

7. Divorce & Remarriage

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[0 : 00] in 7. And you'll see that our subject tonight is that of divorce and remarriage.

Not a subject really that I'm thrilled about having to tackle. I suppose that's why it's not a subject that often is talked about and the Bible's teaching made clear.

It's not easy to do and it's not easy, I'm sure, to listen to either. But it's not open to a Christian preacher to be selective about the material that we look at.

It's not open to Christian people not to hear the full Word of God. And in a series on right relationships, on marriage and every aspect of it, this is something that we have to think about. By the very nature of it, of course, it's something of an intrusion into a series on right relationships. But of course the reality is that we do live in a fallen world, don't we?

[1 : 08] And the very essence of sin is in fact seen, isn't it, in ruptured relationships. We have rebelled as human beings against the right relationship with God.

And that has led so often to the rupture of relationships in every other possible realm of our experience. That's true, we know, isn't it, internationally. It's true in national politics too.

It's true across ethnic lines, class lines. And it's true in personal relationships. And it's true also in the deepest and most personal relationships.

The relationship of marriage. I could recite to you all sorts of statistics. But we don't need to do that. All of us know perfectly well, don't we, the tragedy of marriage and family breakdown that seems to be increasingly rampant in our society.

The politicians are just beginning to pick up on it, aren't they? Just beginning to dare to talk about it in public. But, alas, it appears that this problem is almost equally prevalent in the Christian church.

[2 : 23] And therefore it is something that we have to deal with as Christians in the church. But I want to say one or two things about that. First of all, this is a complex issue.

And of course, to deal with it anything like comprehensively would take many studies and many hours. And I don't propose to do that for several reasons. Firstly, because our focus is on marriage, on right relationships.

And I don't want to unbalance a series on that by spending weeks and weeks on the subject of divorce. It would be wrong. It would give it a wrong prominence. And second, because I want this tonight to be the last in our series for the meantime, because I'm aware that for many of us, some of the things we've had over the recent weeks have been hard.

And I don't want to go beyond the bounds of what is necessary for us to deal with all together as a congregation. These issues are essential. They must be dealt with as a whole congregation. Don't get me wrong about that.

But we do all need to be clear together about the part that we have to play in upholding marriage and in family life. And the Bible addresses all of us with these issues just because of that.

[3 : 36] It doesn't just address the married people or the parents among us. It addresses all of us. And we must be clear about that. And if some of us have felt that this is not for them, then they're wrong.

It's as simple as that. They're wrong. Because the Bible says we all have our responsibilities, whether we're married or not married or once married or widowed or whatever it might be.

But even so, and I have, I suppose, especially in mind those single people among us, I don't want you to feel that this is a never-ending series all about marriage and all about children.

So this is the last of our current series tonight. So it is a complex issue and therefore we can't possibly deal with everything as we might like to tonight. That's the first thing.

And the second is this. This is also a very painful issue. And I'm sure that is the case for some of us here tonight. And I know that.

[4 : 37] And that's why it's a hard thing for me to have to speak about too. But because we can't deal with everything tonight and can only touch on it, there are many things that can't be said.

And there's potentially room for anxiety and for distress because of that. So I do want to say to you, please don't hesitate to come and talk to me personally about anything that's said tonight that's a burden for you.

Either because it's something that I do say that burdens you or because it's something that hasn't been dealt with and it's biting you and you're concerned about it. I really do mean that. Please don't hesitate to come and speak to me about anything arising from tonight.

Okay, well with that by way of introduction, let me come to our subject. As I say, we can't possibly cover the whole of the biblical material regarding divorce and remarriage.

So I want to focus on some of these verses that we read in 1 Corinthians 7 because they do at least, I think, give us succinct clarity on some of the very main issues.

[5 : 45] But remember, first of all, that when we come to a letter like this, this is not a treatise on marriage and divorce that Paul is writing. It's a specific letter that he's writing.

He's writing to a particular people in a particular situation. He's writing at a certain time in history. It's part of an ongoing correspondence between Paul and the church at Corinth.

