

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

Facing Life's Choices...With a Priority on Jesus Study #10

(1 Corinthians 7:8-40)

Introduction: The dignity of decision-making...

The French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, said that God blessed mankind by giving us the dignity of causality, specifically, the power to change things by prayer. I like that.

I would add that God has also blessed us by giving us the dignity of decision-making. He didn't make us robots. He created us as free-will agents who make real decisions every day.

Dozens of the decisions we make are routine and mundane and relate to normal life (what to eat, what to wear, what's for dinner). And some of our choices are consequential and affect the whole trajectory of our lives.

Review...

Over the past two Sundays we have considered, from Scripture, the themes of sexual sin and the blessing of married sexual expression. Today, we consider marriage and singleness.

Preview...

The Apostle Paul gives God-inspired advice to people who find themselves in different stations of life, maritally speaking.

Today, as we walk through this pretty long passage in 1 Corinthians, we'll...

...see the amazing freedom God has given us to make real and consequential choices about our lives.

...hear Paul urge us to learn the grace of contentment in whatever station of life we find ourselves.

...listen as he casts vision for us to use every decision about every circumstance of our lives to live more fully for Jesus.

In the first section, Paul writes to the unmarried.

A Brief Word of Counsel to the Unmarried (7:8-9)

[8] But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I.¹ [9] But if they do not have self-control, let them marry²; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.³

When Paul wrote this, he was living the single life and was finding great fulfillment in that.⁴ So, while he knew that singleness was not for everyone, he commended it to others. (See 1 Corinthians 7:7.)

Some people who are single constantly fight a battle with sexual temptation and with intense desire for personal intimacy with a member of the opposite sex. They **"burn"** with passion.

Paul's advice to them? Feel free to go ahead and get married. Your choice. He knew that married life was a good thing and for dozens of reasons.

¹ Marriage was certainly the norm for Jewish men. Rabbis, which Paul may have been, were almost always married (Acts 22:3 refers to Paul's rabbinic training under Gamaliel.). Still, Paul might have been unmarried. Members of the Sanhedrin had to be married, but we don't know if Paul was a member.

² Paul's advice here was that widows and widowers often should remarry, despite his personal preferences.

³ Elsewhere we have **"burn"** with grief and indignation (2 Cor 11:29) Paul certainly does not mean *"burn in hell,"* as, incredibly, some have suggested.

⁴ Paul was single. See 1 Corinthians 9:5; he did not exercise the right he had to take a believing wife as so many of the other apostles had done.

Then, Paul turned his attention to the married person.

A Brief Word to the Married About Staying / Leaving (7:10-11)

[10] But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord,⁵ that the wife is not to leave her husband [11] (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband is not to divorce his wife.

Here, Paul references Jesus' teaching and gives us two points of instruction.⁶

First, to marry is to enter a sacred covenant. So, married partners should not divorce each other.

Paul doesn't list exceptional cases where divorce might be permitted here (he does later), and which Jesus also mentioned.⁷

He simply says here that two Christians living together as husband and wife should stay that way.

Second, the Christian who does leave their spouse should remain unmarried, or else reconcile with that spouse.⁸

In saying all of this, Paul is not writing an exhaustive treatise on divorce and remarriage.

But, with respect to the Christian who thinks that marriage is an easily escaped relationship, that there is no "*tie that binds,*" that they

⁵ We believe Paul wrote 1 Corinthians earlier than any of the Gospels. The Corinthians would not have had access to the four biographies of Jesus' life.

⁶ Compare Paul's words with Jesus' words in Matthew 5 and 19 and in Mark 10.

⁷ When Jesus spoke, He only mentioned the initiative taken by a man, since in the Jewish world the husband was the only one who could sue for divorce. In Corinth, though, a woman might just as easily leave her husband as a man might leave his wife. So, Paul mentions both possibilities here.

⁸ If the departing spouse did remarry after leaving, it would raise suspicions about why he or she had divorced in the first place.

can divorce whenever they feel like it, Paul repeats Jesus' words and says, "No."⁹

Marriage is a binding, covenant relationship. Husband and wife are bound by vows, by a one-flesh relationship, and by, ***[Mark 10:9] "What God has joined together, no person is to separate."***

Next, Paul wrote to the situation of a believer who is married to someone who is not a believer.

