

Lecture 14 - Advice on Marriage and the Weaker Brother

1 Corinthians 7:1 – 8:13

If Paul were to write a letter to us, the evangelical Bible believing churches of America today, it would probably sound a lot like 1 Corinthians. Their world was much like ours – the same fascination for the spectacular, the same thirst for something new, the same permissiveness towards moral standards.

And their church was like our churches – proud, affluent, materialistic, and fiercely eager for social acceptance by the world – primarily orthodox in doctrine, but morally and practically conforming to the world around us so much that it often looks like more of a social club than a worship center. I remember back in the days when potential employers were allowed to ask about your religious affiliation; I was advised to “always put down a church because it looks good on your application.” Of course, whether you believed or attended was of little consequence – anything for the appearance of morality and honesty that the world wants to expect from a Christian.

In chapters 1-6, Paul rebuked the church by starting out saying, “Now I appeal to you, brothers . . .” because there were:

- 1) divisions existing which he exposed, and
- 2) disorder ranging from toleration of blatant sinful relationships, to frivolous lawsuits, to sexually immoral behavior.

In chapter 7, however, there is a shift. Paul begins by saying, "Now for the matters you wrote about." It's clear that he's answering a letter written to him by the Corinthian church. They had questions about a number of difficulties. There were:

domestic issues of marriage and divorce (7)

social issues of liberty and license (8-10)

practical issues regarding spiritual gifts (12-14)

doctrinal issues about death and resurrection (15)

and financial issues of giving and receiving (16)

Since we don't have a record of the Corinthian's letter to Paul, it's sort of like listening to one side of a telephone conversation. We must just infer from the answers what those questions might have been.

The blessings of marriage's fullness and richness and the comparison of marriage to the relationship of Christ and His church that Paul touches on in Ephesians and Colossians is not addressed here simply because the Corinthians apparently had not asked for his advice about the institution of marriage, but were concerned with some specific issues involving marriage. No doubt, the Corinthian questions probably reflected some controversy within the church.

Those with a Jewish background considered marriage an absolute duty. The Greeks regarded the marriage state as morally inferior to the celibate life. Others seemed to have held that when

one becomes a Christian, all existing social relationships, including marriage, cease to be binding.

One other thing, we need to remember that Paul was aware of certain unusual conditions that were local and perhaps even temporary, because he speaks of the prevailing sexual pressure of life in Corinth and a current emergency designated as “the present crisis.” So we might assume some of his advice could have been colored by those considerations. Certainly if persecution and possible death were imminent, you might want to spare a spouse that pain.

Whenever you discuss marriage and/or divorce, it’s very easy to be distracted discussing specific cases of “what if” situations. So for now, let’s keep the “big picture” in focus.

We know that God approves of marriage. It’s His institution so man would not be alone and that the earth might be populated. Marriage carries with it both privileges and duties. One man said, “Marriage is like twirling a baton, turning handsprings, or eating with chopsticks. It looks easy until you try it.” It’s a relationship that is ever changing and growing and full of challenge.

Regardless of how marriage relationships evolve, however, there is one thing certain – it was meant to be monogamous and permanent. When the marriage is consummated, there is no longer two, but one flesh. Scripture is specific. Any sexual involvement outside a lawful marriage contract is sin. You can call it an “affair” or

a “one night stand,” but its adultery and fornication. Pretty words might take the sting out of our ears, but to God it is sin. We need to learn to call it what it is. Satan’s great strategy, when it comes to sex, is to do everything he can to encourage sex outside of marriage, and to discourage sex within marriage. It is an equal victory for Satan if he accomplishes either plan!

God created us to be sexual human beings with passion. It’s that passion Paul addresses when he says “it is better to marry than to burn with passion” and then be tempted to commit sin. The “big picture” behind all of this is purity and holiness in a Christian’s life whether single or married.

As much as marriage is entered into with plans for a lifelong commitment, sometimes Satan invades the Garden and drives the relationship into the dust. Some mask the pain of their separateness by retaining a form of marriage, living lives of “quiet desperation” as they plod through their days. Others become angry, pounding out their differences through psychological or physical abuse. Separation offers escape – a respite from the hurt of a marriage gone bad. At last, divorce seems the only solution because these heartaches will not go away on their own.

