

For better or worse: The Christian & Marriage

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[0 : 00] Well, I hope you do keep your Bibles open in front of you.

There's also a sermon outline available on the website, or you should have already received it if you're in one of our home fellowship groups. So that might be helpful to keep open in front of you.

But let's pray now again, and let's ask God for his help. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have given us your word. And we pray now that as we listen to the full counsel of your word, please help us to listen with attentive hearts, that we might know your will, especially in this area of marriage and divorce.

Father, we know that this is sometimes quite a difficult area to untangle. And I pray, Lord, that you would be still communicating your care and your love, Lord, for all those who are in all sorts of situations this morning with regards to this topic.

So be with us again this morning and help us to receive your word. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Now in my five years here as a pastor so far, I've conducted maybe six or seven weddings.

[1 : 08] And every time I stand in front of a couple on their big day and say, we have come together in the sight of God for the joining in marriage of this man and this woman, I still find myself pretty amazed by what is about to happen.

I'm about to witness a guy and a girl in public before God make vows to one another. I'm about to witness them making promises to have and to hold for better or worse, for richer or poorer in sickness and in health, to love and cherish each other till death do them part.

I'm about to watch them take an act of faith because that's what it is, as they stand up and declare that they will be bound by the promises they make, that they will be faithful to one another.

Because a wedding is not just a celebration of present love, it's a mutually binding agreement of future love. It's no wonder theologians often speak of marriage as a covenant, and that's quite an amazing thing to witness.

But that's not how many people think about marriage today. On the one hand, marriage is commonly treated as little more than a joke, a punchline. Now here's one that I've heard recently.

[2 : 30] Want to know what it's like being married? Chain yourself to a bear and then kick it. Or here's another line. A wedding ring is like the smallest handcuff ever made.

Choose your prison mate and sentence yourself wisely. So that isn't exactly a high view of marriage, is it? And yet that's how some people picture it, as a prison, handcuff a commitment that leads to confinement.

And yet on the other hand, marriage is also treated not so much as a joke, but as this incredible ideal that is ultimately unattainable. Marriage is just too hard.

A comedian once said that it's so hard that even the ex-South African president, Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in a jail, constantly getting tortured as a political prisoner, well, even he eventually got divorced.

He could survive jail, it's implied, but he can't survive marriage. It's just too much. And so people call it quits. It's just too hard.

[3 : 39] The Corinthian Christians were facing similar challenges. If you've been following this series, you might remember that some of them were visiting prostitutes. They thought of sex in the same way that they thought about food, simply as satisfaction for their appetites, rather than being one with another person in body.

And so marriage was more or less a joke to them. It was there simply to ensure that you had some heirs, people to look after you in your old age, and that was it.

But we also saw last week that some others were influenced by a particular view of sexual relations as completely unnecessary in a marriage. Some of them were also married to unbelievers.

And as the details of today's passage would suggest later on, it's possible that some of them stopped having sex with their unbelieving spouses because it felt unholy.

There was no more intimacy. And when that dies, marriages are in danger. Now, whatever the exact details, it's clear that for some believers, marriage was, frankly speaking, beginning to feel too hard.

[4 : 58] And so they were asking themselves, should I call it quits? Should I end the marriage? And that's a question that has never gone away.

It might even be asked by some of you today. Back in 2017, our State Minister for Women and Family, Datuk Sri Fatima Abdullah, expressed alarm at the increasing divorce rates in Sarawak.

And then three years later, in 2020, in another speech, she said the exact same thing. And so things have not changed. So I just want to make a couple more preliminary comments before we proceed.

I'm aware that marriage and divorce are quite sensitive and even painful topics. And especially since I'm speaking to a live stream, in theory, this sermon could be heard by all sorts of people in all sorts of situations.

And the truth is, I just wouldn't be able to speak into each and every situation. Indeed, it would be impossible for me to even know all of them. And so I can only speak in general terms.

[6 : 04] Indeed, it's important to remember that 1 Corinthians 7 verse 10 to 16 itself is not attempting to speak to every single possible scenario. But please know, whatever your situation, you've got to hear this now, God cares for you.