A Word To Those In Unequally-Yoked Marriages (7:12-16)

If the Unbeliever Allows it, the Believer Should Stay in the Marriage (vv. 12-13)

[12] But to the rest I say, not the Lord,¹⁰ that if any brother has an unbelieving wife, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. [13] And if any woman has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not divorce her husband.

Note: When Paul says here that **he** is speaking, **not Jesus**, he is saying that Jesus never addressed the situation of a believer being married to a non-believer. So, he can't quote Jesus, as he did in vv. 10-11, but he can give his own, apostolically-inspired, perspective.

It was not unusual in Corinth - and it is not unusual in San Antonio - that a believer in Jesus will find himself or herself married to someone who doesn't believe in Jesus.

Maybe in Corinth, a husband became a Christian after listening to Paul preach and the wife didn't. Or, today, a wife had a Gospel conversation with a church member, believed, and her husband didn't.

The believer may wonder, "*Does my faith require me to leave my beloved unbelieving spouse?*"

⁹ I believe that verse 11 should be understood as referring to the illegitimately divorced.

¹⁰ Paul didn't claim that he was quoting Jesus here. He told the Corinthians that he was speaking his own mind, the mind of an apostle under inspiration of God.

Paul says, “No.”

Evidently, though, some people were advising the believer to divorce. Paul pushed back and told them that if the unbelieving spouse agrees to stay married, the believer should by all means stay in the marriage.

Again, as a rule, no divorce, and for good reasons.

The Believer Brings Benefit to Their Unbelieving Family Members (v. 14)

[14] For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband;¹¹ for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.

Paul is not saying that the unbelieving spouse is now considered a Christian because of the faith of their husband or wife.

He is just saying that being married to a Christian can open a door and a heart so that the unbelieving spouse come to faith in Jesus.

The Christian spouse can be a channel of God’s grace and blessing to their partner.¹²

In addition, staying in the marriage will bring blessing to children. Children who live with a believing parent get the chance to learn God’s Word, to see Christian faith at work, and to make decisions for Jesus they wouldn’t if they weren’t living with a Christian parent.

So, the Christian should not divorce the non-believing spouse if the unbeliever is willing to remain married.

¹¹ See 1 Peter 3:1-2.

¹² Paul was not concerned that a believer would lose faith by staying married to the unbeliever. He was more hopeful that by staying in the marriage the believer would bring blessing to the unbelieving spouse.

But, as Paul knew and as we know, things don’t always work out that way.

Believers Are Not Under Bondage If the Unbeliever Leaves (v. 15a)

[15] Yet if the unbelieving one is leaving, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases...

The tension in a marriage where one partner believes and follows Jesus may prove intolerable to the non-believing spouse.

And if that unbeliever chooses to divorce his or her spouse, the Christian partner “***is not under bondage.***” They should let the beloved unbeliever leave.^{13,14}

The final phrase of the verse sheds more light on the rationale for not pushing at all costs to keep the marriage intact.

There Are No Guarantees...(vv. 15b-16)

[15]...but God has called us in peace. [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?

As much as the Christian wants their unbelieving mate to be saved, no one knows whether that spouse will believe in Jesus.

Certainly, many, many husbands and wives have been won to Christ through the faithful witness of their spouse.

¹³ Since it is the desertion, not the “*unequally-yoked marriage*” that makes divorce permissible here, I understand that Paul’s words about not being “*under bondage*” apply to the case of marital desertion by a believer from a believer.

¹⁴ At the end of this chapter, Paul wrote about the widow: ***[39] A wife is bound*** (emphasis mine) ***as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.***” The widow’s being “*bound*” and then “*free to be married*” leads me to say that, here in v. 15, the believing spouse who is deserted by their spouse (believer or not) is also free to remarry.

But the lack of peace in a marriage that often comes as a result of the conversion of one spouse can be a barrier to faith for the other.

Paul's point here is that the biggest game in town in this case is not keeping the marriage intact. It's keeping the peace, because that peace just might lead to a better hearing of the good news about Jesus.

Review...

Now, about what I have said concerning the themes of divorce and remarriage, there is not too much debate. But the Bible does have more to say about this than what we read here in this passage.

For that reason, I've put together some notes about the general theme of divorce and remarriage from other biblical passages. You can find them at the end of the written manuscript in the lobby or on the church website.

