

When Can Christians Divorce?

Sleater Kinney Road Baptist • Olympia, WA

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This paper is not an exhaustive discussion, but a brief survey of the most primary texts.

Synopsis of the Bible on Divorce

A Christian may divorce under the following scenarios, each of which is an egregious fracture of the marriage covenant:

- (1) **sexual betrayal:** physical adultery or an egregious, repeated and seemingly (to a reasonable person) unrepentant breach of sexual allegiance more generally (Deut 24:1; Mt 5:32, 19:9)
- (2) **neglect:** refusal to provide food or clothing ≈ material neglect (Ex 21:10-11; cf. 1 Cor 7:33-34 “how to please wife/husband”)
- (3) **desertion:** an implication from the previous, whether carried out by a believer (1 Cor 7:10-12, and principle also logically follows from Ex 21:10-11 (cf. 1 Cor 7:33-34 “how to please his wife”)), or an unbeliever (1 Cor 7:15).
- (4) **physical abuse:** an implication from the previous
- (5) **failure to provide marital privileges:** refusal to provide “marital rights” ≈ the expected matrix of sexual relations, affection, and expressions of love (“love” is a *decision*, not a feeling). Analysis should be totality of circumstances, not a legalistic weighing of scales.

My Interpretive Presuppositions

These are my broader interpretive presuppositions about the texts herein. They help you understand where I’m coming from, up front:

- (1) Exodus 21:10-11 provides a general principle about divorce that transcends covenants and the immediate context in Exodus 21.
- (2) Genesis 1-2 is the controlling passage for Jesus that expresses God’s idealistic heart for the covenant of marriage. It therefore must be *our* heart, too.
- (3) Matthew 5:32 and Luke 16:18 are both excerpts from larger teaching that God did not see fit to provide for us. They stand alone, without context, as disparate pieces of collected teachings. Therefore, their interpretation should be controlled by the larger context of Matthew 19 and Mark 10.
- (4) Jesus’ statements in Matthew 19 and Mark 10 are explicit responses to the pro “any cause divorce” interpretation of Deuteronomy 24, and we must interpret them in that light. They are not blanket statements covering all circumstances; they are simply Jesus’ interpretation of Moses’ intent behind

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the exemption at Deuteronomy 24. “[T]he Gospels record the whole debate as if it was concerned solely with divorces in Deuteronomy 24:1.”¹

- (5) At 1 Corinthians 7, Paul is responding to a misguided craze for sexual asceticism, and we must interpret his comments on divorce and remarriage there with that context in mind.

Some Overarching Principles to Consider

A pastor (and a congregation) must remember these things:

You’re a Counselor, not God

The pastor’s role is to advise the Christian and guide him to make the best decision in light of the matrix of biblical truth. A pastor can only advise based on his observations and the best data he can gather. He may be wrong because the parties provided skewed data. Everybody is responsible to the Lord for their own decisions.²

Sometimes You Gotta Face Reality

Sometimes there has been so much baggage, so much hurt, so much water under the bridge, that one or both parties just *will not* put forth the effort to repair the damage biblically. Stanley Grenz writes, “it must be admitted that divorce is at times but the formal declaration of the actual state of affairs.” He explains “... divorce is not an abrupt termination of a marriage. Rather, it is but the final statement concerning the process whereby the marital bond has been violated for some time.”³

Better Peace Than Forced Misery

See Romans 12:8; 1 Corinthians 7:15; and the previous heading, above.

¹ “There were no debates about the validity of neglect and abuse as grounds for divorce in any ancient Jewish literature, for the same reason that there are none about the oneness of God: these principles were unanimously agreed on. Rather than indicating that Jesus did not accept the validity of divorce for neglect and abuse, his silence about it highlights the fact that he did accept it, like all other Jews at that time,” (David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* [Downers Grove: IVP, 2003], p. 96).