And if you think that something needs to be clarified later on, please do take advantage of our Q&A; facility, the form that has been set up for this series. We'll tell you more about that later during announcement time.

And if I do say something thoughtless, then I ask for your forgiveness. And the other thing simply to mention is that on the topics of divorce and remarriage, good Bible-believing Christians do disagree.

I'll be presenting a particular view, which I believe is the right one. But this is just to take note that others worthy of your respect might take a different view. But here's our question.

If marriage is too hard, should I call it quits? Yes. And Paul's answer, actually, is not going to be a straightforward yes or no. Indeed, he will show great pastoral sensitivity and judgment in the way he answers.

[7 : 15] And so I hope I'll be able to bring out some of that for you. And so I'll try to give you his answer under two headings. Now, here's the first heading, the divine blueprint.

The divine blueprint. In verse 10, Paul addresses Christians who are married. To the married I give this command, not I, but the Lord.

And so Paul signals straight away that he's not about to say anything new. He's simply applying what Jesus has already taught. So what has Jesus already taught about marriage and divorce?

Well, we need to go to Matthew 19 to find out. In this episode, we find the Pharisees approaching Jesus with a question. Look at verse 3 on the screen.

They ask, Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason? Now, during Jesus' day, there were two popular schools of thought taught by different Jewish rabbis based on their understanding of Deuteronomy 24.

[8 : 20] One took a more permissive view, basically saying that if your wife burned your porridge that morning, well, you could divorce her just for that. The other view was more strict, saying that the offense had to be a little bit more serious.

But both views simply assumed that divorce was fine, it would be the norm, it was even required the moment the perceived transgression happened.

And so the Pharisees want to know which side is Jesus on. But Jesus says, the question itself is mistaken. For either way, such a *tidak apa* attitude to marriage is wrong.

Verse 4 on the screen, Haven't you read, he replied, that at the beginning, the Creator made them male and female, and said, for this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?

And so they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate. Now here's Jesus' point.

[9 : 33] Marriage, she points out, is something God created. It's woven into the creation account of Genesis 2. In other words, Genesis 2 shows us the divine blueprint for marriage.

And according to God's design, there is a fundamental oneness to marriage. In Genesis 2, the phrase united to his wife has the idea of two parts of metal being soldered together.

That's how joined together they are. And if this is God's blueprint, then it's probably a bad idea to try to change it however we like.

It would be wrong to try to yank apart what God has joined together. And so Jesus says, you Pharisees are missing the point.

It's as if you've already decided to tear up the blueprint, but you're just debating about when that might happen and how it will look like. But the purpose of marriage isn't to split up.

[10 : 39] The purpose of marriage is for two people to come together in a lifelong relationship of complete belonging and unashamed vulnerability.

Divorce, then, is fundamentally at odds with that. It's just not part of the original design. And so stop treating it as if it is. And so back in 1 Corinthians 7, verse 10, Paul now applies Jesus' teaching.

A wife must not separate from her husband. Are you married? He asked the Corinthian Christians. Then don't separate. Don't divorce.

Now just to clarify, in our modern world, we make a distinction between the two, between legal separation and divorce. But that distinction does not exist in the world of the Corinthians to separate is to divorce.

And Paul says that was never the purpose of marriage anyway. Now let me quickly say now, that's not all Paul is going to say. And in fact, that's not all Jesus said either.

[11 : 49] So do keep listening to the end. But here's what we need to know first and foremost. The divine blueprint means that as much as possible, stick together.

As much as possible, stick together. For that's how God designed marriage. And when life gets busy, conflicts start to power up, and expressions of love become fewer and fewer, don't quit.

Remember those promises on your wedding day? Well, that's why you both made them in the first place. To keep you from giving up too quickly, and to assure you that your spouse won't give up too.

And that's why it's for better, for worse. God made you one. And you know for sure that He's on your side if you are still striving for that oneness, even in the difficulties of marriage.

