

COUNSEL FOR TROUBLED MARRIAGES

1 Corinthians 7:10–24

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1 Corinthians 7:10–24 (NIV)

“To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts. Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord’s freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ’s slave. You were bought at a price; do not

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become slaves of men. Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to.”

A young man came to his pastor for counsel after a couple of years of marriage. He complained to the pastor that he and his wife weren't getting along well and he wanted out of the marriage.

The pastor had been the minister who had married them, so he responded that the vows were “for better or for worse.” He said to the young man, “Did you not say for better or for worse?” To which the young man responded, “Yes, I did say that, but she is worse than I took her for.”

More and more people are feeling that way in our society. I called the Orange County clerk this past week and asked them what the marriage registrations were for last year and the divorces granted. There were 13,188 marriage licenses issued. The number of divorces granted in that same year was 15,341.

California problems are very akin to Corinthian problems. The world's view regarding sexual morality had invaded the church, as we saw in 1 Corinthian 6. And as we see in 1 Corinthians 7, the world's view on marriage and divorce also had invaded the church. There were troubled marriages among the Corinthian Christians, just like there are troubled marriages among California Christians. What counsel does the Word of God have to offer the troubled marriage? I recognize, as I pose that question, that it cannot be expected that within twenty-five minutes or so, we could possibly exhaustively answer that question for every troubled marriage that may be represented here today. At the same time, though, there are some broad guidelines that the Word of God gives us when we are going through a troublesome experience in marriage. These guidelines are really anchors for us.

I. The first counsel that Paul gives is that a person in a troubled marriage must make an inner commitment to stay with their spouse in that marriage.

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He says in verse 10, “To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord), a wife must not separate from her husband.” Being understood that the same would apply to the husband, that he must not separate from the wife. This is not the kind of counsel you would give to a person who is already in a very joyful marital relationship or experience. You don’t have to tell a person who is very satisfied in marriage not to leave their spouse. They would respond, “I wasn’t thinking of it anyway.”

This word is specifically for persons who are thinking about divorce. And a very strong word is given that, in consideration of the problems a troubled marriage is going through, the first response is a response to make an inner commitment to stay with one’s spouse. “This,” Paul says, “is not simply his word as an apostle. But this is directly a word from the Lord.” He is obviously referring to statements Jesus made on the sanctity and unbreakability of marriage in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, Mark 10:11, and Luke 16:18.

What he is saying by this word of counsel is that the law of God is the fence around a marriage, designed to keep us safely inside the borders of marriage until the love of God can prevail in the healing of the marriage. In effect, the love of God is a safe harbor to contain the marriage together until the love of God can work through the core of the marriage and bring the relationship to complete healing.

Let me put it in this analogy. Suppose that you see marriage as being maintained in an arena ,and that when two people are first married or when they’re joyfully married they stay in one another’s arms in the center of that arena. Around that arena is a fence, if you will, and that fence is meant to keep those two people in that arena together. Love, if it’s mutually satisfying, keeps them in the center of the arena, they are not worried about going out to the borders of the arena, let alone getting beyond the fence, into an arena somewhere else. But it is when a relationship

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gets into difficulties that God, in His love, has erected the safe harbor of the law, the fences of the arena, to say, “Don’t imagine that you can work out your problems more successfully by jumping outside of that arena. Rather, let the law keep you inside the arena and work at the problem from the inside.”

Paul’s counsel here, as an apostle, quoting the Word of the Lord, reflects the basic Christian attitude toward suffering and problems of all kinds. It is not an attitude of escape, but it is an attitude of endurance. The great Christian word is “endure,” “remain under.” It describes a basement—something that is under something. It is a word in Scripture often translated “patience.” It actually means something far stronger than simply being patient. It means “taking stress,” “staying true under great pressure.” Paul is saying here that this applies to a troubled marriage. The first tact is to endure.

We acknowledge, as we make that commitment in marriage, that the basic person that needs change in the marriage relationship is not our partner, but ourselves. It’s so easy to pray that God will only change someone else when the only person He’s really free to change is ourselves. Because our will must be offered to Him and in prayer we become the person who invites the Holy Spirit to change us, to give different attitudes or to give staying power or perspective. If I were to give this counsel to married couples, it would be, “Don’t ever, even in the heat of an argument or debate, threaten one another with divorce or separation.” So often, actions follow words. We can, in the heat of a moment, express things that we really didn’t mean. But those words can begin to create a wedge which, unless we’re very careful, can widen into a very large breach.