Look at verse 1, you see, of 1 Corinthians 7. It's about the matters that you've written to me about, he says. Now here was a troubled church. The church in Corinth was a divided church.

It was a badly mixed up church, in fact, on all kinds of different issues. And one of the manifestations of their mixed upness was an awful lot of confusion about the whole area of sex and marriage.

That's no surprise. Confused theology always leads to confused living. And wrong living is so often expressed by misuse of some of the very best gifts of God.

[6 : 45] The gift of sex and relationships. Now we can't go into the whole of the context at Corinth, but I want to give two important things for you to note, which I think help illuminate some of the things in this chapter.

The first is the major sexual confusion and corruption that there obviously was in the church in Corinth. If you go back to read chapter 5, you'll see just how bad things were.

It begins that chapter telling us about a case of incest in the church. There was a man who was openly sleeping with his father's wife. And yet the church seemed to be quite accepting of that. Then in chapter 6 you read that there were men who were going to prostitutes, quite openly, and justifying it by saying that, well, it was just a bodily matter, and therefore not something that could affect them spiritually.

Nothing wrong in that. Food for the body, the body for food. Same with prostitutes. So all in all, there was a fairly strong case for saying that there was a lot of sexual dysfunction going on here in this church in Corinth.

[7 : 53] But you see, chapter 7 begins by telling us that some people had gone to the absolute opposite extreme. They'd written to Paul and they'd said to him that they felt it was good for there to be absolutely no sexual relations at all, even within marriage.

If you've got an NIV, by the way, that first verse is translated very wrongly, I think. It's good for a man not to marry. It's not what it says.

It says literally it's good for a man not to touch a woman. It's a euphemism for sexual relationships. So the ESV is right to say it's good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.

But Paul, you see, is absolutely having none of that. No, he says, a man should have. His wife. That means go on having sexual relationships with his wife, with his own wife, and vice versa.

Not prostitutes. Not somebody else's wife. Certainly not his father's wife, but his own wife. Paul starts by saying marriage needs sexual relationships, so don't shirk your responsibilities.

[8 : 59] He's very blunt about it, isn't he? The only possible reason for abstinence is for a time of prayer and fasting. And even that must be short. He says it's a concession. It's not a command. It's strange when you read this chapter because Paul often seems to get criticized for being anti-sex and anti-marriage.

It's quite the opposite. What Paul's saying here is that real piety in marriage is a proper sex life, not pious prayer times. That's what he means. So these people were going to the opposite extreme, and Paul was seeking to reassert the goodness of marriage.

But the important thing for us to notice is this. It's often said, you see, today, well, society has changed, and therefore the world has changed, and so the church must change too. And we must change our views about sexual morality because the traditional ways just don't work anymore. Well, that just doesn't hold up when we come to study the New Testament. Corinth was, by any standards, a very sexually progressive society. It was a very free and promiscuous society, and in fact, they felt they were very liberated, and the church had quite happily liberated itself and taken the world's practices into the church.

[10:16] But Paul's message, notice, and this is what's so important for us today, in exactly the sort of context that we're facing today, Paul's message was very clear.

You are not to be like the pagans outside. No, you are to be holy. You are to listen to God's commands. You are not to just do as you please.

You are not to just live as those outsiders. So that's the first thing about the context, and it makes it very relevant for us today. This is not far removed from our situation.

But the second thing is this. Paul is writing to the Corinthians at a very particular time. And in verse 26, you will have seen that he calls it a time of this present distress.

Now, what does he mean? Well, we know that there was severe famine in Greece at this time. Secular history tells us that as well. Perhaps it's why in chapter 11, Paul was talking about people coming to the church, hungry and desperately wading into the Lord's Supper.

[11:25] But it was a time of fear and a time of distress. There was a lot of social disharmony. There was a great uncertainty and anxiety. And it's very understandable that Christians were saying, well, how should we be living in these times?

I'm engaged now. What should I be doing? Should I be getting married or holding off? Or we're married. Well, should we be expanding our families?