You see, marriage is good, but marriage is hard. Why is that? Well, because actually if you are married today, I can tell you exactly who you married.

[13 : 04] And if you aren't married today, but you get married in the future, I can also predict with 100% accuracy who you will marry. Are you ready for this amazing display of my prophetic gift?

So here's my prophetic insight. You will marry a sinner. You know, we talk about people having a type. That is, certain features that we find attractive in a marriage partner.

sinner. But actually, in one sense, there is only one type of man or woman that you will ever marry. A sinner. There really isn't any other type.

And so that means there will be days when we will be sinned against. There will be days when your husband comes home two hours after he said he will, without even calling you beforehand or apologizing to you that he can't help with your kids' homework and driving you crazy with worry.

And you're steaming inside. Or there will be days where you go the extra mile with your wife, paying extra attention to her, washing and vacuuming the car even earlier than you said that you would, and buying her a surprise gift.

[14 : 19] Only for her to look at it and say, that one's not my favorite. And you know, how come you didn't clean the fan as well? And firecrackers follow. And so what can help you stick together?

What can prevent you from calling it quits when it starts to feel too hard? Well, let me mention two big things you should get in place, ideally before you even face a crisis.

Number one, know the divine blueprint. In other words, understand what marriage really is according to the Bible. Two weeks ago, I said marriage isn't just an emotional bond that you share with someone.

That's the dominant view in our culture. For many today, marriage is about gaining a partner who will fulfill our emotional and relational needs in a complete and unique way that will last for a lifetime.

time. This, if you like, is the soulmate view of marriage. And it necessarily assumes that marriage exists for the purposes of our self-fulfillment.

[15 : 34] But that is to place too much burden on your marriage partner. That he or she is a sinner, remember? And if you have a soulmate view of marriage, what happens the moment your soulmate starts disappointing you?

What happens when they keep on failing to live up to your expectations? You might conclude that he or she isn't really your soulmate after all, and it's time to start looking for someone better.

You have no incentive to stick together the moment reality hits, and every incentive to call it quits. But when we understand marriage instead, as a covenant, where two promise to become one, both emotionally and bodily, and to be father and mother to any children that this union might potentially bring forth, then you would want to stick together.

You see, some people think of promises as opposite to love. Hey, dear, I love you so much. Why do we need to get married? You know, that's just an outdated institution.

I said I love you good enough, ma. But in truth, promises are the deepest expression of love. Because when you're making those wedding vows, you are supplying evidence that you're committed for the long haul you're making promises before God.

[17 : 07] And when you enter into a covenant, it doesn't suffocate love, but instead gives more oxygen for your love to flourish.

Because it provides a safe space for you and your spouse to know each other truly what and all, knowing that the other person isn't just going to pack up and leave at the first sign of imperfection.

You know, that's how God designed it to be. And so number one, know the divine blueprint. And number two, let the cross control your marriage.

You know, what does the cross remind you of? It will remind you that you are not just sin against, but that you are a sinner as well. That's why Jesus had to die.

But it will also remind both of you that in Christ, that is no longer your primary identity. Instead, your primary identity is as a saint, a holy person washed clean by Jesus.

[18 : 17] And so when we remember both those truths that we are a sinner but we are washed clean, well, it can have a profound effect on any marriage. As the Christian counselor, Paul Tripp, says, when the shadow of the cross hangs over our marriage, we live and relate differently.

We are no longer afraid to look at ourselves. We are no longer surprised by our sin. We no longer have to work to present ourselves as righteous. You know, God knows everything already.

And we say goodbye to finger-pointing and self-excusing. We abandon our record of wrongs. We settle issues quickly. And we do all these things.

Why? Because we know that everything we need to confess has already been forgiven at the cross. And what is needed for every new step we will take has already been supplied.

We can live in the liberating light of humility and honesty, a needy and tender sinner living with another needy and tender sinner, both no longer defensive and no longer afraid, together growing near to one another as we grow to be more like him.

[19 : 40] So isn't that amazing? Just let the shadow of the cross hang over your marriage. But then the question arises, what if a Christian is married to an unbeliever?

