



Not Under Bondage

Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

(Part 4)

by Dean Taylor

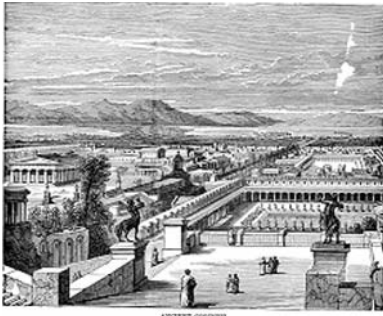
A few days ago I was at work when a nurse handed me a newspaper and pointed to a small article asking me what I thought about it. The article was about a radio station in West Virginia that boasted that it was “giving away a free divorce.” The article from the Associated Press read:

A Charleston radio station is observing Valentine’s Day with a reminder that Cupid sometimes misses his mark. WKLC-FM, better known as Rock 105, is giving away a free divorce. Valentine’s Day isn’t all hearts and flowers, says WKLC Program Director Jay Nunley. There is a darker side, he said, “where maybe you despise your spouse and resent the entire day.” Through 4 p.m. on Thursday, Valentine’s Day, applications for the free divorce will be accepted on the classic rock station’s website, and the winning name will be drawn at 5 p.m. Nunley cautions that this is a real divorce and people shouldn’t enter if they aren’t serious. Also, people expecting a long, drawn-out legal battle should hire a lawyer because the Rock 105 contest is for a relatively uncomplicated divorce. Charleston attorney Rusty Webb will handle the actual filing. “Sure, we can give away concert tickets, and we do,” said Nunley. “That’s going to make you happy for a little while. This is the chance to make someone happy for the rest of their life.”

That last line really got me, “This is the chance to make someone happy for the rest of their life.” The sad fact is that in most cases, this is the furthest thing from the truth. Not even considering eternity for a moment—the damage, misery, suffering and child-neglect that has resulted from the epidemic proportion of divorce in the last century is nearly incalculable.

Jesus Has A Better Way

Sometimes the way of Christ seems hard, unapproachable, or even out of touch. We try to better ourselves and our society with new ways, new ideas and new solutions to our problems. Often it takes a lifetime, or sometimes even generations to realize that serious mistakes have been made. Even though His way is often very challenging, Jesus told us that He supplies the ability to perform anything He is asking us to do. He said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Surprisingly, in the end we always find there is joy in His way. Jesus said, “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 11:16:33).



Jesus' teachings are not popular today, and unfortunately, numerous different interpretations abound, turning the words of Christ into nonsense. Interestingly, the further you go back in history, the more literal you find the Church on the subject of divorce and many other controversial teachings.

In the last three articles on marriage and divorce we primarily focused on the teachings of Jesus. We saw that in these teachings, like many other teachings of the New Testament, Jesus made radical changes in the way things were done under the Old Covenant. Many things concerning marriage were affected. In the Old Testament, polygamy was allowed and divorce was permitted. Divorce and remarriage often went on in rapid numeration, with very few restraining circumstances, particularly for the man. A man could commit adultery only by taking another man's wife; and unfaithfulness to his own wife was only considered fornication.

But then Jesus came, and in the Sermon on the Mount, right there alongside anger, war, lust, law suits, public prayers, storing up treasures, etc., Jesus made radical changes in the way we understand divorce and remarriage. When the teaching of Jesus was looked at in total, it became evident that the essence of His teaching was that marriage, by definition, is actually a miracle from God, whereby two people are made into one indissoluble union. His teaching can be summarized in His words, "*Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh*" (Matt. 19:6).

Summarizing Jesus' teaching, we saw that:

- Divorcing a wife and marrying another is adultery (Mark 10:11-12).
- Marrying someone who has been divorced is adultery (Luke 16:18).
- Divorcing a spouse for any reason except for fornication is to be guilty of causing your spouse to commit adultery (Matt. 5:32, 19:9).