Is that a wise thing to do? What do we do in this time of famine? These are exactly the kind of issues you see that Paul is dealing with in this chapter. And that explains, I think, one of the features of this chapter, which is that so much of what he says, he makes clear, are not commands. This is not a command I'm giving you. But it's my advice. He says that several times. Look at verse 25. I have no command on this, he says, but this is my judgment. I haven't got a command on this, he says, verse 26.

But I think this is the best way for you. But equally, he goes on to say, well, if you do something differently in verse 28, well, that's not sin. You see, he's giving advice. He's talking here about matters of pragmatism and wisdom, not commands.

[12:40] And it's wisdom for a particular present situation, this time of distress. He's not telling them they must do this, or do that, or do the other, but he's telling them, well, if you're engaged, whether you marry or not, there's different ways to look at this.

Here's my advice. It's not a command. Nor is it advice that he's giving that's binding forever. He's speaking about that particular time and situation in much of what he says.

And the constant focus that Paul gives through this chapter is rather that they should see the bigger issues, see the issues of eternity. See, that's really what verses 17 to 24 are all about, and the verses that go after verse 29.

Especially, you see, what Paul is saying is that in times of crisis, what all Christian believers need above everything else is perspective. We need detachment from all the things of this world because, as he says in verse 31, the present form of this world, the world as we know it, is passing away.

And therefore, all the relationships of this world, too, are passing away. But what really matters is the eternal kingdom of God that doesn't pass away.

[13:51] So in a time of distress, you need to take that perspective. And that perspective will govern the decisions that you make about many practical issues to do with domestic family, to do with marriage, and so on.

So Paul wants them to be wise about all worldly issues so that they're free from anxiety. He says that again and again, doesn't he? So that they're secure in what really matters, that is, devotion to God.

So there's real pragmatism on many issues. If you marry, well, that's fine. If you don't marry, well, that's fine too. So there's an awful lot of wisdom and not direct command in this chapter.

But, and this is very important, even in the midst of such a focus on pragmatism in a time of crisis and an emphasis on wisdom, not on law, not on commands in these matters, on the issue of marriage and rupturing marriage and on the issue of separation and abandoning marriage, Paul is exceptionally clear and it's not wise advice that he's given.

The very clear commands that he gives in that situation, as we'll see. And he makes it abundantly evident that the sanctity of the marriage bond must not ever, even in very difficult circumstances, not ever be diminished or downplayed.

[15:27] So with these things in mind then, let's look exactly at what Paul says about separation. Look first at verses 10 and 11 because in these verses he's addressing, isn't he, married Christians.

That's very clear. And he gives a clear command and it's this, believers must not contemplate marriage breakup. but rather they should seek grace for reconciliation.

Verse 10, the wife should not separate from her husband. Verse 11, the husband should not divorce or leave his wife. There's no real difference in the vocabulary there.

There's no sense in which he's talking about separation being different from divorce in the way we talk about it in our modern times, you know, a trial separation and so on. Both of these words simply mean the rupture of the marriage, whether it's legalized or not.

He's simply saying neither partner should ever countenance rupture of the marriage bond, not even in these special times of distress.

[16:41] And it is a charge, isn't it? It's a clear command. Don't contemplate that ever. And that's what he means.

Very straight. Don't latch on to the parenthesis in brackets there in verse 11. That's not an exception. He's not saying except if you want to do this.

No, the command is very clear. The parenthesis in brackets there simply recognizes that this is a fallen world and that there will be Christians, believers, who find themselves in situations a rupture because Christians are sinners just like everybody else and that's the reality of life.

He's just providing therefore regulation of a situation that shouldn't have happened. He's not providing release for somebody who wants it to happen in that way. They don't latch onto that.

Paul is saying no Christian couple should ever enter marriage thinking that separation or divorce is ever going to be a potential way out. And he's saying that no married couple should pursue divorce as a sin-free way of ending things.

[17:56] And certainly he's very clear that there's no thought of remarriage in these circumstances. If the worst does happen there's still no release says Paul. The only options are reconciliation or remaining unmarried.