But we now turn to the theme of singleness.

And if it seems "funny" to you that I, a married man for the last 45+ years, should be talking about singleness, don't laugh too hard.

After all, Paul and Jesus were single and gave inspired advice about marriage. As well, everything that I'm saying today is straight from the Bible.

In what follows (17-40), the broad topic of which is the single life, Paul begins by speaking about a character trait that is increasingly present as any Christian matures. That trait: Contentment.

In this chapter, Paul repeatedly urges us to contentment.

A Word About Contentment (7:17-40)

The Beauty and the Power of Contentment (7:17, 20, 24, 26, 40)

[17] Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this way let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches.¹⁵

[20] Each person is to remain in that state in which he was called.

[24] Brothers and sisters, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.

[26b]...it is good for a man to remain as he is.¹⁶

Anything we read in the Bible once is true. Something that the Bible repeats is, obviously, really important. Something stated, then restated, then restated, and restated again is crucial.

Paul is writing to assure us that no matter what our station in life might be, we can be content, knowing that we can serve Jesus there.

All conditions - whether of family life or social standing or service or employment - can be platforms for living for Jesus.

Becoming a Christian changes everything, internally: your relationship to God, your eternal destiny, your essential nature.

But the simple fact of becoming a Christian need not require someone to change jobs or house or even marital status.

Paul says, glorify God by using the opportunities you have to shine for Jesus in your present situation, right where you are.

Sure, you can change your situation if you want to. But don't feel compelled to because you think that you can't be effective for Jesus right where you are - because you can.

For instance...

Contentment - Applied to Certain Life Situations (7:18-24)

¹⁵ What he says here, he says to all churches, without discrimination. This is the advice and direction he gives wherever he goes. Corinth, Thessalonica, Berea, Philippi - and San Antonio.

¹⁶ Paraphrased, all of these could be read, "Don't be in a such a hurry to change the circumstances of your life simply because you have become a Christian."

Circumcision or Uncircumcision is Nothing (vv. 18-19)

[18] Was any man called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised. [19] Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing,¹⁷ but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God.¹⁸

The first-century Corinthians were not to concern themselves with circumcision or with similar things.

Those things didn't matter, just like external marks of religiosity don't matter today.

What matters? Obeying God's commandments.

Slave or Free Doesn't Matter (7:21-23)¹⁹

[21] Were you called as a slave? Don't let it concern you. But if you are also able to become free, take advantage of that. [22] For the one he who was called in the Lord as a slave, is the Lord's freed person; likewise the one who was called as free, is Christ's slave. [23] You were bought for a price; do not become slaves of people.²⁰

¹⁷ To show how strongly Paul himself believed this, he felt free to circumcise Timothy, a half-Jew, to keep from offending his contemporaries in his outreach to the Jewish community. But, when Judaizers insisted on imposing their agenda as a prerequisite for salvation, Paul stood firmly against them (Acts 15:1; Gal. 2:11-14) and did not circumcise Titus, a Gentile.

¹⁸ In the early church, Jewish zealots (Christians referred to as Judaizers) often forced Gentile converts to be circumcised (Acts 15:1). At the same time, many Jews who sought acceptance in the Greco-Roman world underwent a minor surgical procedure to make themselves appear to be uncircumcised.

¹⁹ Why did Paul not come out forthrightly against slavery? Because he, like Jesus, was concerned primarily with fashioning a countercultural community of disciples who did not directly challenge the state but modeled better lifestyles for a watching world. Paul and Jesus did sow the seeds for a revolutionary alternative which in time threatened social institutions of oppression such as slavery.

²⁰ Slavery in ancient Rome did not always resemble the institution we know from US history. Certainly, there were cruel slave-holders in the ancient world, but at times some slaves lived more like the indentured servants of wealthy families in medieval Europe. Sometimes, slaves were captured victims of the wars of Rome

As Paul saw things, neither freedom nor slavery brought inherently better opportunities to serve Jesus.

And he had a beautiful way to express this:

- If you are a slave on earth - remember that you are free in Jesus.
- If you are free on earth - remember that you are a slave of Christ.

And he says, *"By the way, there is nothing wrong with pursuing freedom. if you have the chance and you want to be free, do that."* (v. 21)

But if you don't want to, that is fine, too. Again, you're free to choose.