When Paul uses the word “unmarried” in verse 8, he’s actually referring to those who have been divorced and are not yet remarried. He also mentions widows.

Ideally, stay single – not to inflict a life of loneliness, but to spare them from the cares and worries involved in a marriage relationship. He'd like them to give their undivided attention to serving God. But he's realistic. Paul realizes that not all have the gift of celibacy, not all are able to control their sexual passion . . . so let them remarry.

What about the unhappily married? (And I don't mean the gripping, coping out, and "things are too tough" syndrome.) Christian couples should not give in to the destruction of divorce. It would be wonderful if that word were not even in the vocabulary between you and your mate. God does heal, God restores, and God enables forgiveness. Couples should do everything in their power to nurture and build their marriages.

Unfortunately, this ideal cannot always be upheld in a sin-laden world. Hardness of heart can set into a relationship where there is no willingness to walk softly before God, and instead a stubborn willfulness that refuses to listen to God takes hold and the result is divorce. When that occurs between believers, they should either stay single or start fresh with each other – not with anyone else. Of course, Christians may marry people other than their former mates when the cause of divorce was sexual immorality (with the clear instruction that believers are free to remarry only other believers).

Having knowledge of this instruction from the Word of God causes many to think, but what about . . .? That is where your

relationship with God becomes truly intimate. God knows every detail that may lead to a decision about divorce and the condition of the heart of each party. If sin of any sort is involved, He waits for confession, repentance and offers forgiveness.

Isaiah 55:6-7 “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.”

What about marriages in which only one mate is a believer? This usually refers to the case where one becomes saved after the marriage. (There is also the reality that believers and non-believers today marry – disregarding God’s warning about being unequally yoked. The believer should know going in that darkness and light have nothing in common.)

Paul’s counsel here is that the believer is to stay as long as the unbeliever is willing to live with them. Should they leave (and the saved partner hasn’t intimidated or promoted the split), then remarriage is permissible; again, only to a believer.

Many times we have trouble with the statement in verse 14 that “the unbelieving spouse has been sanctified through the believer.” Sanctification means “set apart.” As a child of God, you are His vantage point to reach your spouse, and it is not God’s will that any should perish. The children too, being brought up with a spiritual

impact on their lives, will be able to discern right from wrong and will be acquainted with God's grace. By remaining committed to that union and to godliness, Christian mates can greatly influence their unbelieving partners to turn their lives over to Christ.

I don't want anyone to misunderstand, however, and think that this means a family can piggyback into heaven on your salvation. It is still mandatory that every individual make a personal commitment to Jesus Christ for himself.

There is a principle involved here . . . every person should remain where he is when called to follow Jesus Christ. If you are married, don't seek to leave that relationship. If you are single, it doesn't require that you be married to be accepted into church fellowship. It's the "bloom where you're planted" principle.

We may "bloom" where we're planted, but sometimes the grass looks greener on the other side of the fence. Husbands and wives up to their elbows in garage grease, dirty dishes and Tinker Toys say, "If only I had more time to myself then I could accomplish my goals . . . I'd feel more worthwhile." Just down the street, a single person, settled into a career, home every day at 5:30 sits down to a Lean Cuisine and the news and wishes he had someone to eat dinner with and someone else's voice besides the local newscaster to listen to.

Too often we look at our lives and see only the weeds. But Paul advises those on both sides of the fence, especially singles, to graze where they are contentedly.

Let's spend a little more time on Paul's thoughts on singleness. Not everyone is suited to a marriage relationship. Paul says he is unmarried and it has certain advantages. There are three views about Paul's state of being unmarried: 1) either he was never married, 2) a widower, or 3) possibly he had a wife who left him when he was converted since he said in Philippians 3:8 "for the sake of Christ Jesus I have lost all things."

The choice of a single life needs God's gift of handling celibacy first of all. Moral purity for every Christian is God's standard.

