

Does the Bible Permit Divorce? Part 2

1 Corinthians 7

I. Introduction

- A. Divorce is biblically permitted (though not required) when a spouse sins in a way that breaks the core of the marriage covenant (i.e., the one-flesh union).
- B. Two categories of marriage-covenant breaking: Sexual immorality (Matt 19), Abandonment (1 Cor 7)

II. The Bible Permits Divorce for Abandonment (1 Corinthians 7:15-16)

- A. Scenario 1: When an unbelieving spouse consents to remain married (1 Cor. 7:12-14)
 - 1. Just as Jesus, in Matthew 19, gave the general rule before dealing with any exceptions, so Paul does here.
 - 2. If one spouse becomes a Christian and the other doesn't, and if that unbeliever wants to remain married, the believer should not seek a divorce and is not being unholy by doing that.
 - 3. Why? ("for" v. 14)
 - a. Despite what some thought (perhaps due to unwarranted applications of 1 Cor. 6:9-20), being married to an unbeliever didn't make the believer unholy or their children unclean before God.¹
 - b. He is not saying it is ok for a believer to decide to marry an unbeliever (1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14-16).
- B. Scenario 2: When an unbelieving spouse leaves the marriage (1 Cor. 7:15-16)
 - 1. Here we see a contrast ("but"), an alternative scenario.
 - 2. If the unbeliever wants to divorce, let it be so.
 - 3. Why is this a biblically valid response? (7:15b-16)
 - a. "not enslaved" - "spouses are not stuck in the slavery of a no-man's-land where they have no spouse (because they have been abandoned) and yet are not able to remarry (because they remain married). They are free."²
 - b. God has called you to peace (Rom. 12:18; also *Shalom* - "well-being").
- C. Why sexual immorality and abandonment are exceptions
 - 1. Both sexual immorality and abandonment cut at the core of the marriage covenant of being one flesh.
 - 2. It is not merely sinning against each other, but sin that destroys the one-flesh covenant of marriage.
 - a. Immorality cuts at the physical and spiritual union of marriage by enacting the sign of marriage with another person besides one's spouse.
 - b. Abandoning constitutes a refusal to remain one flesh.
 - c. As Naselli rightly notes, "Physical desertion is as serious as *porneia*. Each is a ground for divorce because each breaks the marriage covenant to leave and cleave and become one flesh (Gen. 2:24)."³

III. The Need for Wisdom in Sorting Out Complicated Situations

- A. Does abandonment mean *only* situations in which an unbeliever leaves the home *and* files divorce paperwork?
- B. "In such cases" (1 Cor. 7:15, only appears in this passage in the Bible)⁴
 - 1. What cases are the equivalent of an unbeliever physically abandoning the marriage covenant commitments?

¹ Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, in the Pillar NT Commentary, 294-95.

² Ciampa and Rosner, 303.

³ Andy Naselli, "What the New Testament Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage" (Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal, 24, 2019: 3-44), 32.

⁴ Wayne Grudem, "Grounds for Divorce: Why I now believe there are more than two," in *Eikon*, Spring 2020: Vol. 2:1, pgs. 71-79. See his example of Philo commenting on the Egyptian plague (72-73).

2. Naselli points out, “Desertion or separation may not be spatial—that is, the spouses may still live in the same home. But the desertion or separation is still real because the sinful patterns abandon the one-flesh union that is essential to the marriage covenant.”⁵

C. Permanently leaving without legally filing for the divorce (cp. Ex. 21:10-11)

D. Abuse of spouse or children

1. “Abuse desecrates what God made sacred; the personhood of those who bear his image (James 3:9). More specifically, an abusive person uses his personal capacities to force other people to deliver on his personal desires. The force he exerts inflicts damage - that is, the effect of weakening someone to make them easier to control.”⁶
2. Physical attacks (see Chrysostom commenting on 1 Cor. 7:15).⁷
3. Are we saying a divorce is legitimate any time a spouse claims to be abused?
“There is a difference . . . between a man who raises his voice on occasion and the man who physically beats up or berates his wife. Just as we wouldn’t encourage divorce in the case of every person who has a lustful thought or look (Matt. 5:28), we wouldn’t say that every spouse who has spoken hatefully in anger should be punished as a murderer (5:21–22) or has given grounds for divorce.”⁸

E. Incurable and serious addictions to alcohol, drugs, or gambling⁹

1. Incurable: A person who is unwilling to receive correction, improve, or reform his or her ways.
2. Serious: destroying the one-flesh life.

F. Wisdom is needed to apply God’s unchanging word to various situations.

IV. Remarriage

- A.** Permitted in cases of the death of a spouse and for the innocent party in a biblical divorce.
- B.** In an unbiblical divorce or for the guilty party in a biblical divorce, remarriage *might* be possible.

V. Summary

1. Marriage is the God-ordained, covenantal union of one man and one woman designed to last until death.
2. Every divorce is due to sin, but not every divorce is sinful.
3. Divorce is biblically permitted, though not required, in cases of sexual immorality.
4. If an unbelieving spouse abandons the marriage, the believer should let him or her go and is not enslaved to remaining formally married or permanently single.
5. There are complex situations that could fall under the two categories of sexual immorality and abandonment.
6. Divorce should generally not be pursued without the wisdom and authority of elders.
7. In our counsel, we should usually start by asking “Can anything be done to heal this marriage?” before we ask “Are there grounds for divorce?”
8. After a biblical divorce, remarriage is permitted for the innocent party.
9. Remarriage situations can be complex and should generally not be pursued without the wisdom and authority of the elders.

⁵ Naselli, 36. See also Grudem, 74.

⁶ Jeremy Pierre and Greg Wilson, *When Home Hurts: A Guide for Responding Wisely to Domestic Abuse in Your Church* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publishers, 2021), 40.

⁷ Chrysostom, “Homily 19 on 1 Corinthians” in *NPNF*, 1.12, 108 (quoted in Wayne Grudem, “Grounds for Divorce”, 75).

⁸ Jim Newheiser, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage: Critical Questions and Answers*, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2017), 262.

⁹ Examples adapted from Jim Newheiser *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, 255-56 and Wayne Grudem “Grounds for Divorce,” 74-76.