Paul says that Christian couples owe it to one another and to God to make that inner commitment from the heart to stay in the marriage.

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The apostle Paul recognizes, though, that his counsel will not be adhered to by all. And indeed, that there will be some situations in which, for the sake of physical safety, as well as psychological safety, it may be necessary that a separation ensue.

Therefore, in verse 11 he acknowledges that there may be some people who will not keep his counsel to make that inner commitment to stay married.

II. He says, therefore, if there is separation, that person who separates must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to their husband or the husband to the wife.

We need to note, a moment, that this passage, like other sections we have dealt with in Corinthians, is not covering the whole of a given subject. If we look carefully at all the Scripture has to say on divorce and remarriage, we find that there are some exceptions to the rule of “remain separated”—don’t remarry. Jesus says, in Matthew 5:32, that a marriage which has been broken because of the infidelity of a spouse may result in divorce with permission to remarry. I won’t go into all the background that could be developed regarding exegeting or understanding that particular verse of Scripture. But there is that permission given by the Lord. That is not to say that, if there is infidelity in a relationship, the first course of action of a Christian in the relationship is to say, “Now I’ve got grounds for divorce and I’m getting out of this relationship.” The first tact is always one of reconciliation and forgiveness and healing. But there are some relationships that have been so breached by unrepentant immorality that Jesus indicates that that marriage is dead and carries with it, then, the right of remarriage.

Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 7:15 and some verses following, that where a marriage is broken off by an unbeliever, refusing to live with a believing spouse, then in that case, the believer is no longer bound, indicating that the believer is no longer bound to the law of marriage, and remarriage is permissible.

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A third exception that may be seen is from 2 Corinthians 5:17, where Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old has passed away, the new has come.” Recognizing that the grace of God applies to our pre-Christian experience. That Christ calls us where we are. There are many persons who have had a marital experience—divorce and remarriage—prior to becoming a Christian and the grace of God finds you where you are at, and totally accepts and receives you where you are.

Paul here is counseling Christian couples who are thinking about separation and divorce. He is saying, “First of all, put it away from your mind. Make a commitment to the marriage.”

Then secondly, if for some reason there is a separation among you, remain unmarried or be reconciled. There are some occasions when separation may be a safe thing to do, when the physical danger in a relationship is so great that separation may be necessary.

It should be noted, though, that where separation occurs as a result of a person attaching themselves emotionally or physically to a third party, the marriage is in tremendous danger. And the attachment to the third party must be laid to rest. Paul is saying that when Christians divorce and remarry on grounds other than that permitted in Scripture, they have forfeited their right to hold places of teaching and leadership responsibilities in the body, 1 Timothy 3:2 and 3:12. In other words, when there is a believing couple and separation ensues, and there is not the ground of infidelity nor is there the ground of there being an unbeliever as a spouse, then in such a separation, both parties are to remain single or be reconciled.

III. Paul then goes on to give a third counsel to troubled marriages. God sees marriage as equally sanctified outside the church as inside the church.

One thing that could be said is that God’s plan for marriage is not confined to the church. That is, the troubled marriages at Corinth, in the case of a believer being married to an unbeliever (verses

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12–14). As we look at this passage, we need to reflect on some preliminary things that should be said about marriages between a believer and unbeliever. God instituted marriage long before He instituted the church. Marriage is thousands of years older, as an institution, than the church is. There had maybe been some cases at Corinth in which one person in the marriage relationship had come to faith in Christ. They've now attended the Christian congregation, looked around, and their spouse at home is sort of a lout, if you will. Maybe it's a gal and she looks at all the neat, young single Christian men in the church. And starts saying, "It would really be neat to have a Christian husband. If I could just get rid of my unbelieving husband, surely God would approve this. After all, it's His will that I have a Christian marriage." Paul has to deal with that. He says, "No, it's not God's will that you have a Christian marriage. You are not free to leave that unbeliever simply because now you've found a nice Christian bachelor." Rather, God recognizes the validity of that marriage, whether or not it is between believers or between a believer and an unbeliever.

Another thing that should be noted is that, had Paul said that it was permissible to leave your spouse because they were an unbeliever, it would have, right away, set up grounds for many insincere conversions. Suppose a man who is an unbeliever really loves his wife and his wife says, "I'm going to leave you because you're not a believer." Then he says, "We can remedy that real quick!" He may make a profession of faith that is really not honest. And that is not a good motive for the conversion.