That is seeking no further marriage union. And that says Paul is his authoritative apostolic charge. It's his command. But you see also he says it's not just his command.

That's the plain teaching of Jesus. It's from the Lord Jesus specifically that he's passing this on says Paul. Well we better look at that.

Turn back with me if you would to Matthew chapter 5 and verse 31. Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount. Here's what the Lord himself said.

It was also said whoever divorces his wife let him give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife except on the grounds of sexual immorality makes her commit adultery and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

[19:07] Well it's very clear isn't it? The only possible grounds for divorce and remarriage is sexual immorality. That word means any kind of sex outside marriage.

Clearly within the marriage bond it must mean adultery. And no Christian of course can ever contemplate imagining that that would be a proper action and therefore no Christian couple could ever contemplate divorce as though it was just an option to choose.

That's what Jesus is saying. And notice in these verses when Jesus speaks he puts divorce and remarriage together. Divorce virtually implies remarriage and its possibility in the Bible.

That must be so here because divorce alone can't make somebody else an adulterer. No it's the subsequent remarriage that creates an adulterous relationship that Jesus says here.

But it's very clear isn't it? And Paul is just passing it on. No divorce. Turn over to Matthew chapter 19 a passage that we studied some time ago when we were going through Matthew's gospel because there again Jesus repeats his stark and clear teaching but he explains why.

[20 : 19] It goes right back to creation he says in verse 6. God made them husband and wife and he made that one flesh union and therefore what God has joined he says don't let man separate.

Now notice here that that bond of marriage is not seen as impossible to break. That would be the position held by the Roman Catholic Church that the bond is impossibly broken that a bond of marriage is akin to the bond between a brother and sister.

It doesn't matter what happens you can't break it. But that can't be so because for one thing death does break the bond and God can break the bond as Jesus says in the case of adultery and man can.

Sinfully break the bond. Jesus warns us not to. He wouldn't have to warn us not to do something if it was just impossible. But again it's quite plain what Jesus says isn't it?

No divorce. Well his critics came back to him in verse 7 and said well what about Moses? He commanded divorce.

[21 : 27] No he didn't said Jesus. He allowed it. He had a process to regulate it even though it shouldn't have been but he had to because of your sin because of the hardness of your hearts.

The reference there is to the one concession that there is in Deuteronomy chapter 24 in amongst a raft of teaching forbidding all kinds of adulterous and improper sexual relationships.

You see the Pharisees are so typical of us human beings aren't they? They immediately home in on seeking the loopholes. What are the ways that we can get a divorce and yet they'll be righteous in God's eyes?

That's the question that they were asking. But Jesus turns them right back to the real issue. Not about divorce. It's marriage. The sanctity of marriage that he wants to emphasize.

And we all need to be very careful about that in our thinking about divorce. We need to be very careful from being like the Pharisees and just looking to try and justify something in our particular situation.

[22 : 37] But Jesus won't let us do that. He says from the beginning it was not so and he says it must not be so in my kingdom. Followers of Jesus, he's saying, are to think marriage not think divorce.

And that's it really as far as Jesus' teaching is concerned. Yes, it's true Jesus does give the exception here of adultery. He explicitly says here what's implied in the text we read in Matthew chapter 5 that remarriage after divorce for adultery doesn't create a new adulterous union in the same way because adultery has already in fact broken the marriage covenant, the marriage bond. But just even to think of that as an excuse or as a way out of marriage for a believer, well that's unthinkable. You've got to think about committing adultery just to get out of your marriage just so that you can dot the I and cross the T.

Now there can be absolutely no question about the clarity and the absoluteness of the teaching of Jesus here. Even the disciples are sobered by it and that's why in verse 10 they say well it's better not to marry at all.

And Jesus says indeed not everyone can receive this teaching. But his implication is that those who have received it are his followers, his people.

[24 : 00] Those are the ones to whom it has been given to have the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. He's already said that in Matthew's gospel. And marriage remember is all about serving the kingdom of heaven.