² “Only the Lord really knows the heart; as Jesus said, evil comes from within and loves the dark. We cannot leave it up to a minister or a church leadership team to decide when a marriage ends; it is up to the individual victim, in prayer before the Lord. Only they and the Lord know what their life is really like. Only they know if their partner has expressed repentance, and only they will have to live with the consequences of the decision,” (Instone-Brewer, *Divorce*, pp. 104-105).

³ Stanley Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* (Louisville: WJK, 1990), pp. 133, 126.

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Sometimes, human failure and sin in the marriage will cause great suffering. “At this stage, the principle of God’s compassionate concern for the person’s involved, God’s intent to establish *shalom* or human wholeness, must take precedence over the concern to maintain the inviolability of marriage.”⁴

This peace includes an *honest assessment* about whether they can continue to live together as husband and wife. “Peace by necessity includes a peaceful parting and a resolution of lingering responsibilities of their marriage, including a division of material goods and a just arrangement for providing for the children. Finally, interpersonal peace must work toward a normalization of their relationship as two separate persons, including the cessation of whatever hostilities the marriage breakup may have engendered.”⁵

In short, when faced with hardened hearts that *will not* put forth the effort to fix the issues, coupled with the ongoing pain and hurt caused by the compounding baggage, **it may be best to just “call it”** and acknowledge the marriage has been over for quite some time—no matter that the legal veneer is still in place. **Formalize what the *de facto* reality already is and will continue to be.** This is not a “get out of jail free” card, but a call to carefully examine the realities of the situation while balancing all the biblical teaching—especially the command to “if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all,” (Rom 12:18).

Put the Blame Where it Belongs

“A marriage is ended by the person who breaks the marriage vows, not by the wronged person who decides to end the broken contract by enacting a divorce.”⁶

Yet, There’s Likely Plenty of Blame to go Around

“Legalistic approaches, therefore, run the danger of viewing complex marital problems too simplistically. A legalistic structure seeks to force the situation into categories of ‘guilty partner’ versus ‘innocent partner’ which simply may not fit the case at hand. The determination of ‘innocent partner’ in many cases of marital breakup is difficult, if not impossible. It may well be that both parties share in the guilt.”⁷

⁴ Grenz, *Sexual Ethics*, p. 128.

⁵ Grenz, *Sexual Ethics*, pp. 137-138.

⁶ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce*, p. 42.

⁷ Grenz, *Sexual Ethics*, pp. 136-137.

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Divorce is not the Unpardonable Sin

This shouldn't have to be said, but it must be said.

Divorce is not God's Intention for Marriage

This also shouldn't have to be said. It isn't a "Get Out of Jail Free!" card. Jesus' burden was to uphold God's intent for marriage from Genesis.

Besides the scriptures themselves, the two most helpful resources for me were:

- (1) David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Church* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), and
- (2) Andrew Naselli, "What the NT Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage," in *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 24 (2019), pp. 3-44.

Now, to the relevant texts:

Exodus 21:10-11

Here is the passage (Exodus 21:7-11):

- When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master, who has designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has broken faith with her. If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. **If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her** food, her clothing, or her marital rights. And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out **for nothing**, without payment of money.

Here is the interpretation (the ethics of *how* the wife becomes the wife will not concern us, here):

- (1) the man can divorce her for cause (unspecified), but cannot sell her because this will "break faith" with her
- (2) if the woman is to marry the son, then he shall treat her as a member of the family and not a "second-class" person
- (3) if the man marries a *second* wife, then he **must continue** to provide **the first wife** with (a) food, (b) clothing, and (c) her sexual rights as a wife. If he

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fails, she may leave and may not be held over to pay for her freedom with cash

- Food and clothing may be classed as “material obligations,” and failure to provide them is properly “neglect,” and by extension we can fold “physical abuse” into the mix, here.⁸
- This is a bit of a creeping interpretation, *a la* the case law precedent we see in our courts, but the principle seems sound.
- (4) “marital rights” certainly means sexual intercourse (cf. 1 Cor 7:2-5), and likely also its associated expressions of deep love (hugging, affection).⁹ It’s difficult to see the sexual act within a marriage (properly understood) as devoid of affection in general. We should interpret “marital rights” as the matrix of sexual relations, affection, and expressions of love (which as Boston rightly says, is “more than a feeling” but a *decision*)

