

Marriage Counseling

1 Corinthians 7:8-11

INTRODUCTION

- A. Divorced couples in Albuquerque, New Mexico, can take advantage of a business in town.
 - 1. The company is called Freedom Rings: Jewelry for the Divorced.
 - a. Founded by jeweler and divorcee Lynn Peters, the company makes custom jewelry out of wedding rings.
 - b. Each customer at Freedom Rings pay a fee, and the ring-smashing ceremony begins—complete with champagne and music.
 - c. Just before the smashing, the MC says, “We will now release any remaining ties to your past by transforming your ring—which represents the past—into a token of your new beginning. Now take the hammer. Stop for a moment to consider the transformation that is about to begin your new life. Ready? With this swing let freedom ring!”
 - 2. The former husband or wife then uses a four-pound sledgehammer to whack her emblem of love and fidelity into a shapeless piece of metal. And the ceremony ends.
- B. Divorce ceremonies are gaining in popularity, for they give both parties an opportunity to bring closure to the marriage.
 - 1. Divorce ceremonies have grown out of a culture where people view marriage as something disposable.
 - 2. From the way Paul writes in this text, it becomes clear that this is not a new phenomenon, but people have always viewed marriage as disposable.
 - 3. Because marriage is a serious undertaking, the Apostle, following the example of Jesus before him, lays down guidelines to regulate marriage.
 - a. After he has laid down guidelines for keeping ourselves and our spouses from sexual immorality, Paul lays down broad guidelines about marriage.
 - b. In writing guidelines for marriage, Paul speaks specifically to three groups: the unmarried, the married, and those married to an unbelieving spouse.
 - c. This morning, we want to think about the marital guidelines Paul provides to the unmarried & the married. Next week, we’ll look at those regulations for Christians with unbelieving spouses.

MARRIAGE COUNSELING FOR THE UNMARRIED, vv. 8-9

- A. Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am, 8.
 - 1. Paul addresses the unmarried and the widows.
 - a. It is quite plausible that in Corinth, like most any modern congregation, there was a good number of people who had never been married or those who had once been married and had lost their spouses.
 - b. Paul says, “Whatever the reason that you’re not currently married, I have some things to say.”
 - 2. What Paul has to say to the unmarried is this: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am.
 - a. Maybe Paul envisioned the man who was seen sobbing uncontrollably at the cemetery: “Why did you die? Why did you die?”
 - 1) Another man stopped to offer some comfort, and asked him, “Did your mother just die?” “No,” sobbed the man.”
 - 2) “Your father?” “No.”
 - 3) He continues, “O, why did you die?” “Well, who died?” the comforter asked. “This was my wife’s first husband.”
 - b. Seriously, though, Paul understood it was best for the unmarried and widows to remain unmarried as was he.
 - 1) Why would it be better for unmarried people to remain unmarried?
 - a) “Those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this” (v. 28).
 - i. But Paul does not tell us what troubles the married will face in this life, although he does mention at v. 26—”Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you [the unmarried] to remain as you are.”