In times of crisis, the single are more flexible; you can adapt more quickly to certain, sudden catastrophic actions or events; you can pick up and move if necessary; there is less concern for the handling of the affairs of others for whom you may be responsible.

We can easily imagine, how in a time of persecution or great crisis, how much more of a burden a wife or a family can be for someone committed to standing strong for the Lord. A man might say, "Torture me, and I will never renounce Jesus"; but what if a man were threatened with the rape of his wife, or the torture of his children? This type of crisis might seem far away to us, but it wasn't to the Christians in the first century.

There was a time a generation or two ago when being single was considered as being a “second class” citizen in church membership. Today, however, singles ministries are a vital part of almost every congregation in today’s church. Past church history has taught that to be single was a superior state of spiritual progress since you didn’t have to deal with the more mundane matters such as in-laws, children, schooling, flimsy things hanging in the bathroom or razor stubble in the sink.

One cartoon was cute. One man is telling another, “I’m still single thanks to Marriage Anonymous. – What’s that? – Well, whenever I get the urge to get married, I call this number and they send an old woman over in cold cream and curlers and she nags me until the feeling disappears.”

There are many examples of people who have chosen the single life so they might devote themselves to God. Author John R. W. Stott was one. He’s written numerous volumes of Bible exposition and spent several hours a day in Bible Study and prayer and worship of the Lord. Something married people seldom have the time to do.

Henrietta Mears is another. There are hundreds of men in the ministry today because as a long-time staff member at the Hollywood Presbyterian Church she captured their imaginations and taught them Scriptures. She chose never to be married so that she might have the

time to give to the study and teaching of God's Word with such remarkable power and effectiveness.

Of course, there's Paul. He was free to travel and down the whole length and breadth of the Roman Empire. Out of that dedication and spirit of a devoted heart he lived in complete moral purity, and by the grace and power of God gave us these remarkable letters that have changed men's lives and the history of the world.

So, if you're single: Rejoice! And thank God. If He wants your circumstances changed, He will bring it about. Channel your energies to fulfilling God's desires for you and relax, He's always looking out for your best interests.

Well, let's close out chapter 7 with the instructions about virgins (the never-married).

Some commentators feel Paul is referring to a father's virgin daughter (remember in those days there were arranged marriages). Others feel, and the NIV seems to indicate that this is talking about an engaged couple. Because of the quote "present crisis," Paul's advice is to stay single. But if they feel marriage is best, go ahead. The father is not sinning by giving her in marriage, nor is there sin in following through in a commitment between couples. Again, the perspective is to live a life of moral purity.

Because the whole subject of marriage/divorce/remarriage is so much a part of our culture today, it's sometimes hard to hear the truth

of God's Word. Divorce has probably touched every family here today in some way – I know it has mine. Two of my three children have suffered through divorce. As I said in the beginning, we're not here to examine the "what if's" of life, but to know what God's intention is for men and women. Marriage, a home, children all centered in God's love was the plan from Genesis. There are many books available from Christian resources that thoroughly examine all that the Scriptures have to say on the subject and certainly your pastors are well qualified to give you Biblical advice on the subject. Suffice it to say that the Bible is our guide, not Hollywood, not our permissive society – but the Word of God.

It was interesting to read of Henry Ford's sage advice when asked on his 50th wedding anniversary for his rule for marital bliss and longevity. He replied, "Just the same as in the automobile business, stick to one model."

Chapter 8 begins "Now about food sacrificed to idols." The subject has changed, but the direct response Paul gives doesn't. In case you hadn't noticed, the Bible is really up to date. It speaks directly to the subtle temptations and complex moral problems of our twenty first century; giving us much needed direction in those difficult "gray areas" of life.

We might not be faced with the meat offered to idols problem today, but the principle of thinking about others when it comes to

choice of amusements, pleasures, questionable business ventures, how to spend the Lord's day, cards, alcohol, . . . you name it . . . it still applies.