Here are the implications:¹⁰

- (1) the woman has rights in the marriage
- (2) those rights are for (a) food, (b) clothing, and (c) “marital rights”
- (3) she may leave if the husband fails to provide these things
- (4) these implications carry over into the New Covenant, because the nature of the marriage covenant transcends temporal covenants—it’s a creation ordinance

Matthew 19 and Mark 10

- Synopsis of Matthew 19 and Mark 10 on divorce:
 - (1) Genesis 2 is the controlling passage
 - (2) Deuteronomy 24 is an *exception* or *accommodation* clause, added because of our sinfulness
 - (3) “some indecency (Deut 24:1) = “sexual immorality” (Mt 5:32, 19:9) = physical adultery or an egregious, repeated and seemingly (to a

⁸ “Since there is no question that the abusing husband is ‘neglecting’ to support his wife, she should be aware that she does have the option to divorce him. Paul recognizes the validity of divorces when unbelievers have neglected their partners,” (Instone-Brewer, *Divorce*, pp. 103-104). See also Naselli, “Divorce,” §4.7, pp. 35-36.

⁹ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce*, p. 102.

¹⁰ “Polygamy was allowed in the Old Testament, and human nature being what it is, when a man took a second wife he often neglected his first wife and favored the new one. This was especially likely if his first wife had been a slave before he married her. So the point of this law was to ensure that the first wife was treated fairly. It says that the husband would not be permitted to withhold food, clothing or conjugal love from her. If he did neglect any of these, she would be able to go free—that is, she could get divorced,” (Instone-Brewer, *Divorce*, p. 35).

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reasonable person) unrepentant breach of sexual allegiance more generally

- (4) Jesus' divorce and adultery statements here occur in the context of questioning about a "pro-any cause" divorce interpretation from Deuteronomy 24,
 - (5) and thus we *must* interpret them as Jesus' response to that context, not as blanket prohibitions which negate other bible teaching
- Brief explanation and harmony follows:

Matthew 19:3	Mark 10:2
And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"	And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

- Matthew has "any/every reason," but Mark is generic
- They are trying to entrap Jesus. This occurs in Perea (Mt 19:1; Mk 10:1), a province ruled by Herod Antipas who earlier executed John the Baptist for questioning his marital ethics—their question to Him, in *this* place, is not a coincidence!

Matthew 19:4	Mark 10:3-4
He answered,	He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away."

- In Mark, Jesus asks about Moses, and they respond with Deuteronomy
 - It's possible He was *really* asking about Genesis, but they answered (still correctly) from Deuteronomy
 - After all, Jesus assumed Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch (Jn 5:46; Lk 24:27), and so did Jews in His day (Jn 1:45), so His query probably has Genesis in mind
- In Matthew, Jesus explicitly goes to Genesis right away (below)

Matthew 19:4	Mark 10:5
"Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female	And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment.

- **Matthew:** Men and women are made for one another—

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- (1) haven't you read about this?
- (2) why do I need to tell you about it?
- (3) why do you come to me *looking for* an escape clause (note that Matthew has the clause, whereas Mark doesn't) when you *can see* what God intended this covenant relationship to be?
- **Mark:** Divorce clause from Deut 24 is an exception, and doesn't reflect God's heart for the institution at all

Matthew 19:5	Mark 10:6-7
and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?	But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female. 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife

- **Matthew:** Because God made men and women for one another, they join together and become one
- **Mark:** Now pivots to Genesis, and ends up in precisely the same place as Matthew—a covenant relationship grounded in God's creation

Matthew 19:6a	Mark 10:8
So they are no longer two but one flesh.	and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh.

- The man and the woman metaphysically fuse together to create *one* new person—which has obvious implications for the continuity of this relationship!