- ii. What was the present crisis facing the Corinthian congregation?
 - i) Obviously because Paul, writing under the Holy Spirit's guidance, has not informed us, anything we say would be pure conjecture.
 - ii) However, it seems there was some type of persecution against these brethren.
 - aa. "If Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am" (16:10).
 - bb. "Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong" (16:13).
 - b) Also, as we mentioned last week, the unmarried have more time to devote to the Lord's service: "An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided" (v. 32-34).
 - 2) Being celibate in this life, according to Paul, is the ideal—interests are undivided and there are not the pressures which ensnare the married.
- B. I do not know how you can read this text and not conclude that, at least at the time Paul wrote, being celibate is far superior to marriage. However, I do not know how you can read this text and conclude that celibacy is the only path acceptable to God. Paul concludes this paragraph: "If they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion," v. 9.
- 1. Self-control is an important quality for the Christian life.
 - a. Self-control is part of the fruit the Spirit produces in our lives (Gal 5:23).
 - b. In a sexual context, such as the one before us, Paul elsewhere wrote, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable" (1 Thess 4:3-4).
 - 2. While we absolutely need to control our bodies in a God-honoring manner, we mentioned last week that one avenue we have for controlling our sexual appetites is marriage, a point Paul again makes. It is better to marry than lose control.
 - 3. About that, Paul writes: "It is better to marry than to burn with passion."
 - a. The Greek reads, as does the KJV, "For it is better to marry than to be burning."
 - b. The NIV, and most other modern translations, qualify the statement with the idea of being aflame with passion. Those translations add the "passion" with good reason.
 - 1) That is the context; learning to control sexual impulses.
 - 2) Also, in the Greco—Roman world, "burn" was a common idiom for passion.
 - a) Interestingly, that ancient idea came from Cupid with his flaming arrows.
 - b) Thus, to be afire meant to Greek readers to having been shot with Cupid's arrows and aflame with passion.
- C. What does that have to do with us who live two millennia after Paul wrote?
- 1. We need to be careful about judging people who have chosen celibacy.
 - a. There are always those folk who look down on those who are unmarried. They're the type who are always saying, "We need to find her a husband" or "If he's not married, maybe he's really a homosexual."
 - b. I doubt seriously that there's a one of us married folk who would not say we are immensely blessed by our spouses—I know for a fact that I would not be the man I am today were it not for my good wife, and I have been blessed by her far beyond words.
 - c. But, that lifestyle is not for everyone.
 - 2. We also need to be careful about our sexual appetites.
 - a. Paul makes clear that God created those appetites for marriage and only for marriage; that is the only rightful place to express ourselves sexually.
 - b. If we have trouble controlling those appetites, we need to seek a spouse, In fact, in the clause, "It is better to marry than to burn with passion," the term "marry" could be translated "Let them seek a spouse."
 - 3. Brethren, let us be careful about judging people and let us control our sexual selves!

MARRIAGE COUNSELING FOR THE MARRIED, vv. 10-11

- A. To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband, v. 10.
 - 1. Paul now begins to speak to the married, and he does so with divine authority.

- a. The apostle makes clear that what he is about to write is not his own idea, but that of the Lord.
 - b. There are places where Paul declares that he writes a command of the Lord, and he means that he is in no way writing his own opinion, but that of the Lord. The phrase does not seem to have the same idea here.
 - 1) That doesn't appear to be the case, for in v. 12, he writes: "To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord)."
 - a) Paul cannot mean that he is simply giving his own ideas, for he writes, "If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command" (14:37).
 - b) Granted, in context, Paul is speaking of the things he had just written about the use of miraculous gifts in the worship; however, Paul as an apostle wrote everything he did with apostolic authority.
 - 2) What Paul means here when he says that this is a command of the Lord is that Jesus himself had given this command while he was in the flesh: "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and married another man, she commits adultery" (Mk 10:11-12).
2. A wife must not separate from her husband.
- a. In the Roman world, wives could not divorce their husbands, only the husband had the right to divorce.
 - 1) Paul, following Jesus before him, allows women the ability to divorce; throughout this chapter, we see women elevated far beyond the typical position they had in Roman society when Paul wrote.
 - 2) I really wonder if the reason Paul addresses the women here rather than the men is that women had no right to divorce, even for what we would term biblical grounds, in the Roman Empire.
 - a) Actually, this is the second time in the text before us this morning that we've seen Paul nullify Roman law.
 - b) In the previous paragraph, Paul said that it's best if widows remained single, but Roman law, because they wanted procreation, allowed widows two years to remarry.
 - c) Paul is saying, "Here's what God says. We're members of his kingdom, and we need to obey him before we give any thought to what the Romans say."
 - b. Brethren, we need to understand that divorce always involves sin.
 - 1) I did not say that divorce is always sin, but simply that sin is always involved.
 - 2) If I have an affair and Tammy puts me away, sin is involved, but she hasn't sinned in the least.
 - 3) Why is it that women should not divorce their husbands?
 - a) We read in the opening pages of Genesis that God created marriage.
 - i. Jesus, providing commentary on those first pages of Scripture, adds: "What God has joined together, let man not separate" (Mt 19:9).
 - ii. Marriage has always been a permanent and binding proposition. I know that's not our society—we're told that if we fall out of love we simply go get a divorce and try again—but that's Scripture. We dare not take marriage lightly.
 - b) Marriage is a covenant.
 - i. God says through Malachi: "The LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant" (2:14).
 - ii. When Tammy & I were doing our wedding programs, I suggested that we title our ceremony "The Marriage Covenant," based on these words and because I'm convinced that's an apt description of marriage.
 - i) In ancient covenant, two parties came together and agreed both agreed to keep their end of the arrangement: In the Old Testament, God entered into a covenant with the Israelites, to be their God and to bless them, provided they circumcise their males and keep the covenant.
 - ii) That's a good description of marriage; both partners' coming together and promising mutually to love and to honor. And, you simply cannot enter into a covenant and then decide it's just riot for you.
 - c. We simply must understand that we cannot simply and easily divorce our spouses.
- B. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband, v. 11.