What then? can they call it quits? Paul now addresses this. Look at verses 12 and 13. 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. Now when he says I, not the Lord, Paul simply means that he is now addressing a scenario that Jesus never encountered in his lifetime.

But he's still applying the same principle. And so he says that the divine blueprint means that even in a mixed marriage, you still stick together. Even in a mixed marriage, you should still stick together.

Now Paul isn't giving a license to Christians to go out and start marrying non-Christians. Later on in verse 39, he makes clear that Christians should only marry Christians.

[20 : 59] But here he's addressing the common situation where somebody has become a Christian after they got married, but their partner hasn't. So where does that leave the Christian?

Paul's answer is don't abandon the marriage. Don't leave. If everyone is content, stick together. Because that is still more in line with the divine blueprint than divorce.

But Paul also offers an additional reason, verse 14. 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. Now, this is probably one of the most difficult verses in 1 Corinthians 7, let's admit that.

But let's try to work it out. Firstly, let's work out what it cannot mean. Paul is not saying that somehow the believer's faith will trickle over to the unbelieving spouse as if by spiritual osmosis.

[22 : 07] Verse 16 makes clear that the believer is still hoping for the spouse to be safe, meaning that he or she isn't safe yet, rather than presuming that he or she is automatically safe simply by virtue of their marriage.

So what does Paul mean here? Here's my best guess. The word sanctified means set apart. And so when a believer stays in a mixed marriage, their unbelieving spouse is set apart to hear the gospel and to see the gospel lived out in a way that they wouldn't otherwise have.

if a marriage were to break up. After all, what closer relationship is there than marriage? And so what greater opportunity than marriage to see how Jesus affects someone's life up close and personal?

Similarly, children benefit from having a Christian parent around where they otherwise might not have. And so they too are sanctified. The root word for holy here is the same as sanctified.

And so to summarize, verse 14 seems to be saying, seems to be saying, stay for the purpose of being a gospel witness.

[23 : 22] Now it's not guaranteed that your spouse would be converted, as verse 16 points out, but you never know. And that's why you don't quit, Paul says.

When it's hard, or if you find yourself in a mixed marriage, do all you can to stick. Together, do all you can to follow the divine blueprint. Do all you can to showcase the gospel.

But Paul is not a naive man. He knows very well that while Genesis 2 is the ideal, we currently live in a Genesis 3 world. And so we come now to our second heading for today, the reality of sin.

The reality of sin. As we've already observed, marriages today only consist of one type of person, people who sin. And here's the painful truth.

Sometimes they sin against each other to the point of divorce. Jesus himself recognizes that reality. Back in Matthew 19, he says to the Pharisees, do you know why Moses permitted divorce?

[24 : 33] Do you know why Deuteronomy 24 exists? It's because verse 8 on the screen, your hearts were hard. Moses had to deal with the reality of sin, Jesus says.

He had to make the best of a bad situation. And so he had to come up with divorce laws to protect the vulnerable or innocent parties since marriage failure was already occurring.

But it was not this way from the beginning, Jesus says. It was not how God intended things to be. Moses was merely regulating divorce, not requesting it.

And Paul is doing the same thing in 1 Corinthians 7 verse 11. Paul's been saying as much as possible, stay together. As much as possible, don't call it quits. as much as possible, don't divorce.

But Paul accepts divorce can and does happen even when they shouldn't. The reality of sin means that people do divorce. And so in such cases, he regulates it.

[25 : 45] If you do leave a marriage, Paul says, ordinarily speaking, there are two options available. Either you remain unmarried or you go and reconcile with your spouse.

And so once again, Paul's instinct is to encourage the preservation of the marriage. But both Jesus and Paul also understand that the reality of sin is such that sometimes sin is so serious that a marriage simply cannot continue.

The reality of sin means that occasionally divorce and remarriage might be appropriate. Now, such decisions are never meant to be taken lightly or hastily.

But sadly, sometimes it might be necessary. The Bible suggests, broadly speaking, that there are two categories under which divorce is permissible.