Matthew 19:6b	Mark 10:9
What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."	What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

- Jesus' conclusion: don't split up covenant that God joined together—this is an imperative that reflects God's heart
- Even as we consider the way Jesus hems in the "any cause" interpretation of Deuteronomy 24 (below), know that God's heart is still for reconciliation *even in cases of adultery*

Matthew 19:7-8	
They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" He said to them,	

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“Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.	
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- Matthew now has the same question asked earlier, in Mark, but with a different twist
- The Pharisees push back on Genesis as the controlling passage for marriage, and throw Deuteronomy on the table as a counter
- Jesus adds a bit more info than in Mark, explaining “but, in the beginning, it wasn’t this way ...”¹¹, thus pivoting back to Genesis as the controlling passage

	Mark 10:10
	And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter.

- The teaching is confusing, because there are contradictory schools of thought floating about regarding divorce and remarriage (just like today). In essence, does Jesus uphold the Deuteronomy exception, or doesn’t He?

Matthew 19:9	Mark 10:11
And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery	And he said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her,

- **Mark:** The context is not a general statement, but a continuation of the framing about divorce in the context of “any cause” from Deuteronomy 24, as follows:
 - o (1) Query about divorce
 - o (2) Jesus asks them to cite Moses, and they turn to Deut 24
 - o (3) He explains Deut 24 is the exception and accommodation to sin, but it doesn’t reflect God’s heart or intention for marriage
 - o (4) Genesis 2 is God’s heart; that man and woman unite and fuse together into “one,” and people should not split this union
 - o (5) Later, privately, the disciples (not the original questioner), ask for more info about Jesus qualification of Deut 24. It must be about this,

¹¹ I interpret the preposition ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς to be expressing a point in time, not a duration (“from the beginning”), because obviously things derailed in creation pretty fast and it wasn’t “this way” for very long at all. It’s best to take it as a punctiliar sense of time (“in the beginning”); cf. NEB, REB.

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- because it was the substance of Jesus' entire discourse in Mark's version. What else could they possibly want more info about?
- (6) So, referring to someone who wants to dump his wife for "any cause," Jesus explains divorce is sinful ≈ "any cause" divorce is a sin
 - **Matthew:** In context, Jesus rejects "any cause divorce" and upholds the Deuteronomy exception clause
 - (1) He says "adultery" triggers when a person divorces and marries—except in the case of sexual immorality
 - (2) Matthew's exception clause covers both instances; the divorce and the wronged party's subsequent remarriage
 - (3) Jesus doesn't say this is the only exception, but merely interprets "any cause" from Deut 24 to mean "sexual immorality," *contra*. the more expansive interpretation
 - (4) Πορνεία means¹² sexual unfaithfulness in a broad sense, which means (a) a physical sexual act involving someone *not* your spouse, (b) or other sexual unfaithfulness that break the marriage covenant because of its egregious nature = there should likely be a pattern of activity that seems, to a reasonable person, to be unrepentant¹³
 - Jesus' sense here seems to be *physical adultery*, and it would go against the controlling Genesis passage to go all in for divorce if a spouse, say, views pornography one time.

	Mark 10:12
	and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

- Jesus pushes further, and holds the wife to that same standard if she engages in "any cause" divorce

¹² Deuteronomy 24:1 suggests a more generic form of sexual immorality falling short of sexual intercourse, because the Old Covenant upheld the death penalty for adultery. Jesus seems to take a stricter view by interpreting the passage to be referring to sexual intercourse. The word Jesus used in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 is *πορνεία*.

Based on how the word is used in the LXX and the NT, the word appears to have four categories; (1) unlawful sexual intercourse (Gen 38:24; Tobit 4:12; Sirach 23:23, 26:9; Hosea 1:2; Mt 15:19; Jn 8:41; Acts 15:20; 1 Cor 5:1, 6:18, 7:2), or (2) metaphorical unfaithfulness, often to God (Num 14:33; 2 Kgs 9:22; Wisdom 14:12; Ps 47:10, 57:9; Jer 2:20; Ezek 16:15; Micah 1:7), or (3) improper sexual lust (Tobit 8:7), or (4) as a noun (Assyria) who entices others to metaphorical unfaithfulness (Nahum 3:4)

It's clear the word almost always conveys the idea of sexual unfaithfulness by way of (1) physical adultery, or (2) personal unfaithfulness in sexual matters more broadly.

