsuits against each other. Sin was allowed to fester within the church and they were unwilling to take immediate action against the man who was outwardly fornicating. Despite the many egregious problems, Paul calls them saints who have been washed, sanctified, and justified. Paul was hoping that they would be able to resolve these problems before he personally visited them a few months after writing this letter.

Chapter 7 begins a slightly different focus as Paul begins to answer some questions that they had about how they were to live. Now that they had become believers, they were wondering how to handle marriage and interpersonal relationships with unbelievers. They were wondering how far they should go to disassociate themselves from unbelievers. Should they stay married? Should they try to become a free man if they were a slave? They were also wondering if they should eat food offered to idols? All of these things are answerable by applying wisdom to Grace doctrine and an understanding of the position we have in Christ.

Husband and wife

Believing husbands and wives belong to each other. The Husband loves the wife and the wife submits to the husband as the head of the house. It is not up to the husband to make the wife submit, and it is not up to the wife to make the husband love her (Ephesians 5:22–28). When a couple loves each other, each will watch out for the needs of each other. Both play different roles in the family, and there is no reason for couples to compete against each other. The man acts as the head of the house just as Christ is the head of the Church. He is responsible for making wise, godly decisions concerning the family. The final authority rests on the husband, but good decisions are often found in wise council from the wife. The two working together and walking in the Spirit will make good family decisions and they will be able to love each other properly.

Personal interactions in a marriage are very similar to how believers should interact with each other. We are to seek what is best for one another. We should be looking out for each other, not looking at how to fulfill selfish needs or desires (Philippians 2:2–4). This is not surprising since we are to have the mind of Christ, who humbled Himself, taking no thought of His own desires. If we live esteeming others above ourselves, we wouldn't need to worry about all the little petty things that get in the way of sincere fellowship with each other.

Sexual purity

One common and destructive problem in Christian circles is that of improper sexual activity. The Bible is very clear that fornication and adultery are always wrong and disobeying God's direct commands concerning sexual purity will have a devastating effect on the person committing such acts and will lead to the destruction of healthy God-centered relationships (1 Thessalonians 4:3–4). Since our body is the temple of God, we need to keep ourselves holy, separated from sin and worldly activities (1 Corinthians 6:18–20). We will act upon what our mind thinks about. If we have impure thoughts, we will eventually act on those thoughts. This is why it is important to renew our mind by replacing carnal thoughts with spiritual ones. We are to think on things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely and of good report (Philippians 4:8).

In the context of sexual purity, Paul says it is best for the unmarried to remain unmarried, unless they are not able to remain sexually pure. In other words, Paul is not saying there is anything wrong with

marriage, only that the conditions at the time of his writing did not make it a good time to be “burdened” with a spouse. Believers were being greatly persecuted at that time and having a spouse and family would only make matters worse (2 Corinthians 4:8–10; 2 Thessalonians 1:4). However, it was better to be married than to be drawn into sexual sin.

It seems that persecutions against believers had quieted down toward the end of Paul’s life for we see Paul recommending that younger women get married in 1 Timothy 5:14.

Divorce (verses 10–20)

There are two errors made when trying to understand what the Bible says about divorce. The first is interpreting scripture through the lens of church tradition. Everybody seems to know what the Bible says, but few can actually point to specific verses that teach it. The second common error is to look at divorce biblically instead of dispensationally. The Bible teaches Israel about divorce through the Mosaic Law while we in the Church, the Body of Christ need to understand divorce from a position of grace, specifically through the doctrine contained in the 13 books written by Paul. It will be very helpful to forget everything you think you know about divorce and just carefully study Paul’s doctrine.

One of the first things Paul tells us about marriage between believers is found in 1 Corinthians 7:10 where he says that the wife is not to leave her husband. I believe that the same admonishment is directed to the husband. Although most people take this verse to be speaking of divorce, it actually makes more sense to see it as a separation, or literally walking out the door. The woman has merely left her husband and is therefore not free to marry another. At this point she has two options, to be separated from her husband and unmarried to anyone else, or be reconciled to her husband. The verse seems to assume that she is still married if it speaks of reconciling with her husband. The husband is not to divorce (to put away) his wife.

Paul now addresses what to do if a believing husband is married to an unbelieving wife. As long as the wife agrees to live with him, he is not to “put her away.” The Greek word *aphiemi* (G863) is behind this phrase. The same word is also used in verses 12 and 13 and both, I believe, refers to divorce. These are the only times that Paul uses this word in the context of marriage. Verse 13 says not to leave him, but it actually means not to put him away. The believer is not to divorce the unbelieving spouse because it is possible the believing spouse could lead the unbelieving spouse to believe in Christ.

The application of these commandments comes from Grace doctrine. We have much freedom in our position in Christ. When it comes to divorce, there is no reason for two believers to get divorced if they are living according to Paul’s doctrine. However, when one, or both, are living for themselves instead of looking out for the needs of others, major problems can arise in a marriage, as can happen within a church. Problems arise because the old nature gets in the way and people begin to live for themselves instead of humbly before the Lord. A marriage works when both live unselfishly for each other.

Some people believe that it is impossible for them to live in the center of God’s will because they have been divorced. There is often a stigma attached to anyone who has gotten divorced, even to the point of not being able to serve within a church. Grace says that marriage or divorce do not change our position in Christ. We can still be in the center of God’s will because His will is all about the present and about walking in the Spirit. Have you filled yourself with the knowledge of His will as found in Paul’s 13 books? Are you applying that knowledge and walking in a manner worthy of the Lord by bearing good fruit (Colossians 1:9–10)? If so, you are in the center of God’s will no matter what you have done in the past.

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