1. It may have seemed odd when Paul was declaring that women must not divorce their husbands that I said Paul elevated women since they couldn't divorce under Roman law. But, Paul is cognizant that divorce is going to occur, and he mentions that reality here.
 2. Jesus had some strong words to say about divorce in the Gospels.
 - a. We've read Mark's wording, but Jesus there doesn't allow any concession for divorce or remarriage. We know that he did in Matthew's account: "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery" (Mt 19:9).
 - b. Anytime we preach those words, people always want to but a "but" in what Jesus says.
 - 1) But, what if my husband abuses me or abuses alcohol or is cruel to the children?
 - 2) The problem with that reasoning is that there are no loopholes in Scripture, period.
 - c. Paul here, and I believe a close reading of what Jesus says, speaks to those other issues.
 - 1) Would God, in his compassion and mercy, ever want anyone—man, woman, or child—in a destructive environment? Absolutely not!
 - 2) Paul says here, "If she does divorce, here are the guidelines."
 3. Those guidelines are as clear as they are difficult: she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband.
 - a. If I come home drunk every night, kick the dog, scream at the children until they're frightened out of their minds, and beat my wife black and blue, Tammy has every right to leave.
 - b. She does not, however, have the right to remarry, unless she remarries me.
 - 1) I've known some good women who had no choice but to leave toxic relationships. These good women understood they had no right to remarry. To do so, according to Jesus' words, would have been adulterous.
 - 2) If that happens the only person we have a right to remarry would be our previous spouse.
 - a) Sometimes a divorce has a strange way of changing people. It could very well be that when a spouse realizes the other is serious, he or she may decide to repent and change.
 - b) If that occurs, it would be wonderful to see the husband and wife reunited in marriage.
 - c) Yet, if that does not occur, the spouses must remain celibate, for that is the Word of God.
- C. Paul concludes this section by including the men as well as the women; "A husband must not divorce his wife," v. 11.

CONCLUSION

- A. Yes, I know these are hard words.
 1. I am well aware that these words run counter to culture; however, we Christians are to be a counterculture.
 2. We have got to stop allowing this world to influence us.
 - a. Sure, we can read these words and say, "Yeah, that's what the Bible says, but things have changed so drastically from the time Paul penned those words."
 - b. Yet, the Book says what the Book says.
 3. Jesus calls us to drastic discipleship: Lk 14:25-33.
 - a. The cross is a symbol of death.
 - b. Carrying our cross means that we die to self and live to Jesus.
- B. How are we living in light of these hard words?
 1. Do you need help applying these hard words to your own life? The elders and I stand ready to help you all we can; if you need help, come see us after the worship.
 2. Do you need to die to yourself in baptism and be raised to carry your cross for Jesus?
 3. Have you stopped carrying your cross and need to come home this morning?