We took special note of this last point. The teaching of *causing* your spouse to commit adultery is often quickly passed over in our reading of this passage. This teaching should put a special check on our hearts when we begin to contemplate divorce—these are indeed challenging words. We saw in the last issue however, that Jesus did give one exception to the guilt of causing your spouse's future adultery, and that was if they were an adulterer already. Albeit, even in the case of adultery,

where separation was permitted, remarriage still was not granted. This would have meant to live the rest of your life single. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we saw that even with such difficult teachings as these, we were not to accomplish them in the flesh but to trust God, who has promised the needed grace to accomplish what He has called us to.

Jesus' teachings are not popular today, and unfortunately, numerous different interpretations abound, turning the words of Christ into nonsense. Modern interpreters disagree on how to interpret the words of Christ. Over the centuries, Jesus' teachings have grown increasingly figurative. Interestingly, the further you go back in history, the more literal you find the Church on the subject of divorce and many other controversial teachings.

What Did The Apostle Paul Think?

The writings of Paul give us the priceless opportunity of having an infallible interpreter of the words of Jesus. It takes the burden of interpreting these passages away from us and puts it onto Paul. The seventh chapter of first Corinthians is vitally important in the understanding of the teaching of Jesus on divorce and remarriage, because many topics discussed there provide actual real-life examples of the teachings of Jesus. The points most contested by modern interpreters are dealt with directly in his writings.

The book of first Corinthians is actually a letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthian church in reply to many questions that they were asking him. We don't have that original Corinthian letter, but throughout the book, little clues and phrases such as, "*now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me,*" supply us with a glimpse of what the Corinthians were asking him. Chapter 7 is particularly helpful because it deals with several contemporary concerns such as:

- The permanence of the marriage bond.
- A summary of Jesus' teaching on divorce, and what is permissible after divorce.

- How we should consider our marriage bonds made before conversion.
- Serious considerations dealing with young people in courtship or betrothal situations.
- Finally, Paul caps off the chapter with his final dictum on divorce and remarriage to avoid any misunderstanding.

The Context

Coming into Chapter 7, Paul has just finished a difficult and heated rebuke to the men of the church for



going to prostitutes. From the context, flowing into Chapter 7, it would appear that Paul may also be correcting overly-strict chastity standards by the Corinthian wives, implying that this may partly be a cause for the failure of their husbands. Whatever the case, it is safe to say that they were dealing with some very difficult, real-life situations there in Corinth. Paul was taking Christianity to the formerly pagan, idol-worshipping, unlearned, and often illiterate Gentiles.

In other words, Paul's understanding of Jesus' teaching, simply put, is that a person should not divorce their spouse. This is about as straightforward as you can get.

This was clearly a clash of two worlds and a clash of two ways of life. But Paul had faith that the ways of Christ had answers for their lives.

One of the most important things to do when reading first Corinthians is to pay special attention to Paul's textual markers. All throughout the book, Paul uses phrases like, "now concerning," "I say therefore," "and unto," "but to the rest speak I." Each of these phrases is given to present a new thought, or to address a separate point of the Corinthian letter.

Paul's Summary Of The Teaching Of Jesus On Divorce And Remarriage

After addressing the question of marital abstinence and Paul's preference for the single life, Paul introduces

Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage, underlining its importance by exhorting them that this is not merely a suggestion but rather a command, "And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband." This passage is important because he is saying here that this is the teaching of Jesus. In other words, Paul's understanding of Jesus' teaching, simply put, is that a person should not divorce their spouse. Consistent with the Gospel accounts, Paul does not soften the message for the Gentiles, nor does he try to explain it away. This is about as straightforward as you can get.

However, the question remains: what do you do if the divorce happens beyond your control? Or even following in line with the teachings of Jesus, what do you do if a separation occurs because of fornication? Paul taught that Jesus did not leave us to wonder. He finished this command of Christ saying: "But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife." Very simply put, Paul is telling the Corinthian church that Jesus taught:

- Divorce is not allowed.
- If a divorce or separation should occur, only two options are open to us: reconciliation or remain single.