The thing is to be confident that you can serve Jesus, slave or free, and you can find contentment, slave or free.

That's contentment applied to external signs of religion and to slavery or freedom.

Paul now applies the idea of contentment to the theme he has been addressing from the beginning: Marital status.

Earlier, he mentioned singleness in passing. Here, he tackled it head-on because evidently, the Corinthians had asked about the advisability of remaining single vs. getting married.

So, with the twin goals of contentment and serving Jesus at the forefront of our minds, we listen as Paul now gives his unmarried readership reasons to seriously consider the single life.

A Word About the Question: To Marry Or Not...? (vv. 25-40)

Consider Singleness... (vv. 25-35)

...in light of coming trouble (vv. 25-28)

and continued their jobs as government officials, teachers, traders, or artists - but they were owned as slaves. Many slaves of the ancient world were able to buy their own freedom. And, among those who could, some chose not to, preferring instead the security of their owners to the insecurities of freedom.

[25] Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord,²¹ but I am offering direction as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy.²² [26] I think, then, that this is good in view of the present distress, that it is good for a man to remain as he is. [27] Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. [28] But if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Yet such people will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you.²³

As far as we know from historical sources, severe persecution wasn't hitting Corinth at the time Paul wrote this letter.

But he mentioned ***"the present distress."*** So, maybe things were really tough, or he may have seen hard times coming.²⁴

Here is Paul's thinking. In times of extreme stress and distress, or in those times when it seems likely that stress and distress are just around the corner, remain as you are.

- If you are married, don't use the prospect of hard times to tempt you to be separated from your husband or wife.
- If you are single, realize that hard times can be harder still if you get married.²⁵

²¹ Except for the time Jesus spoke of those ***[Matthew 19:12] who make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God,*** Jesus never addressed the option of remaining single.

²² Just as earlier (vv. 8 and 12), where Paul had made a point of identifying what Jesus had to say and what he, as an apostle has to say, so here he makes that distinction again.

²³ The recognition that opposite courses may each be right for different people is more fully drawn out in Romans 14:1-12, also see Rom 12:6; 1 Peter 4:10. We'll also see this principle clearly in 1 Corinthians 8-10.

²⁴ The words of v. 26 can be translated ***"impending distress."***

²⁵ ***"A man who is a hero in himself becomes a coward when he thinks of his widowed wife and his orphaned children."*** From ***Tortured for his Faith***, by Haralan Popov. Popov suffered prison and torture from Soviet Communists for his faith.

His comment regarding the benefits of the single life here is that people who marry will have ***"trouble."*** (So, how can I say anything here and not get in trouble...)

What Paul says is true. While singleness brings certain, unique challenges, marriage also brings troubles that singleness does not.

There are financial, social, relational, and sexual stresses that come with living in close proximity with a member of the opposite sex. In marriage, two will struggle for expression in a marriage.

Paul would agree that there are wonderful benefits to being married. But in his eyes, the troubles marriage brings offer a reason to consider not marrying.

He gives a second reason to consider the single life.

...in light of life's brevity (vv. 29-31)

[29] But this I say, brothers, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none; [30] and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess; [31] and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the present form of this world is passing away.

Comments like ***"the time has been shortened"*** and ***"the present form of this world is passing away"*** highlight that with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, everything happening all around us is epilogue, a "mopping up" campaign.

We who belong to Jesus are to be careful that we not get so caught up in the doings of the world - commerce, mourning, rejoicing - that we don't keep the main thing the main thing, the main thing being Jesus.

Paul even wrote that ***"those who have wives should be as though they had none."*** And we wonder, ***"What in the world does he mean by THAT?"***

Well, since he has already urged that marriages are to be strong and healthy, he clearly doesn't mean that married men and women should leave each other so that they can devote themselves to Jesus.

But he would have married folks understand that the married arrangement, while perfectly appropriate for this age, won't be the arrangement for the age to come where there will be no marriage.²⁶

Marriage is precious, now. Domestic, married life is central to the lives of those who are married, now. Love between a husband and a wife is unique and beautiful and powerful, now.

But we are to remember that things will be different, then and there. So, hold your husband or your wife tightly...and hold the idea of marriage loosely.

Paul gives a third reason to consider the single life.