Paul, also in this verse, is doing more than offering good advice. I wrestled a little bit with my sermon title today, "Counsel for Troubled Marriages." Because what Paul is doing here is more than giving advice which we can be free to accept or reject. He's putting us under apostolic orders. In verse 10, he's saying that the orders which he has given come directly from the Lord.

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That is, he quotes the Lord. But in verse 12, he says, “To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord).” He’s not saying in verse 10, “I’ve got proof the Lord said this,” but in verse 12, “It really isn’t binding, it’s only my opinion.” What he’s really saying in verse 12 is, “The Lord never said anything on this subject, so I am free to speak on it and I am speaking as an apostle.” He’s speaking with authority here. The counsel which he gives for a believing and unbelieving relationship is far different than the pre-marriage directions regarding believing and unbelieving marriages. He says to a person who is not married, “Do not be unequally yoked with an unbeliever.” Here, he is specifically addressing marriages in which one person, after the marriage, has come to faith in Christ. Should they stay in that relationship? He said, “Yes, you should.” There is a blessing that the believing person can give to the marriage, to the spouse and to the children.

It may very well have been that there were people in the Corinthian church that were following along with Paul, as he was writing, and remembered his argument in chapter 6 about sexual immorality and him saying to them, “You are so vitally a member of the Lord, a part of His body. You cannot give yourself to a relationship that the Lord would not be a part of. Therefore, that’s his argument against sexual immorality. We’re vitally joined to Christ as an arm is to a body.”

There may have been those who said at Corinth, “If this is the case, then how can I be married to an unbeliever and so then defile Christ, since I now belong to Him?” Paul’s saying, “You understand it all so incorrectly. Don’t you know that you cannot be defiled by an unbeliever? What will happen, instead, is that you will consecrate an unbeliever.” Paul doesn’t have the idea that sin is greater than grace. We sometimes so easily, in a Christian life, adopt this sort of view, that one bad apple in the barrel will spoil all the apples in the barrel. That may be a true law as it

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pertains to apples, but it shouldn't be a true law as it pertains to Christians. Because Christians aren't the good apple in the barrel waiting to be spoiled by the bad apples, Christians aren't apples at all!

Christians are salt and they are light. To use that analogy, put some little bit of salt in something that is rotten and it stays or it protects and preserves. So in marriage, Paul is saying that it's not the unbelieving person that's going to defile the believer, but the believer is going to pass on a beautiful benefit. "Don't you know that by keeping in that relationship you will sanctify your husband and your children will be declared holy or sanctified as well?" Paul doesn't use the word "saved" here. He's not saying that, by maintaining that relationship, you as the believing spouse will automatically then save your spouse and save your children. He's using the word "sanctified," not "saved." The word "sanctified" literally means "to be set apart." He's saying that the unbelieving spouse and the children born to such a relationship are then, because a believer is in that relationship, set apart for special treatment by the Lord. Why do they get set apart for special treatment? Because they get to see a Christian up close. They get to see a Christian who prays. They get to see a Christian who models the life of Christ. They get to see a Christian in whom the Spirit of the Lord dwells. What a tremendous benefit that is—a sanctifying, holy benefit.

Peter amplifies this same kind of thing in giving wise counsel. "They [that is, the unbelieving husbands] may be won over, without talk, by the behavior of their wives when they see the purity and the reverence of your lives" (1 Peter 3:2).

Paul is saying, though, that when there is a marriage in which an unbeliever leaves the marriage, the believer is then no longer bound to the marriage. There are some instances where an

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unbeliever simply will not have a Christian for a spouse. In such a case, Paul regrettably says the marriage terms have been violated and the believer is no longer bound to that law of marriage.

Christians in a relationship like that must not use this truth as a pretext for getting out of a marriage. It's amazing what you can do if you're legalistic-minded. Saying, "If it's true, then I can get out of this relationship. I'm going to do all I can to get them to want to leave me so I can get out of this relationship." That's not the tactic at all. It's after you have done everything you know how to make the relationship go and the unbelieving partner still says, "I'll have nothing to do with the relationship."

Paul here is saying to a believing person, "Don't stick to a marriage at all costs." He's saying, in verse 15, God has called us to live in peace and he's not asking believing persons to go through a marriage Armageddon with an unbelieving spouse who makes life, because of their unbelief, absolutely intolerable. He doesn't draw a firm rule here and say, "When the level of peace gets to seventy decibels or drops below that..."