Marriage To An Unbeliever

After quoting these teachings from Jesus to the married, Paul begins to discuss the curious problem of unequally yoked marriages. What do you do when you're a Christian but your spouse is an unbeliever? What if you got into this marriage even before you were a Christian? Should you take into account Paul's teaching about not mixing with the world, and separate from your ungodly spouse? Paul starts the discussion by telling them that he does not have a specific teaching from Jesus dealing with this topic. That should not diminish these teachings for us, but it does again underline the point that what he was saying above in verses 8-11 was explicitly from his understanding of the teachings of Christ.

Concerning these unequally yoked marriages Paul said:

"But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell

with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy.

Paul lets them know that their relationship with God actually shields them from spiritual defilement. Furthermore, Paul says that if their spouse is willing to stay with them, then they should not leave them or send them away. Interestingly, he encourages them that their faith provides a spiritual cleansing or sanctifying protection over their children, even when an unbeliever is living in the house. He concludes by saying that if the unbelieving spouse is willing, then they should do everything they can to make the marriage work and stay together.

But What If They Are Not Pleased To Dwell With You And They Demand That They Are Going To Divorce Or Leave?

This was a difficult situation for the Corinthians because Jesus said that divorce, even without remarriage, was wrong. Remember that Jesus taught that to separate from a spouse for anything other than adultery was to actually cause your spouse's future adultery. "*Whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery*" (Matthew 5:32). What were these new Corinthian believers to do if their unbelieving spouses left them or demanded a divorce?

In this case Paul tells them that they do not need to fret and fight with them to keep them at home. He releases them to let their unbelieving spouse go. "*But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace. For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife?*" (Vs. 15-16).

Modern Views Of "Not Under Bondage"

Some have taken Paul's words "*not under bondage*" or especially the NIV translation, "*is not bound in such circumstances,*" to imply that because the spouse left home or rather "deserted," that the marriage bond is now *broken* and the person is free to marry again.

However, the overall context of this chapter does not support this view. Considering what Paul said a few verses before this, and even a few verses after these

verses, where Paul is specifically addressing the permanence of the marriage bond, the view that the divorcee is free to remarry is particularly misleading. It would seem extremely unlikely that in verse 11, when the context might possibly even be dealing with fornication, as Paul says, "*but and if she depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband:*" that he would now give the complete opposite counsel on the matter and say that you don't have to remain unmarried, and you don't need to worry about reconciliation! The clear language of what to do after divorce was already clearly established, "*remain unmarried or be reconciled.*" Why stretch this passage to say something that it simply does not say?

What About The Greek Word For *Bond*? Is This The Same Word In Greek As The *Marriage Bond*?

Many modern interpreters have also made an argument based on Paul's wording for "marriage bond," suggesting that it is linked

with Paul's words, "*not under bondage,*" or again as the NIV reads, "*is not bound in such circumstances.*" They suggest that the words are similar in origin and share some kind of root word similarities. With this thought they once again conclude that the marriage bond is broken and the person is free to remarry. This is also an unfortunate teaching. While it is true that these words are close in English, and may even share some kind of Greek "root family" similarities, the *actual* words used in the Greek are very different. John Piper makes these observations about the use of these Greek words:



Remember that Jesus taught that to separate from a spouse for anything other than adultery was to actually cause your spouse's future adultery.

The word used for "*bound*" (*douloo*) in verse 15 is not the same word used in verse 39 where Paul says, "*A wife is bound (deo) to her husband as long as he lives.*" Paul consistently uses *deo* when

It is not the (sin of) divorce which makes remarriage impossible for the Christian; it is the (original) marriage. Only death dissolves the marriage bond, and therefore only death sets a person free to remarry.

speaking of the legal aspect of being bound to one marriage partner (Romans 7:2; 1 Corinthians 7:39), or to one's betrothed (1 Corinthians 7:27). But when he refers to a deserted spouse not being bound in 1 Corinthians 7:15, he chooses a different word (*douloo*) which we would expect him to do if he were not giving a deserted spouse the same freedom to remarry that he gives to a spouse whose partner has died (verse 39). The last phrase of verse 15 ("God has called us to peace") supports verse 15 best if Paul is saying that a deserted partner is not "bound to make war" on the deserting unbeliever to get him or her to stay. It seems to me that the peace God has called us to is the peace of marital harmony. Therefore, if the unbelieving partner insists on departing, then the believing partner is not bound to live in perpetual conflict with the unbelieving spouse, but is free and innocent in letting him or her go.