...to secure undistracted devotion to Jesus (vv. 32-35)

[32] But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord;

[33] but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, [34] and his interests are divided. The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. [35] I say this for your own benefit; not to put a restraint on you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.²⁷

²⁶ See Matthew 22:30, where Jesus made this statement in an interaction with the Sadducees.

²⁷ Given his personal preference for the single life, it would have been easy for Paul to cave to the pro-celibacy faction and insist that all people become as he was. Given his "pro-marriage" upbringing in Judaism, it might have been equally tempting for him to issue a wholesale condemnation of the proponents of celibacy

Paul is right to say that a lot of a husband's life and of a wife's life revolves around pleasing each other, watching out for each other, providing for each other.

And a big part of God's stewardship for the one who is married is the welfare of their family. It is good and right and godly for a married person to be all about those things.

The unmarried don't have a husband or a wife to please and that freedom can free them up to be concerned about the things of the Lord.²⁸ He or she can give themselves to ***"to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord."***

That is the goal.

Paul's overriding message here to everyone - married or unmarried, male or female, boss or employee - is to pursue undistracted attention to Jesus on whatever condition you're in.

Then, we come to a situation involving a couple engaged to be married.

The Issue of Engagement Leading to Marriage (7:36-38)

[36] But if any man thinks that he is acting dishonorably toward his virgin, if she is past her youth, and it ought to be so, let him do what he wishes, he is not sinning; let them marry. [37] But the one who stands firm in his heart, if he is not under constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin, he will do well. [38] So then, both the

as legalistic. He did neither. Instead, he charted a centrist course, recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of both sides.

²⁸ See 2 Corinthians 5:9; Ephesians 5:10; Colossians 1:10, 3:20; 1 Thessalonians 2:4, 4:1.

one who gives his own virgin in marriage does well, and the one who does not give her in marriage will do better.

Just as an aside, you should know that there is more than one way to understand what Paul is saying here.²⁹

Some believe that Paul was giving instruction to a father who had the authority to allow or to not allow his daughter to marry.³⁰

But I think it is more likely that he was giving instruction to a man who was engaged to a woman but was stalling on setting the date for the wedding because he was unsure whether marrying was godly.

Paul tells that engaged guy that he hasn't sinned if he goes ahead and marries his fiancée.

Neither singleness nor marriage is morally superior. Paul thinks that you can make the argument that it would be better to stay single but admits that it would be a fine thing if they decided to go ahead and get married. They were free to choose.

Sin was not at issue in this decision. It is up to each one to determine which state (married or single) results in the best service to Christ.

Then, at the end of the chapter, Paul speaks to the situation of the widow (and to the widower), as the Corinthians must have asked about them, too. Should they remarry?

The Issue of Widowhood / Widowerhood (7:39-40)

²⁹ A third way to take Paul's thoughts here is to say that he was giving instruction to a couple involved with each other in a "spiritual marriage" (a marriage with no sexual component; something that became an issue in the 2nd century, after 1 Corinthians was written) and were considering making it a regular marriage. (So, Leon Morris and others.)

³⁰ If this is the correct translation, then Paul's words have to do with a father who is treating his daughter dishonorably - specifically, in that he is not providing for her marriage. In this understanding, Paul says that the father is free to do what his conscience dictates. But he should feel free to allow his daughter to marry, as this would not be a bad thing.

[39] A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. [40] But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God.

Paul says that widows have perfect freedom to remarry (but only another Christian) BUT, he affirms here what he has consistently said throughout this chapter.

There is no condemnation of marriage. A husband or a wife can secure undistracted devotion to the Lord. Singleness is not morally superior to marriage.

But he plays the "happiness" card here and suggests that the widow will be happier if she remains unmarried.

To which some widows and widowers through the ages have said, "Amen" and others have said, "Thanks for the advice. But I think I'll get remarried."

There is no problem with this at all.³¹ They are free to choose.

Conclusion:

We embrace the gift God has given us to make consequential choices about how we live. We are grateful to God for giving us the dignity of choice.

He could have arranged life otherwise, but He chose to make us free-will agents. And with respect to the issues of employment, buying and selling, and marital status, and more, we are free to choose. Thank You, Lord!

³¹ Paul wrote, ***[1 Timothy 5:14] Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, have children, manage their households, and give the enemy no opportunity for reproach.***

We embrace the pursuit of contentment in the station in life in which we find ourselves.