And Christian marriage is all about displaying the recreation harmony of God's new world not the disruption of the old world that we have made. It's new world living that Jesus is teaching in this chapter.

Everybody goes on to speak about that in verse 28 in the new world. Okay, come back to 1 Corinthians chapter 7 then. For Christians, says Paul, there's no separation, there's no abandoning marriage.

There's no harboring ideas about an easy way out. That's my teaching, that's the Lord's teaching, his own words. No, instead, you are to seek God's grace for reconciliation.

That's always to be the aim for a couple struggling in a situation of marriage breakdown. It's always to be the aim for others in the church seeking to help. And there is grace in the gospel, grace that works through you if you're seeking God's way to reconcile your problems, preferably long before they get to the point of breakdown and splitting.

[25 : 26] But even afterwards, says Paul, even after this has happened, you can still be reconciled. There is grace. So, to a Christian couple, we just can't avoid the clarity of Paul's words.

You mustn't contemplate marriage breakup, not ever. Rather, you are to seek God's grace for reconciliation. Well, then in verse 12, Paul turns to another group that he calls the rest. That is, to a believer who is married now to an unbeliever. One of them has become converted and come to Christ, but the other hasn't. What does he say about that? Well, he says that a believer, even in a difficult marriage to an unbeliever, mustn't seek marriage breakup either. Rather, they are to seek God's grace for redemption. of their spouse. Again, this just shows how powerful and sacred the marriage bond is. Even these circumstances don't justify a new start. Now, notice Paul is still speaking authoritatively. He doesn't have a word from Jesus, but he is giving a command. He doesn't have a direct word from Jesus because Jesus never dealt with this situation.

[26 : 43] It's a situation that arises from mission, from pagans becoming converted. And by the way, that's a point that's really well worth noting because mission creates many problems.

Mission creates an awful lot of mess. The more pagans who become converted, the more messy situations there are to get sorted out. Some Christians just can't cope with mess.

They're very, very concerned with protecting their own consciences. well, it tends not to be surprising that those people are not usually up to their eyes in evangelism.

It's much more comfortable to have a holy huddle and to have no mess to touch your conscience than it is to be involved in the mess of mission where people with messed up lives come to Jesus. But mission creates all sorts of messy situations for the church just like these that Paul's speaking about because people come with baggage. they come with a background. So what do we do in that situation?

[27 : 46] Well, it may have been that some Corinthians were worried about defilement because they were married to an unbeliever. They may have read in, well, maybe Ezra or Nehemiah about the problems of mixed marriages defiling the people of God.

Maybe they were just facing a real struggle being in a marriage to an unbeliever. I'm sure it was very tough just as it is today. It's very understandable, isn't it? For a spouse, especially for a Christian woman, perhaps to want to have a fresh start with a Christian husband, life would be so different.

But Paul says no. The marriage bond is sacred. Don't seek a divorce even on these grounds. But you see in verse 14, if you look at that, he gives a wonderfully positive side to it, doesn't he?

It's not that you are going to be defiled by having a pagan spouse. Rather, they're made holy by being married to you. That doesn't mean, of course, they're automatically saved.

Verse 16 makes that clear. It calls them an unbeliever. It's an open question what's going to happen. But what it does mean is that the spouse is brought into the orbit of special grace, where God's grace is at work through the gospel in his church.

[29 : 07] It means that that spouse is brought within the orbit of the wonderful privileges that all of that brings. That's the case, he says, in verse 14, for the children of even one believer, of course.

Their children are set apart and holy. None of them would have disputed that. They're heirs to all the privileges to be raised for a future of faith. But Paul says it's the same for your spouse.

In a marriage like this, you see, God's Spirit has already invaded your household. He's already at work. God's grace is at work in your family. And your spouse may be one for Jesus too.

Not a guarantee, of course, it's not magic. God is sovereign. But verse 16 is a word of hope. Your spouse may indeed be saved.

You don't know. It may happen precisely this way as part of God's plan to save your whole family. And God works in families. It's wonderful. Nobody knows what he can be doing.