In chapter 7, verse 16, Paul is saying something which, probably more often than not, has been misunderstood. He says, "How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband; or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" This has sometimes been used to teach persons that are involved in a relationship where they are taking physical abuse from an unbelieving partner—or other kinds of incredible, intimidating threats and the like—to stick with the relationship because, sooner or later, you might win that person to the Lord. What Paul, however, seems to be saying in verse 16 is, "You don't know whether you're going to be able to win that person to the Lord or not, so you have to determine (back to verse 15) where the level of peace is at and if it is worth totally having peace destroyed in order to go for the hope; maybe if you stick with it, ultimately, they'll be saved."

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Let me give you some analogies of this. I think back to a friend whose husband, some years ago, whom she married when they were both believers, turned on the Lord and became a very militant agnostic. Finally, after a time in which she really attempted to do her best to remain with that situation, he finally delivered an ultimatum and told her that the only way he would stay married to her was if she denied Jesus as Lord and joined him in his religious outlook. She at that moment had to make a very clear choice as to whether to be with her husband or be with the Lord. She took the latter option. She did not deny the Lord. Instead, she said, “If you must leave, it is not my will. But if that is your persuasion, I cannot deny my Lord.” That’s the very kind of thing that Paul is talking about here.

I can point to another marriage of a young woman—not a casual observance, but a lifelong observance of a relationship—who, over a half century ago, knowingly married an unbeliever. She thought he had been converted. He gave a false confession, but she didn’t really test that enough. Right after their marriage, he informed her of his lack of faith and demanded that the children born to their marriage not be raised in her faith. She continued to live in the relationship, believing that God’s grace would prevail and he would wind up being saved. As their marriage progressed and children came along, he began to physically abuse her, beat her regularly. He ridiculed her in the presence of the children. He made light of and belittled her faith. He made her really appear, not as a wife, but as kind of a cleaning or cooking woman who bore his children and who was under his orders.

In that kind of relationship, the peace of the relationship had really been broken. Today, years later, as I have the vantage point of assessing the result of that marriage, the nine children all grew up and none of them are Christians today, none of the grandchildren are Christians. The whole family is away from Christ. The unbeliever in that relationship exerted such pressure on

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the relationship, in terms of physical abuse and psychological abuse, that the peace was destroyed. The person, out of hope that peace would return, stayed in the relationship. Probably, in looking back, she did not keep the spirit of what Paul is saying in verse 16. There was freedom in that instance to go.

I can, however, show you other marriages where a believing person has not been subject to that kind of verbal or physical abuse, and where an unbelieving spouse has simply not been interested in spiritual things but has said, “If you want to practice your faith, that is fine with me.” In such relationships, there has been a growing together and, more often than not, the partner, the unbelieving partner, has eventually come to faith in Christ. The children have come to faith in Christ. That’s a far different matter.

Paul is saying, in this kind of relationship, “Let peace be your guide.” The peace of God.

Paul gives some broad perimeters here. I indicated, at the beginning, that we wouldn’t have time to explore them all. He doesn’t really tell us how you should go about repairing a troubled marriage. I just want to focus in on that for a moment or two.

If you are in a troubled marriage or if you are praying for a troubled marriage, the first key in helping a troubled marriage is really getting on your knees about the relationship and bringing prayer into the relationship. Asking the Lord to give you help. I find that the closer we draw to the Lord, the more closely we’re able to relate to other people and really make the marriage a matter of prevailing prayer. “Lord, show me how I need to change. Show me how I need to reflect Your love.” If you are a husband, “Lord, show me how You love Your bride, how You led Your bride.” And if you are a wife, “Lord, show me how the church best fulfills Your desire as the bride.”

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Secondly, to seek spiritual counsel from somebody in the body of Christ who has the ministry of spiritual counsel. This is not just involving a third party in the relationship, but saying that there have been persons in the body who have been especially gifted with the ministry of counsel, to seek them out.

I've often found, in marriage counseling, that so often American men feel reluctant to seek counsel in a troubled marriage. Don't try to be an American macho man. Be a biblical man. Our model is not some mighty man in the world's sense. But our model is Jesus Christ. Jesus, as a model of a man, showed himself to be a communicating husband of His people, whom He loved. He showed Himself to be vulnerable, willing to take criticisms. And also, was always willing to take the initiation in healing and communicating. And also, the initiation in conversation. That's a helpful model. I'd say, in addition to these words of counsel, to give a relationship time and not put it under the gun, the stress that something's got to happen in X number of days "or else." But to remain pliant and soft before the Spirit of God and let Him shape you.

