

**Sermon preached by Pastor Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

1 Corinthians 7:10-16

The father of the bride was concerned that his daughter and her fiancé were rushing into marriage, since they had known each other for less than a year. On their wedding day, as she waited with her father at the back of the church for the ceremony to begin, the bride leaned over and whispered to him: “Daddy, I can’t move.”

“That’s okay, Honey,” he said, revealing his lingering doubts. “We don’t have to do this. We can turn around and walk right out that door.”

Squeezing his arm, the daughter replied: “No, Daddy, you’re standing on my train.”

Last Sunday we examined what Paul says in verses 1-9 of 1 Corinthians 7 about singleness, marriage, and sex in marriage. Before we move on, let me add this brief postscript: There is more to sex in marriage than just sex. This is intuitively obvious to wives. But it is not always so obvious to husbands. Men and women are just wired differently. Dave Barry (slightly paraphrased) explains the difference between men and women this way:

What Women Want: To be loved, to be listened to, to be desired, to be respected, to be needed, to be trusted, and sometimes, just to be held.

What Men Want: Tickets to the Super Bowl.

Women like to be romanced. And, as Gary Chapman explains in his book *The Five Love Languages*, husbands and wives do not necessarily or always speak the same “language” when it comes to expressing or receiving love. You may not typically communicate love in the same way your spouse does, and your preferred method of receiving love – whether it is physical touch, words of affirmation, acts of service, receiving gifts, or quality time spent together – may be different from that of your spouse. Learning your mate’s love language (or languages) and communicating love effectively to your mate outside the bedroom will contribute to a mutually satisfying relationship of intimacy in marriage.

Today we turn from the subject of sex in marriage to the topic of divorce, which is like going from the frying pan into the fire! Divorce is one of the most difficult and sensitive pastoral issues we have to face in the church and society as a whole. It is a hard subject, in part because it is something that has touched so many of us personally. Some of you in our church family have been through divorce yourselves. Some of you are children of divorce. Some have children or siblings who have gone through the pain and trauma of divorce.

The divorce rate in America today is about double what it was in 1960. If current statistical trends continue, some 40-50 percent of marriages in the U.S. are likely to end in divorce. Any way you look at it, that is not so good.

The Bible tells us what God thinks of divorce. In Malachi 2:16, the Lord says to the people of Israel: "I hate divorce." God was withholding His blessing from the people when they brought their offerings to Him in worship, and the people wanted to know why. The reason, God said, was because of the prevalence of divorce in their midst. "It is...because you have broken faith with (the wife of your youth), though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant" (Malachi 2:14).

God hates divorce. He hated it then, and He still does. He hates it because of what it does to the marriage bond itself, which is intended to be lifelong. He hates it because of the hurt and pain and brokenness it causes for those whose marriages end in divorce. He hates it because He knows the ripple effects of divorce. He knows its effect on children, and how it can affect and infect and complicate extended family relationships and friendships.

God hates divorce. But He allows it even though He does not like it. He has made provision for it even though it is never His perfect will.

From the beginning, marriage was intended by God to be a lifelong union of a man and a woman (Genesis 2:24). That has always been God's will. And God has not changed His mind. Marriage is meant to last a lifetime. "As long as we both shall live." "Till death do us part."

F. F. Bruce, the renowned New Testament scholar, points out that in His teaching on marriage, Jesus does not say that every marriage is made in heaven. It is possible to marry the wrong person. And some people do. But while not every marriage is made in heaven, Jesus does say that marriage itself is made in heaven. Which is to say, it is ordained and established and blessed by God. (See *Hard Sayings of Jesus*, p. 58). And it is meant to last a lifetime.

In both Matthew 19 and Mark 10 Jesus acknowledges that Moses, acting under God's authority, permitted divorce in certain circumstances (see Deuteronomy 24:1-4). But divorce, Jesus said, is not a reflection of God's perfect design. It is a concession to the hardness of human hearts (Matthew 19:8). It is a concession to the sinfulness of human hearts which stubbornly refuse, sometimes, to surrender their selfish desires and insist on going their own way. The result, in far too many cases, is the death of a marriage and the ripping apart of a family.