Now, that word permissible is important. We'll come back to it later. The first is once again, back in Matthew chapter 19. Look at verse 9. Jesus says, I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for sexual immorality and marries another woman commits adultery.

[27 : 02] Now, remember the context? In Jesus' day, people were freely divorcing their wives simply for accidentally burning the porridge, especially if that meant that they could then move on to the next girlfriend.

So that is what Jesus is speaking against. He says that what they are doing is simply adultery in a different form. But he does make one exception, sexual immorality.

Now, that's the word *porneia*. And that would usually refer to adultery, although things like incest, like back in 1 Corinthians chapter 5, would be covered in that word as well.

And why? Why that exception? Because infidelity is one of the most painful things in the world. Before infidelity, you trusted your spouse with your deepest secrets.

You are willing to get naked before them. You expected to be there for each other, celebrating the good, comforting in the bad. And you expected that to be lifelong.

[28 : 13] But when that is taken away from you unexpectedly, it hurts really bad. You feel as if the life you thought you had is now over.

And you find it difficult to trust again. And Jesus understands that kind of pain. After all, did not Peter, who swore to be with him, to the end, end up denying him three times?

divorce. And so Jesus says in such cases, divorce is permitted. Now, it's not required. You don't have to divorce.

And wonderfully, sometimes the grace of God can so heal a marriage that it recovers from such trauma. Sexual sin does not have to be the end. And that's what we pray for, that's what we work towards.

But in this fallen world, we need to acknowledge that it doesn't always happen. Sin has consequences. And so that's the first category under which divorce is permitted, adultery or sexual immorality.

[29 : 29] But in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul now brings up the second category, abandonment. Look at verse 15. But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so.

The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances. God has called us to live in peace. Paul says in a mixed marriage, strive to stick together.

But if your unbelieving partner decides that you really can't, then let it go. You are no longer bound to the marriage. The ideal is always to live in peace together, but we can't force anyone.

And so if your unbelieving spouse is dead set on divorcing, then let it be. And in this case, unlike verse 11, it appears as if remarriage is possible.

You are no longer bound. And so these seem to be the two broad categories under which divorce is permitted. Adultery or sexual immorality and abandonment.

[30 : 39] But then the question sometimes comes up, is that it? Are these the only two permissible categories? Let me just address one more rather difficult issue. Spousal abuse.

You know, if those are the only two categories, does that mean I have to stay in a chronically abusive marriage? Since abuse is not explicitly named as one of the categories, you know, where does that fall under?

Now, over the years, different people have made different calls on this. But in my judgment, repeated spousal abuse will fall under the category of abandonment as well.

In verse 15, we read, the brother or the sister are not bound in such circumstances, and that phrase, in such circumstances, which can also be translated in such cases, as in the ESV, for example, will suggest that any cases or circumstances that so affect a marriage that it effectively abandons it are to be treated in the same way.

And so I take spousal abuse to basically be an abandonment of sorts. Now, such situations are difficult to judge and probably need to be taken on a case-by-case basis, with much prayer and wisdom and patience required.

[32 : 05] But please do know, the testimony of the scriptures are clear about two things. Number one, that abuse is a sin, and number two, that God is on the side of the oppressed and the vulnerable.

And God cares about your physical well-being. If you need to leave, you are not sinning. So let me sum up.

In God's good design, marriage is a covenant. It's a oneness that God has ordained. What God has joined together, let no man separate.

And so the divine blueprint means that as much as possible, stick together. Don't call it quits, even when it's hard. And that applies even to mixed marriages.

And yet the reality of sin also means that separations do happen. And occasionally it might even be appropriate for a divorce to take place. The scripture names two categories under which this is permissible, though not required, remember that?

[33 : 16] Adultery or sexual immorality, and abandonment. If divorce happens on those grounds, people are free to remarry. But where it happens on other grounds, then the person should remain unmarried or reconcile with their spouse.

But let me end by just saying a final word to the different groups who might be listening in today. Firstly, a word to you if you're a divorcee or a child of divorced parents today.