See Andrew Naselli, "What the NT Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage," §1.3.2, in *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 24 (2019), pp. 15-16.

¹³ Naselli, "Divorce," §1.4, pp. 17-18.

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Matthew 19:10-12	
The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it."	

- Jesus' dismissal of "any fault" divorce seems particularly crushing to the disciples, many of whom evidently preferred it and had used it
 - o Our culture shapes our traditions, which can sometimes be horribly at odds with scripture—often without us even realizing it!
- Perhaps, they muse, it's best to never marry at all!
 - o Jesus says, in effect, "not a good idea" = it takes a special gift to be celibate and not lapse into sexual sin (cf. 1 Cor 7)
- So, Jesus' general advice for the average person is to marry, **and then** to cast off the "Get Out of Jail Free" card of "any cause" divorce

Matthew 5:31-32 (cf. Luke 16:18)

Here is the text:

- It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

In this passage, Jesus says essentially the same thing as in Mt 19:9:

- The text stands along in the midst of the Sermon on the Mount as part of a series of collected teachings—there is no other context to consider. Thus, this passage's interpretation ought to be controlled by Matthew 19 and Mark 10
- Jesus cites Deuteronomy 24:1-2, then hems in the "any cause" interpretation **in that passage only** by explaining the ground Moses intended there is sexual immorality.

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- Thus, Jesus says to interpret and use the Deuteronomy 24 exception as *being broader than sexual immorality* is to commit adultery
- Luke 16:18 omits Jesus' stricter interpretation of the Deuteronomy 24 exception clause, but it's ridiculous to expect that He would contradict Himself. The context for Luke's citation must have been different, but we have no more information.
- *πορνεία* retains the meaning given in the synopsis and at Mt 19:9, above
- The divorce caveat from Mt 19:9 about failure to maintain sexual allegiance more generally still applies

1 Corinthians 7

1: Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

- Paul is responding to a desire for sexual ascetism; something which Jesus explicitly said was not a realistic option for most people (Mt 19:10-12)

2-5: But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

- This is Paul's explanation for why sexual ascetism is not realistic, and his guardrails to solve this problem within the marriage
- This cites one of the three marriage obligations from Ex 21:10-11

6-7: Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

- Paul has the gift of sexual ascetism, but not everybody has this gift

8-9: To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

- A re-statement of what Paul already said in vv.2-5

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10-11: To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

- This scenario depicts:
 - o (1) two believers who are married
 - o (2) and one spouse sinfully initiates a divorce (for whatever reason)
 - o (3) thus, we have an incident of abandonment, desertion, of walking away.
- **Should not separate ... divorce:** Paul makes a general statement based on the controlling Genesis passage and Jesus' own teaching about God's ideal = let no man split what God has joined together!
 - o Paul's focus is on the believer who initiates the divorce, throws in the towel, and walks away. He is *not* talking about the other party who has been abandoned.
 - o In these generic commands about re-marriage, Paul assumes the divorce was illegitimate (though, of course, legitimate divorce can surely occur).
 - o He simply uses a generic example of an *illegitimate* divorce because of the context of the sexual asceticism craze (7:1) which prompted the very question he's answering.
 - o This is the best way to interpret this passage (a generic example of an illegitimate divorce), or else Paul disagrees with Jesus and with Moses (Ex 21:10-11). That would be ... unlikely.
- **But if she does:** sometimes believers disobey God anyway. It's a real shock, I know ...
- **Remain unmarried:** God's command is that:
 - o (1) a Christian who abandons her spouse by divorce, gives up, walks away
 - o (2) must remain unmarried
 - o (3) or reconcile with her spouse
 - o (4) there is no wiggle room.
 - Again, this command is for the Christian who initiated and triggered the divorce, who walked away.
 - The injured party is not under this obligation.
- **On "unmarried:"** this means there is no such thing as "marriage is forever in God's eyes." This is silly. *μενέτω ἄγαμος* means "she must remain

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unmarried.” The marriage is over. “The facts are plain—divorce *does* break a marriage.”¹⁴

- To sum up, Paul also assumes that, people being people, divorce *will occur* no matter what God’s ideal is. This was the brutal truth behind the Deuteronomy 24 exception.