I know this is not an easy message for some of you to hear. It is not an easy message to preach. It is a hard topic and an enormously serious one. My task is to be faithful to God in proclaiming the truth of His Word to you, and to be faithful to you as a pastor to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), neither watering down the truth to make it more comfortable or digestible, nor beating you over the head with it as with a club. I hope

you know that as I speak on this subject, as on any topic, I do so with an awareness of my own sinfulness and with a pastor's heart of love for you.

Divorce is not God's ideal. But in some circumstances it is understandable and biblically justified. Jesus, in Matthew 19, says that divorce is permissible – it is not required or commanded, but it is justified – when the marriage covenant has been broken by “marital unfaithfulness” (Greek *porneia*) or sexual immorality on the part of one or both marriage partners. Someone has observed that while adultery is grounds for divorce (which it is), it is also grounds for forgiveness.

Over the years I've talked with couples whose marriages were traumatized by a spouse's infidelity, couples who wondered if their marriage could survive or if divorce was their only option. My response is always that an affair by either marriage partner, as terrible and destructive as that is, does not have to mean the end of the marriage. It doesn't have to result in divorce. Obviously, the affair has to end. The relationship cannot continue. It has to stop. Completely. There must be confession and repentance and forgiveness. It is a hard thing to work through. Extremely hard. But repentance and forgiveness and reconciliation are better than divorce.

In our text today in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says that divorce is also permissible for Christians if a believer's spouse deserts him or her. The situation Paul is addressing specifically in verses 12-16 concerns what we might call “mixed marriages” – that is, the marriage of a Christian and an unbeliever.

We need to be very clear here. Paul is not talking about a situation where a believer marries an unbeliever. Nowhere does Paul condone or give his blessing to such a union. Neither do Jesus nor any of the New Testament writers. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6:14-15 that we are not to be yoked together with unbelievers. Followers of Christ are not to enter into the covenant of marriage with someone who does not share the believer's heart-commitment to Christ. Believers are not to marry unbelievers. That is the basic principle. That some believers do marry unbelievers does not negate the wisdom of God or the validity of the principle.

What Paul is addressing here in 1 Corinthians 7 is the situation, fairly common in Corinth, where, after marriage, one marriage partner – either the husband or the wife – came to faith in Christ. Suddenly things were different in the marriage. Where before there had been two pagan unbelievers, now there was one unbeliever and one Christian. It was bound to shake things up for both marriage partners.

Some of these new Christian converts wanted to know from Paul if they should remain in their marriages to their unbelieving spouses. Some of them may have been afraid that having sexual relations with an unbelieving spouse would somehow defile them spiritually. So they sought Paul's counsel.

Paul responds that they are not defiled by their existing marriage relationships. To the contrary, he says, in verse 14, there are what we might call “collateral blessings” for the

non-Christian spouse and children, blessings from God that result from having even one member of the family follow Christ in faith. This is what Paul means by the unbeliever being “sanctified” and the children being “holy” as a result of the influence and witness of the believing spouse. It does not in any way imply or guarantee their salvation but, in the words of William Barclay, brings the unbeliever (and their children) into contact with the realm of grace.

Paul’s counsel to the Corinthians is this: If the unbelieving spouse is content and willing to continue the marriage, the believer is to remain in the marriage. However, if the unbelieving partner is not willing to live with the believer and chooses to leave the marriage, the believer is to let the unbelieving spouse go. In such a case, Paul says in verse 15, the believer is not bound. Which means, I believe, that he or she is free in God’s sight to marry again.

Surely we are to do everything in our power to preserve the marriage, in a case like this, but if the unbelieving spouse in a “mixed marriage” is determined to go, we are to let him or her go. For God has called us to live in peace (verse 15). There are times when peace will not be achieved by attempting to force someone to stay.