Let me just say the most important thing that you need to hear. Jesus loves you. He really does. And he wants you to know that divorce is not the unforgivable sin.

It is not the insurmountable barrier. And in Christ, your identity is never merely divorcee or child of divorcees.

Your identity is 1 Corinthians 6 verse 11. You know, we can never repeat that verse enough. You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the spirit of our God.

[34 : 32] And whatever broken situation you find yourself in, God can bring good out of it. Over and over and over again in the scriptures, he does it.

And he does it especially at the cross. He brings good out of the bad. And for the church, that means that we shouldn't treat divorce as the unforgivable sin either.

We rightly grieve it when it happens, but we shouldn't shame those who have divorced, especially if they do so on the grounds that the Bible permits.

Instead, we should come together as a family that supports. Secondly, a word to you if you are married. Whatever stage you are at, keep investing in your marriage.

Read the Bible together, pray together, laugh together, show grace to each other. If working on the oneness of your marriage has slipped from your radar recently, well, don't get depressed.

[35 : 36] Just see today as an opportunity to renew your resolve to keep working at it. And don't do it alone. Don't be afraid to journey with other couples. Share some of your struggles, share some of your burdens, seek the advice of those who are long experienced in marriage.

And if there's a good marriage enrichment program available, well, don't be afraid to go for it. Don't feel like that's admitting that your marriage is failing. Chin-yin and I went to one such thing in our very first year of marriage, although it was actually meant for couples who were married longer, and so we probably didn't quite reap the full benefits.

But now that I've been married longer, if that same marriage enrichment day was offered again, we'll definitely go for it. Thirdly, a word to the single.

Invest in your godliness now. Now, actually, of course, that's a word for everyone, regardless of your marital status. But if you're single and hoping to be married, married, and there's nothing wrong with that, you can receive singleness as a gift, but still hope to be married, well, that would be the best way to build a foundation for marriage.

Don't just think about financial security and things like that. That is actually less important for marriage than striving after godliness. What's the point of having a house when the home doesn't have God at the centre, and the marriage that doesn't have God at the centre has already weakened itself considerably before it has even begun.

[37 : 09] And do all you can as a single person to encourage your Christian married friends to remember their oneness in marriage. So don't undermine that by making tasteless jokes and things like that.

And finally, a word for all of us. Remember where faithfulness lies. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who was faithful even to his imperfect bride.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who would never leave us nor abandon us. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who says to all who trust in him, you belong. You really do.

Why? Because as John 13 says, when Jesus knew that his hour had come for him to go to the cross, he didn't call it quits, but chose to love his people to the very end.

And so our Lord Jesus entered into a new covenant with us and made promises to us by his very blood. And he promises us that the reality of sin will not be with us forever.

[38 : 20] For one day, we will be one with him in the new Jerusalem as a pure and radiant bride, basking in his love for eternity as God has always intended.

And that's why we don't have to call it quits. And that's why we praise him today. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you now and we just pray, Lord, that again we would seek to obey your will in these areas.

I pray, Lord, that if in any way I have misinterpreted or misapplied the passage, then people would forget that. But I pray, Lord, that if we have arrived at the right understanding of your passage, we pray, Lord, that we will indeed take that to heart.

Pray for our entire church community. We pray for those who are married. We pray, Lord, that you will continue to be at work in each and every marriage, whatever stage they're at.

if things are difficult at the moment, we just pray that you will help each one of them to just put in the effort, put in the hard work, and put their hope in you to get through a difficult season.

[39 : 40] For those who are currently happily married and who are not really facing any issues at the moment, we just pray that you continue to help them to not grow complacent, but keep building on the foundation, keep fixing their eyes on Jesus together.

For all of us, Lord, whether single or married, again, Lord, we pray that we would seek to glorify you in all that we do and remember your faithfulness to us even as we look forward to the full reality of the new creation where we know that we will enjoy the depths of your love regardless of whether we're married today or not.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Let's sing our next song and let's take it as a prayer.