When you become a Christian, you have a certain level of knowledge about the truth – you are a sinner, you are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, you are forgiven and that means all sins can be forgiven except the sin of denying Jesus Christ is the Son of God. But knowledge can be a dangerous thing if it is not tempered with love. It can lead to legalism and sound a death knell to grace. In fact, Paul writes in verse 2, “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up (or edifies).” Both **knowledge** and **love** have an effect on our lives; both of them make something *grow*. The difference between **puffs up** and **edifies** is striking; it is the difference between a *bubble* and a *building*. Some Christians grow, others just swell!

The Corinthian's problem was that often the temples were the social halls of the area. Banquets were held there, meat markets existed. So, should a Christian eat meat there; or, if invited to the home of a friend, should he eat if there was a probability that the meat had been offered to idols? We tend to use the words “weak” and “strong” in a divisive sense today. But Paul used the term weak to refer to a Christian's conscience, not in reference to their faith. I think it's important to understand that. There is no arrogant superiority in these passages. If idols are nothing, then they cannot hurt the meat.

But let's bring this a little closer to home. What if the bread you bought at the bakery had been offered to the owner's idol displayed in his shop before you purchased it and you were going to make toast for breakfast or sandwiches for lunch? Would it bother you? The principle of knowledge says, "Go ahead and eat." But how will others feel about that or any other freedom you have? That's where the principle of love comes in.

It may remind some of their former practices, and in revulsion they say, "I just can't do this."

So, out of love and concern for another, you are free to practice your Christian liberty by NOT eating the meat – and, of course, that goes for any other practice we might substitute for food. We should never entice another to go against his conscience. It's a sin not only against him, but also against Christ Himself. We need to think . . . in this example, Christ died for him and I won't even give up a meal for him? It isn't just giving something up to avoid hurt feelings or displeasure, but to recognize that the exercise of Christian liberty in self-denial is to be truly concerned for a brother. There is no way that we'd want to lead them back into any sin that might enslave them.

It really comes down to this in a nutshell – the extent of our love is determined by the attitude with which we restrain our liberty. Again, the extent of our love is determined by the attitude with which we

restrain our liberty. The Savior and His saints are one. Any blow that strikes one of them touches Him.

Remember Romans 14:13-15? “Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not destroy your brother for whom Christ died.”

It’s been said before, there is an obligation on the part of the weaker brother to grow up as he grows in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, but that doesn’t mean that you’re not mature until you agree with me. It means that as we grow up in Christ, the Holy Spirit directs our conscience to take a stand without condemning another brother for what to him is his freedom in Christ. We express God’s grace as we’re patient and look on each other with the mind of Christ. To desire the good of our brother is to demonstrate both our love for him and our appreciation for Christ, who died for both of us. Love controlled liberty truly honors our Lord.

So, if we were to put a little synopsis on these two chapters, we might remember the questions asked:

1. Are couples to continue normal sexual relations after conversion? **Yes, they owe it to one another to do so.**
2. Should the unmarried marry? **Paul commends celibacy – but only for those with that gift.**
3. Is divorce permitted to a Christian couple? **No, unless there is a biblical ground of adultery.**
4. Is divorce an unforgivable sin? **No, all confessed sin can be forgiven.**
5. When one partner gets converted, should old relationships continue with the pagan spouse? **Yes. The Christian is not to leave the unbelieving spouse unless the latter desires a separation.**
6. Should Christian fathers give daughters in marriage? Should engaged couples continue with their plans? **It's your own decision.**
7. May a Christian widow remarry? **Yes, with qualifications.**
8. Is it wrong to eat meat associated with a pagan temple? **A Christian is free to do so, but in consideration of others, he might limit his freedom in love.**

What is the measure of your love? I know you've heard it before, but the illustration of the boiler room gauge is still a good one. Since it's impossible to look into a boiler to see how much water it contains, there is a little tube running up beside the boiler. When

the tube is half full, the boiler is half full; if the tube is empty, the boiler is empty. How do we know the measure of our love for God? You believe in Him, you want to know Him and to serve Him better. Look at the gauge. Your love for your brother is the measure of your love for God.

Let's pray.