John Piper concludes this controversial passage: "1 Corinthians 7:15 does not mean that when a Christian is deserted by an unbelieving spouse he or she is free to remarry. It means that the Christian is not bound to fight in order to preserve togetherness. Separation is permissible if the unbelieving partner insists on it."

What If All This Happens Before Conversion?

This discussion about unequally yoked marriages brings up a serious question about the marriage bond it-

self. The argument is often made today that Jesus and Paul might have taught against divorce and remarriage but all of that counts only if it happened *after* what is considered to be a true conversion. They say "If all of this happened *before* my conversion, then I conclude that it no longer applies to me." These people feel that since the *sin* happened before their conversion then it can be forgiven like any other sin. Andrew Cronos directly addresses this common misconception by pointing to the very essence of the marriage bond:

It is frequently stated in Christian circles today that the teaching of the New Testament on the subject of divorce and remarriage only applies to those who become Christians before or during their first marriage....This argument, which one meets very frequently among contemporary Christians, makes a number of very serious mistakes. Most important of all, it assumes that it is the sin (of divorce) which prevents remarriage. If this sin can be removed, by forgiveness, then no barrier to remarriage remains. This view is so obviously flawed that it is amazing how tenacious it is. If sin is really the barrier, what does the time of conversion to Christ have to do with it? Surely sin committed after conversion can be fully forgiven and removed? ...Jesus does not base his prohibition of remarriage on the sin of divorce. He bases it on the fact that remarriage would be legalized adultery. In other words, He bases it on the fact that the marriage bond continues to exist despite the divorce. It is not the (sin of) divorce which makes remarriage impossible for the Christian; it is the (original) marriage. Only death dissolves the marriage bond, and therefore only death sets a person free to remarry" (Divorce & Remarriage, pg. 246-247).

To The Unmarried And Betrothed

In verse 25 Paul is clearly beginning a new section, making the statement, "Now concerning virgins." As mentioned before in dealing with unequally yoked marriages, Paul tells them that he has no direct commandment from Jesus on this issue, "Now concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful." In this section, from verses 26-38, Paul is addressing what betrothal couples should do during the difficult times that they were experiencing. Paul had just made the argu-

ment that everyone should remain in the state in which they were called. He also lifted up the single life, even rivaling that of married life as respects devotion to God. Now, concerning “*the present distress*,” the natural question that had arisen in Corinth was what to do with couples that had established betrothals and arranged marriages already. In these verses Paul again lifts up the single life, but he makes it clear that these couples are not sinning if they go ahead and get married. This entire section reads very naturally as a discussion addressing these courting couples.

Modern Confusion

Some have ignored the indications that this is the beginning of a new section (*Now concerning virgins*) and have tried to turn the words, “*Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned*”, into a license to remarry. They again attempt to tie this passage back to the previous verses dealing with the “deserted”. They insist that Paul is still addressing the issue of the deserted spouse from the preceding section and thereby conclude that Paul is making yet another argument for remarriage. Some support this argument by saying that the word “*wife*” in this passage demands that this section refers to a married person. While this point might be substantiated in English language, it must be taken into consideration that the word “*wife*” in the Greek is simply the word “*woman*” and does not make a distinction. Furthermore, when considering the totality of the passage, pressing the word beyond this becomes a big stretch.

