

CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE AND REMARRIAGE

I Corinthians 7:10-40

The Corinthian Christians had written Paul and asked him for instruction with reference to the relative desirability of single and married life. On this subject there was a diversity of opinion among them. Some regarded marriage as obligatory, and others looked upon it as an evil. In this seventh chapter, which, of course, was intended to be read in the assembly of the church, Paul gave them some explicit instructions. He told them that celibacy is honorable, that marriage is desirable, that marriage entails mutual obligations, and that marriage is often expedient.

This passage illustrates Paul's ability to deal successfully with concrete situations. There were some of the Corinthian Christians who believed that because they had received Christ as their Saviour that they should dissolve their social and economic relationships with those who were unbelievers. Paul here tells them that such should not be done.

Of course, Paul recognized the probability that a person might become a Christian after having been married for some time to another unbeliever. So, Paul faced with them the question, If any Christian brother has a wife who does not become a Christian, should he continue to live with her or dismiss her? There might be the temptation to get rid of an unbelieving partner, on the plea that a high Christian life was impossible in union with one who differed so radically on the deepest things; but, even in such a case, the sanctity of the marriage bond is to be upheld, said Paul.

If the unbelieving partner is desirous of a separation, such is permissible. Binding as is the law of marriage, there must not be any slavery in the matter. If the partner refuses to maintain the union, there must not be any coercion. If a separation is to take place, on account of the fact that one is a child of God, the unbelieving companion must take the initiative always. The Christian husband is forbidden to repudiate his non-Christian wife, and the Christian wife is forbidden to repudiate her non-Christian husband. The first step towards separation must not be taken by the Christian partner. While the Christian companion must not seek a separation, he or she must not refuse to separate if the unbelieving partner insists upon it. If they continue in the union instead of breaking it, the unbelieving partner will receive a spiritual influence which will hold the possibility of such a one being saved.

If you are a Christian and unmarried, and you should contemplate marriage, put out of your mind at once the thought that you might possibly marry somebody who is unsaved. To do so would be a positive disobedience to the will and Word of God. Never permit your affections to be entwined around an unsaved person, for the Bible says, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (II Corinthians 6:14). It is an absolute certainty that a child of God cannot marry a child of the devil without having trouble with his father-in-law. Let your marriage be "in the Lord."

In case one has actually departed, then he or she must remain unmarried, or be reconciled to his or her companion. Many things justify a person leaving a companion, but they do not justify a divorce. Only with a single exception, which our Lord Himself has indicated in Matthew 19:9, marriage is indissoluble. The marriage bond cannot be dissolved by any human authority, because it is a covenant for life between one man and one woman. If the covenant be annulled, it can only be done by the sinful act of fornication committed by one of the parties. Our Lord Jesus Christ said, "And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery" (Matthew 19:9).

Because marriage was God's gift to man in Paradise, because Christ honored marriage in His first miracle at Cana of Galilee, because marriage is life's great mystery and blessed

boon, it is important to ask: "Can marriage be broken? Can the divorced marry again?" Let Scripture, and not man, make answer, for by the Word of God only shall the matter be settled eternally. No authority has ever changed Christ's "It is written," and Paul's "Nothing beyond what is written."

The Scriptures make plain the distinction between separation and divorce. Separation as distinguished from divorce is permissible for other reasons than fornication, but not with permission for remarriage after divorce, but only for reconciliation. The separated parties must either remain unmarried or be reconciled.

No lips but Christ's speak of divorce in the New Testament. Paul speaks of separation without divorce, but only Christ speaks of divorce. What Christ says ought to settle the matter for every Christian. What did He say? Is divorce permissible? Yes, but it is permissible only on one ground. That one ground is fornication—"except for fornication." Christ plainly and unmistakably said that divorce is not permissible on any ground "except for fornication." Is remarriage permissible? Remarriage is not permissible for the party who is guilty of fornication. The question of remarriage for the divorced is therefore clearly reduced to this: "Can the innocent party remarry after divorce?" By implication only does Christ allow remarriage of the innocent party, and not at all of the guilty one. However, the pages of history are full of warning that the remarriage of innocent parties is a possibility fraught with danger.

From verse seventeen we learn that Christianity does not make all its converts masters or capitalists or aristocrats. Christian living belongs to every level of life. Christians are needed among servants as well as masters, workers as well as employers, the poor as well as the rich, and the humble as well as the exalted. Christianity does not create an artificial greatness, but it teaches the true greatness of humble places. After all, greatness does not consist merely in doing great things, but rather in doing little things in a great way.

There were those in Corinth who had the mistaken notion that since they had been servants, conversion would put them on a social and economic equality with their Christian masters. Paul pointed out to them that, although they were slaves of men, they were superior to their masters if they were the servants of Christ. A Christian was, in fact, Christ's bondman. As such a bondman, he was superior to any unChristian freeman on earth. Such freemen were slaves of Satan, but Christ's bondservants were purchased out of that kind of slavery and were set free. Thus Christianity taught the dignity of lowly places and menial services. While doing this, it did not peg men's lives at low levels of attainment. It did not depreciate human ability or discount human attainment. It believed that every man had a right to express his ability and receive the benefits from it. Above all, be what God intends and wants you to be.

Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. It is God's commandments that we are to observe, and not some external rite or service imposed on us by human masters.

Paul told the Corinthian Christians that while many of them had marital obligations which must be respected, nevertheless, these must not precede nor obscure their Christian duties and responsibilities. What is paramount is one's relationship to the Lord. The Christian is to avoid being the slave of outward circumstances and relationships. A married man's relationship should be entirely subservient to his higher relationship with the Lord, who is to have the first place in his heart and life. He is not to permit a natural relationship to obstruct his obedience to Christ. He should not permit anything to hinder his fellowship with God or his usefulness in testimony.

In regard to the remarriage of a person after his or her companion has died, Paul writes with absolute clearness. He, like the Lord Jesus Christ, recognized the fact that "The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth." The bond is absolute, indissoluble

and lifelong. After his death she is free to marry again. But, if she marries again, it must be in subjection to the will and the authority of Christ. This is a distinct prohibition against marriage to an unbeliever. Such a marriage could never be "in the Lord." But the statement goes further than that. The step must be taken in the clear assurance of the Lord's will. To respect and obey His will in this, as in all other matters, will spare many a heartache.