We may have to struggle to find contentment. But we accept that our status in life, our life's limitations, and our life's challenges are all the contexts in which we can grow in Jesus.

We can serve Jesus - right where we are. No darkness, no matter how dark, can keep us from shining for Jesus.

We embrace the challenge in any and all situations and by each and every freewill choice we make to secure undistracted devotion to Jesus.

May God give us grace to do exactly this.

APPENDIX: Divorce and remarriage

***From Dave Smith - The following presents some of my thoughts about some of the issues related to divorce and remarriage. This is not a “position paper” of the church.

While all that Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 7 is true, that passage does not contain all the truth that the Bible offers about marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

What follows is not an exhaustive look at the Bible’s teachings about these themes, but I do attempt to give a broader view than we get from what we read in 1 Corinthians 7.

We’ll start by noticing that there was provision for divorce in the Old Testament.

The Whole Bible On Divorce and Remarriage

From the Old Testament

Divorce and remarriage were allowed under some circumstances

One of the best known passages along these lines is Deuteronomy 24:1-4. This text prohibits the remarriage of a wife to her original husband if she subsequently married another man and was divorced by him, too.

While some versions translate this passage in such a way that divorce is commanded, the best rendering (as found in the New American Standard Bible and others) makes it clear that this passage does not command divorce.

It does allow divorce, though, for an undefined “indecency.” We know that the “indecency” was not adultery because the result of adultery was not divorce, but under the Mosaic Law, death by stoning. The “indecency” was understood to be some major violation of the marriage covenant.

For our purposes, we note that the Law was not attempting to define conditions under which a person might divorce, but simply that there

were conditions where divorce was allowed. (See Deut. 22:13-19, 28-29)

Divorce is sometimes commanded by God

There were cases, though, in the Old Testament where divorce was not only permitted but was actually commanded by God.

We find an illustration of this in the book of Ezra, chapter 10. In Ezra’s time, many of the Jews in the land of Palestine had divorced their Jewish wives so that they could marry pagan women.

There were many problems associated with this behavior, not the least of which was the hatred shown to their original wives and the violation of God’s law against mixed marriages.

Ezra, described as an expert in the Mosaic Law (Ezra 7:10), told the men who had divorced their Jewish wives so that they could marry pagan women to divorce their pagan wives so that they could remarry their first wives.³²

As tragic and painful as these divorces were, Ezra’s solution to the present problem was divorce. (cf. Exodus 21:10-11; Deuteronomy 12:10-14; Genesis 21:8-14)

Divorce is sometimes condemned by God

And then, of course, there are those instances where God’s hatred of divorce is stated clearly. The best example of this is found in Malachi 2, where the prophet Malachi records God’s words, “***I hate divorce.***”

We should not miss the fact, though, that at the exact historical moment Malachi was quoting God as hating divorce, Ezra was commanding the Jewish men to divorce their pagan wives. In some places the language of divorce is used to describe God’s actions with respect to His relationships to the people of Israel.

³² Israel was facing a crisis. Intermarriage would eventually destroy her distinctiveness and hence the Jewish people as the people of God. Severe measures were necessary and justified.

God sometimes involves Himself in “divorce”

At several places (Isaiah 50:1; Hosea 2:2; Jeremiah 3:1-8, for instance) God pictures Himself as a Husband to Israel. And when He does so, He generally highlights what a faithless wife Israel was to Him.

In Isaiah 50, God pictures Himself contemplating divorcing His people. However, in Jeremiah 3 He actually describes Himself as going through with the divorce. He repudiated the covenant He had made with her because of her incessant violations of that covenant with Him. (Note: This was a break of the Mosaic Covenant, not the Abrahamic Covenant.)

Why bring up God’s actions as the initiator in divorce against His people?

Because while it is true that God hates divorce, it also seems to be the case that there is something He hates even more than divorce, namely the brazen mocking of the marriage covenant by one of the partners. It was this contempt for the covenant which led Him to take the very action He hated against His own people.

So, the Old Testament permitted divorce for a variety of fundamental violations of the marriage covenant. Then, too, the New Testament addresses divorce and remarriage outside of 1 Corinthians 7:10-16.