[30 : 12] And some of us here tonight can testify that that's exactly what happened in our own families, with our own spices. It's what Peter spoke of. Remember, we looked at it a few weeks ago in 1 Peter 3. So nothing is there a reason to preserve marriage just because of the sanctity of marriage as God's order of creation, his common grace if you like, but also because his grace is at work in redemption, even in a marriage like that.

And that should be your goal, says Paul, even in the struggle of a mixed marriage to somebody who's not yet a believer, where it's really tough. And no doubt it may be very, very tough at times.

But cling to this good news, Paul says. See the eternal perspective. Don't just see the nitty-gritty of today. It's good news. God is at work. And who knows?

Who knows how far his grace may go, how deep the influence might be. There is grace to be found for redemption, even in a marriage like that.

But of course there is also reality. That's there in verse 15, isn't it? Sometimes it just doesn't turn out like that. And when that happens, Paul says that a believer who is abandoned by an unbeliever must be at peace.

[31 : 37] If that happens, he says, let it be so. The words imply that a decisive end has come and that it must be accepted and not resisted because God, he says, has called you to peace.

You as the believer are not to seek the end and the breakup of a marriage, but if the unbelieving spouse does that and departs, you're to accept it, you're not to fight it, you're to be at peace.

You're not to burden yourself with responsibilities that you can't bear for their salvation, you're to trust them to God, you're to be at peace. That may be a word somebody needs to hear here tonight.

And notice what he says in that situation. Verse 15, the abandoned spouse here, he says, is not enslaved. That's very different, isn't it, from verse 11.

There it was, you must remain unmarried, but here you're not enslaved. Now I believe that that means that there has, in that circumstance, been a legitimate divorce, that there has been a decisive end to the marriage, that God has said, let them go, let it be so.

[32 : 51] And therefore, that there is the implication of divorce proper. that is, that there is the possibility of remarriage. Not everyone takes it that way, that's to be said, but I do believe that that's the implication there.

Such a decisive end, such a clear word about not being enslaved. But it is a situation in that specific issue of a believer being abandoned by an unbeliever because of their faith, not just for any old abandonment, not just for any marriage breakup.

But in this situation, it does seem that Paul is saying that there is grace for a new beginning, there is grace for remarriage. But only in the Lord.

Verse 39, the last verse there, must apply to this situation too. Once that breakup has happened, you can't possibly contemplate marrying another unbeliever. Well, let me draw some conclusions.

There are many more things that need to be said, of course, but actually we do have here the essence, I think, of the Bible's position. And it's really quite plain and simple, even though it might not be easy.

[34 : 08] Are you married Christians? Well, I am a married Christian, what am I to think? Well, it's very clear, Paul says, divorce is not an option for me to think about, and that's that.

In some situations, that might indeed be very, very hard. In some situations, there may need to be an awful lot of help, yes, indeed, but that is the command of God's apostle, that's the command of God, that's the command of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And if we know the Lord Jesus and we love him, we can trust him that his commands are what is best for us. He wants the best for us, not the worst.

There just can't be any such thing as a no-fault divorce for a Christian believer. We just mustn't even begin to think that way. But of course, on the other hand, we are where we are today, aren't we?

We can't turn the clock back. It may be that things have broken down. Well, if that's the case, Paul says there is still good news. There is still grace available, says Paul, for seeking reconciliation, and that is possible.

[35 : 21] If we're humble, if we're both humble, if we're willing to humble ourselves before Jesus and ask for Jesus' help, his way, nothing's impossible with God.

We believe Jesus, we must believe that. There is grace for reconciliation, even when things are very bad indeed. But of course, sometimes that just doesn't happen, it seems too far gone.

And separation may sometimes have to be the lesser of two evils. That would be especially true, I suppose, if there was a situation of abuse or certainly of actual danger, particularly for a woman.

Sometimes that is the case, even in Christian marriages, alas. But Paul does say that in that case, remarriage is not an option. There may yet be grace for reconciliation, but if not, then we must seek grace for contentment, for remaining as we are.

What about the converted spouse, and yet unconverted husband or wife? Well, says Paul, there is hope, there is grace for redemption.