12-13: To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.

- **I, not the Lord:** Paul’s own inspired words. He’s basically saying, “Jesus didn’t address this back in Mt 19, so I’ll take this one up myself.” Paul isn’t saying, “this is my personal opinion, take it or leave it.”¹⁵
- Paul’s instructions are to, basically, “make it work” even if one spouse is an unbeliever

14: For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

- The influence of the believing spouse on the unbeliever is profound; it can “sanctify” the unbeliever (cf. 1 Pet 3:1-2)
- The reference to children is a covenant concept, but we will leave the implications for New Covenant membership for another day! 😊

15: But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.

- Paul refers to desertion, which encompasses the “food and clothing” obligations from Ex 21:10-11 (and also the generic scenario from 1 Cor 7:10-11).
- It would be odd to assume (1) a spouse can divorce if the unbeliever deserts, but (2) is trapped if the believer runs away. I take this passage to, by default, allow divorce for desertion in general, in accordance with Ex 21:10-11.¹⁶

¹⁴ Jay Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), p. 43.

¹⁵ Adams, *Marriage*, p. 45.

¹⁶ “Paul is telling believers that they can regard abandonment as a valid divorce. He does not say why, but it would have been obvious to any first-century reader—and is obvious to us now that we understand the principles of Exodus 21:10—that if they were a victim of desertion, they had the right to divorce on the grounds of neglect,” (Instone-Brewer, *Divorce*, p. 100).

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16: For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

- Self-explanatory; see comments at v.14.

17: Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.

- Paul is referring back to the letter writer's concerns to devote themselves to the Lord, which is behind the misguided enthusiasm for sexual asceticism.
- Instead, he says, just stay in your current position if you can manage it and devote yourself to God

18-24: Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

- Self-explanatory; Paul elaborates on v.17.

25-26: Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is.

- Folks in Corinth who are engaged to be married are being influenced by this misguided craze for sexual asceticism, and are asking whether they ought to break the engagement:
 - o (1) Will they sin if they continue with it?
 - o (2) Do they value worldly things over Godly things if they go through with it?
- Again, Paul's advice (which is not binding) is to remain as you are. Keep with the engagement, or stay single—wherever you are right now, just continue on and serve the Lord!

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27-31: Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

- Time is short, so stay the way you are. Paul assumes the end is near, but he is evidently wrong. This is his own speculation, and it doesn't harm the concept of inerrancy.

32-35: I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, **how to please his wife**, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

- Paul explains his heart that lies behind his advice. He implies, very obliquely, that the husband's duty is to provide the other two covenant obligations from Ex 21:10-11 (food, clothing = material support).
- Thus, Paul upholds all three obligations from Ex 21:10-11. Instone-Brewer perhaps states the case too forcefully,¹⁷ but he is essentially correct.

36: If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin.

- Paul again cautions folks who are tempted to ditch their fiancés. He does not mean to suggest marriage's only purpose is to be a sexual outlet; he's just tossing out *one particular* thing for them to consider.
- Sex is the most immediately obvious benefit of marriage, so he goes for that to make his point.

¹⁷ "If Paul did not accept these grounds for divorce, he would not have used these verses as a basis for his teaching on the obligations within marriage," (Instone-Brewer, *Divorce*, p. 99).

When Can Christians Divorce?

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37-38: But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

- Self-explanatory; Paul sums up his line of argument from the preceding

39a: A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives.

- Paul circles back to the same point he made at vv.10-11; the context is him responding to the sexual asceticism craze in Corinth
- His point = don't ditch your spouse to be single and serve the Lord! Ridiculous!

39b-40: But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

- Paul repeats his own advice about being single if you can manage it; that is, if you find yourself *legitimately* single