These are all unfortunate interpretations of this passage. A natural reading of the passage, coupled with Paul’s subject marker “*now concerning virgins*,” makes this whole argument pretty unlikely. With this in mind, verses 26-38 read very naturally from start to finish concerning the marriage of people involved in a betrothal or prearranged marriage. Do not forget, instructions as to what to do if a married person divorces had already been specifically and explicitly addressed back in verses 10-16. To say now that the divorcee is free to remarry would completely contradict all the instruction given back in the previous passage.

The Betrothed Couple

A small, but significant point worthy of mention here, is the wording “*and if a virgin marry*” from verse 28. Andrew Cornes brings out that in the Greek, Paul uses the definite article “*he parthenos*” which is prop-

erly translated “*the virgin*,” not “*a virgin*”. As the Young’s Literal Translation reads, “*But and if thou mayest marry, thou didst not sin; and if the virgin may marry, she did not sin.*” The way it is worded currently almost implies two completely separate subjects. This doesn’t necessarily change the section all that much, but the proper wording would make the flow even more clear. The discussion is clearly about the betrothed couple, not two different subjects.

Paul’s Final Word On The Marriage Bond

Concluding this whole section Paul, or rather the Holy Spirit through Paul, wanted to make sure that no one misunderstood this chapter. Once again he proclaimed his final dictum concerning the marriage bond and remarriage in very simple, clear and concise words: “*The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord.*”

Interestingly, a very similar statement was made to the Romans when the topic being discussed had nothing to do with divorce and remarriage at all. In Romans, it came instead from a discussion about the Law. There, Paul said:

Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth? For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be



Admittedly, mopping up the mistakes of hundreds of years of deep-seated precedent and preconceived ideas is a challenge for any serious-minded church today. However, we cannot just turn our back on them, malign them, or wish they would just go away.



dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man (Romans 7:1-3).

Paul made some pretty strong statements here. He once again spoke in unmistakable clarity that the marriage bond was for life, and that only death made a person free to remarry. It would be hard to wiggle out of this statement and start looking for loopholes and exceptions. However, as clear as his words are, the Romans passage is usually quickly dismissed because the context under discussion here in Romans 7 is the use of the Law, not divorce and remarriage. For the most part, I would agree with this reasoning and dismiss the statement as well. However, the fact that Paul repeats almost the exact same thought over in I Corinthians makes it difficult for me to completely dismiss the Romans passage altogether. Whatever the case, there can be no doubt that in I Corinthians 7:39 Paul is specifically dealing with remarriage, and there he *distinctly* states that the marriage bond is for life and that only the death of a spouse makes a person free to remarry.

Conclusion

At the beginning of his discussion on marriage and divorce, Paul summarized the teaching of Jesus:

“And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife.” (1 Cor. 7:10-11)

Now at the end of the chapter Paul summarizes all his teaching as:

“The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord.” (1 Cor. 7:39)

Paul begins and ends his discussion on marriage and divorce very succinctly:

- The marriage bond is for life; therefore any divorce in the eyes of man is merely a separation.
- Therefore, if a divorce occurs only two options are open to us: reconciliation or remain single.

As I have tried to stress in each article, I realize that these teachings are hard. Divorce is not just a doctrine or an argument; it affects real people with real lives, in real painful situations. Nevertheless, the Church is called to minister in every painful situation. Admittedly, mopping up the mistakes of hundreds of years of deep-seated precedent and preconceived ideas is a challenge for any serious-minded church today. However, we cannot just turn our back on them, malign them, or wish they would just go away. We must start with the words of Scripture, without compromise, and pray for direction. *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16)*. At times this all may seem like majoring on a minor point of Scripture. I hope this is not the case. However, let’s not forget Jesus’ initial words to us at the beginning of The Sermon on the Mount, *“Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:19)*. Holding on to every word of God’s truth, we can count on God’s promises to bless, provide and guide our way. □

[The next issue we will be looking at divorce and remarriage in the early Church.]

If this is your first issue and you would like a copy of the previous 3 parts in this series on “Marriage, Divorce & Remarriage”, call Charity Ministries at 800-227-7902 or go to www.charityministries.org/theremnant and click on “Archives” on the left.