IV. Paul sums up this whole passage on troubled marriages by giving the overall counsel which applies to many, many situations. It is the counsel "Remain in the state you are in" (verses 17–24).

Three times he tells us in these verses to retain the place in life that the Lord has assigned or that the Lord has called us to. We're programmed to think that we would be better off if our situation would only change. If we're single, we'd be better off if we could only get married. Then we would be happy. If you're unhappy single, you're going to be unhappy married. Marriage is not going to make you happy. Two unhappy single people getting married would just make one unhappy marriage. If you are unhappy married, being single is not the answer. We think if we change jobs or change careers or change cars or change bank accounts with someone else, we

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can be happy. Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is, we can be joyful in the place and station of life that God has called us to.

It's amazing how the Lord makes us test out our principle. When Paul says, "Let each person remain in the state which he is called. God has put you there," he had not yet undergone a Roman imprisonment. He may have had some temporary imprisonments, but the Roman imprisonment is coming up ahead of him, after he writes the Corinthians. I always kind of watch to see if a person lives by what they say. It's intriguing to watch Paul in this regard, because after five years in Roman prisons, he writes the Philippian letter. And the Philippian letter is a follow-up to what he says in these verses (17–24) of 1 Corinthians 7. He says "I've learned to rejoice in all circumstances" (Philippians 4:11). "Rejoice and again I say rejoice" (Philippians 4:4). "I can do anything through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). He says, "My imprisonment has worked out for good. I've even been able to reach these secret service troops of Caesar. His crack elite troops. I've been able to witness to them. I thank God for being in the condition I'm in, in this terrible stinking jail here, because I've been able to witness to people for Christ." (Philippians 1:13). What a marvelous model of being able to settle down where God has called you and being content.

I try to stay away from praying the prayer, "God, change my circumstances." I'm too tempted to pray that all the time. "God! Change my circumstances!" It's not that at all in the Scriptures. It's "God, change me in my circumstances. Rearrange me so that I can adjust to the circumstances in the life You have called me to."

In regard to this, Paul says, "Remain in the state you're in." The Lord knows where you are.

That's a great comfort. "If you were a slave when you were called," he says, "God knows you were a slave. If you get a chance to take your freedom, fine, but don't chafe at being a slave."

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God knows exactly where you are. You haven't been lost. He doesn't have a computer readout in heaven in which somebody pressed the wrong button one day and your name dropped off and they've been searching for you ever since. He knows who you are, where you are, the situations in life are God's assignment to you. Even as Chuck Colson was, in effect, sent by the Lord to prison to accomplish a specific mission, so God assigns us, in our individual capacities in life, on a mission, on assignment. We are soldiers on duty for Him.

The Lord knows where you are. The Lord has assigned you to your present place. He who was a slave. He who was a free man. There are exceptions to the Lord assigning you to your present place. If you were a bank robber before your conversion, you are not to stay and be a Christian bank robber. You're to leave that vocation and be something else. The Lord wants you to walk where you are. Verse 17 says, "Retain the place in life." The root word is simply "walk one step after another." Walk where you are. Abide in your calling. Abide with God in your calling. God is with you.

As we approach communion, today, I think of how Jesus modeled this whole thing for us. It's fascinating to look at His passion and take out a map and see where He was. He was coming out of Galilee and walking out of Galilee to Jerusalem. At any moment, it was just as easy for Him to walk away to Caesarea Philippi and get in a boat and go anywhere in the world and disappear. But He had a calling from the Father to lay down His life. So He went to Jerusalem. He abided in that calling. He took up His cross and He remained true and God vindicated Him.

It's the very same council God's giving us as believers. He's saying, "Abide in your calling, take up your cross and follow Christ. Serve God joyfully where you are." When He gets ready to call you out of it, He will exercise that freedom. But as long as He's called you to where you are, don't seek to escape from it. Be His person in that place.

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Closing Prayer

Lord, we do seek that from You today and know that this word has come especially as a loving word from You to give us counsel. Lord, we don't seek our happiness in things outside of You or outside of ourselves. We would come to You and find in You full freedom and joy. For marriages here that are experiencing adversity and trouble and difficulty, we pray for Your healing. We thank You for these words, which give us some guidelines to live by. Lord, You embrace us with Your love and Your Word speaks to us out of a concern to keep us as wonderful individuals, remade in Your image as a person of Christ Jesus. We receive Your Word, therefore, with thanksgiving. In Christ's name. Amen.