Desertion by a spouse, according to 1 Corinthians 7, is legitimate grounds for divorce for a Christian. Note that a Christian is not given permission to desert his or her mate. But if you are deserted by your mate, you have biblical grounds to seek a divorce. If reconciliation is not possible.

If you happen to be in a “mixed marriage” – if you happen to be a believer married to a “beloved unbeliever” – verse 16 is particularly for you. Paul says:

How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

There is no certainty that the believing spouse will be used of God to bring the unbelieving spouse to faith in Christ if the marriage continues. We should never view marriage as an instrument of evangelism. “Missionary dating,” where a Christian dates a non-Christian in the hope that the non-Christian will come to faith in Christ, is a bad idea. “Missionary marriage” is even worse.

But while there is no certainty that an unbelieving spouse will come to saving faith in Christ, the possibility remains. As the New Living Translation (NLT) of verse 16 puts it: “You wives must remember that your husbands might be converted because of you. And you husbands must remember that your wives might be converted because of you.”

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We have been talking about some serious and important matters today. Divorce is a serious matter, because marriage is a serious matter. The effects and consequences of

divorce are so serious that God says He hates it. So divorce is a serious matter. But it is not an unpardonable sin.

Where divorce occurs, it is always the result of sin on the part of at least one person. There is no way to get around that. But the Bible declares that where sin abounds (and all of us are sinners in our own ways), grace abounds even more (Romans 5:20). The message of good news God has given us to share with our unbelieving neighbors and friends and colleagues and classmates and family members is that through Jesus and His death on the cross for us, there is forgiveness for everyone who will repent of their sins, whatever their sin happens to be.

And in our proclamation of that good news, as well as in our incarnation of it – in our “fleshing it out” in our relationships with real people and real families who have gone through the trauma of divorce, or who may be going through it even now – we need to be channels of God’s grace. Because the church is the grace place. And because God’s grace extends to those dealing with divorce and its effects as much as it extends to any of us in our circumstances.

As much as God hates divorce and grieves over it, it still happens. It happens every day. And God is still there to comfort where comfort is needed, to forgive where forgiveness is needed and sought, to heal where healing is needed, to give strength for today and hope for tomorrow where strength and hope are needed, to walk with those who feel abandoned or confused, to redeem and restore and sustain all who come to Him. God is able. He is faithful. And He is full of compassion and grace.

I know I haven’t dealt with all the possible nuances or “What ifs?” of this passage of Scripture or the biblical teaching on divorce as a whole. But I have tried to be faithful and loving and clear in presenting to you what God’s Word has to say and how it applies to our lives.

In 1995 the General Assembly of our denomination, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, adopted a Position Paper on Divorce and Remarriage, which I commend to you if you would like to study this issue further. You can access it on the internet by going to the EPC web site (www.epc.org) and clicking on the link “About EPC.”

Let me wrap things up with this. If you’re married, especially if your marriage has been difficult, you may have been tempted at one time or another to ask the question: “Did I marry the right person?”

Gary Thomas, in his book *Sacred Marriage*, says that is a dangerous question to ask. A far better alternative to questioning your choice is to learn how to live with your choice. Thomas points to a character in the Anne Tyler novel *A Patchwork Planet* who came to realize this too late. The book’s 32-year-old narrator had gone through a divorce and was now working at an occupation in which he related almost exclusively to elderly people. As he observed the long-standing marriages, he came to a profound understanding:

I was beginning to suspect that it made no difference whether they'd married the right person. Finally, you're just with who you're with. You've signed on with her, put in half a century with her, grown to know her as well as you know yourself or even better, and she's become the right person. Or the only person, might be more to the point.

I wish somebody had told me that earlier. I'd have hung in there; I swear I would. I never would have driven Natalie to leave me.

Divorce happens. It happens way too often and for all kinds of reasons. Sometimes it happens to God's people. But the good gift of marriage, as it was designed and established by God, was meant to last a lifetime. As Jesus Himself said: "What God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matthew 9:6; Mark 10:9).

With God's help, beginning today, may it be so in our lives, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.