From the Words of Jesus

Jesus spoke to the issue of divorce in a couple of places, most notably at Matthew 5:31-32 and Matthew 19:1-12. (also in Mark 10:2-12)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said,
[Matthew 5:31] “Now it was said, ‘WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY IS TO GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE’; [32] but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of sexual

immorality,³³ makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

Here, Jesus was referring to the passage we saw earlier, Deut. 24. He was railing against the easygoing practice of divorce *“for any and every reason,”* (the teaching of the rabbinical school of Hillel) which was very popular in first century Israel.

Jesus’ point was that this attitude is the moral equivalent of adultery. Even marrying an innocent divorced woman is (like) adultery in that it involves a man taking as a wife a woman who - had hardness of heart not produced the violation of the original marriage covenant - should have remained with another man.³⁴

Most all commentators are agreed, though, that in Matthew 5 and 19, Jesus gives to the rule *“no divorce”* an exception. That exception is in the case of sexual immorality (or more literally, *“uncleanness”* a virtual equivalent to the “indecency” of Deuteronomy 24).

Far from invalidating all that the Old Testament taught about divorce, Jesus said that He came to establish the Law.

He did so in this case by pointing to the original design for marriage in Genesis 2 as a corrective to His opponents’ unbalanced understanding of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which was that a man could divorce a woman for any cause.

(Jesus made the same point in Matthew 19:3-12 and in Mark 10:2-12 except that in Mark, the “exception clause” is not included.)

A Summary of the Bible’s Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage

³³ Jesus clearly permitted divorce in the case of *porneia* (a word for general sexual immorality - Matthew 5:32; 19:9), though he never commanded divorce. The specific type of immorality in view in *porneia* would include adultery but is broad enough to cover other types of sexual sin.

³⁴ It is possible to take Jesus’ words in Matthew 5 as hyperbole expressing how serious divorce is, just as His words about gouging out an eye or cutting off a hand are hyperbole for expressing how serious avoidance of lust is.

Among Bible students who take Scripture seriously, there are several positions about the permissibility of divorce and remarriage.

I believe that the New Testament permits (but does not require) divorce for adultery and desertion. I also believe that Paul's phrase "***in such cases***" (1 Corinthians 7:15) opens the door for permissible divorce for other extreme violations of the marriage covenant.

As we see in the book of Ezra, God hates some things more than divorce (remember Ezra), and so commanded divorce to rectify the damage done by previous divorces.

God hates it when the foundations of marriage are repeatedly mocked and held in contempt by one spouse over the other, as in:

- when one spouse flagrantly and repeatedly commits adultery or commits other sexual sin or when one spouse decides as a policy to deprive their partner sexually.
- by abandonment.
- by malicious cruelty, perpetrated either psychologically or physically.

Because I understand marriage as covenant, I believe that when the covenant is violated divorce is permitted. Not required, but permitted.

What has preceded is some of how I take what the Bible says about divorce and remarriage. What follows is more personal.

to the divorced...

Hear this one word: GRACE.

We are all recovering from self-inflicted or others-inflicted wounds. Healing is possible in Jesus' church. You can grow through your divorce just as anyone, by God's grace, can grow through any hard thing.

Forgiveness is possible if that is your need. Healing is available if that is where you are. Reconciliation can be explored if that is a possibility.

Don't hesitate to contact me or any Elder if you are in need of counsel or other assistance due to issues arising from a divorce.

to the married...

Over the years, we have seen marriages end in divorce. These are always heart-breaking events. But we have also seen couples agree to work through problems. In many cases, God has worked powerfully to produce amazing turn-arounds.

Scripture says that God is able to make all things new and that includes His ability to re-make a badly broken marriage.

If you are considering throwing in your marriage towel, make certain that you have exhausted all the possibilities for working things out.

One of those possibilities would be to seek support and counsel from Christians who can point you and your spouse to wholeness in Jesus.

Divorce's effects are so far-reaching and long-term that it should never be pursued except as a last option. Rather than focus on the potential for divorce, why don't you, as a husband or a wife, commit to building a healthier marriage now.

to the unmarried...

Many who are unmarried right now will one day be married. My one word to you: THINK.

You will marry the person you date. Consider carefully whom you date. A successful marriage demands shared commitments, a shared worldview, shared values, shared life in Christ.

If you are single, think about whom you date because you'll end up marrying someone you date. Have your wits about you as you entertain thoughts of marriage. A lifetime is a long time.