[36 : 34] Who knows what God's wonderful grace can do through you having been converted? So yes, it's tough, but work at your marriage, pray, trust God, who knows? Faith very, very often spreads exactly that way.

Often, of course, today it's not exactly a marriage partner that happens, it's a cohabiting partner who is converted. Well, I think 1 Corinthians 7 here applies just the same. You don't have to depart from someone that you've been effectively married with and living with.

In fact, you shouldn't. You want to regularize the arrangement, I would think, into a proper marriage as soon as you can.

That, of course, might be the issue that results in your partner saying, well, they want out, they don't want to be part of that. But on the other hand, it might be the very thing that begins their path to salvation.

But if there is abandonment, then Paul says, you're not bound. There is grace for a new start, for remarriage, I believe, or for the first real marriage, in fact, if it's not been a real marriage.

[37 : 43] Just as there is grace for you as a Christian if your marriage has been destroyed by adultery, whether your spouse was a Christian or not, there is grace for you also, and remarriage is possible, it's not adultery.

Not demanded, of course, neither is divorce demanded, and there can be wonderful grace for reconciliation, even in that case, the case of adultery, and it is a wonderful mirror of God's reconciling love for lost humanity, for all of us who have broken our marriage covenant with God, our Father, our husband, our lover.

Of course, that means great grace, great forgiveness, but there is grace for reconciliation, even in these situations, says Paul. God can work wonders, but in that case where there has been adultery, adultery has broken the marriage bond, and therefore a further marriage is not adulterous.

And there is grace for a fresh beginning, for all of those who have come to faith in Jesus Christ, despite all kinds of wrong relationships, all kinds of breakdown, or adultery, or mess, or whatever it is in the past.

You see, we've seen in these verses that Paul does seem to treat Christians differently from non-Christians, as indeed Jesus does. It's kingdom people who can live with kingdom holiness.

[39 : 12] It's kingdom people, not others, who can embrace the kingdom ethic. We can't undo the past, the past is gone, but there is forgiveness, and forgiveness does mean a fresh start.

And if you were married, and divorced, and remarried before coming to your faith, well, it's your present marriage that matters. It's that marriage that you will want to live out in an honoring way to God.

You can't rewrite history, you can't undo the past. Maybe you were divorced in the past before you became a Christian, but you've not yet remarried.

Well, that's a little bit more difficult, it's not explicitly dealt with here in the scriptures. Some would argue that verse 27 applies here, where Paul says, are you free from a wife?

Literally, have you been loosed from a wife? And would imply that that means not just people never married, but people who have been in the past divorce. I think that's possible.

[40 : 20] Myself, I'm inclined to take that differently, and I think it really probably refers to being released from an obligation to marry, that is, from a betrothal contract.

But even if it does apply, Paul's advice is still to that person, don't seek a wife. Only afterwards does he say, if you do marry, then there's no sin. As I say, I'm less sure whether that applies, but I do think that the general implication of verses 12 to 16 is that such a person is to be regarded as single, and therefore free to remarry, but only in the Lord.

That is, before you were a Christian, God does not require, or does not, does not regard your marriage in exactly the same way as for those who are a Christian.

I do think in any case, in that situation, there ought to be a good deal of caution. I think the advice that Paul gives, don't seek a wife, is good advice. What you need above everything else when you've come to Christ is not necessarily a new spouse, not necessarily a spouse at all.

What you need is a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says the appointed time is short. What really matters is seeking the kingdom of Christ first.

[41 : 41] What about more complex situations, messy relationships? People who are married have been separated, maybe now they're living with somebody else, living with somebody else's wife, who's not divorced.

Well, as I said, mission leads to mess. But praise God, because people are lifted out by grace, into the life, and into the hope of a new life.

Conversion leads people, of course, to recognizing the sin and the mess in their lives, and the desire to put it right. It's not always possible to sort everything out absolutely clearly.

You can't undo the past, but you can repent. You mustn't seek to justify yourself for the things that you want to do, but if we repent, if we seek to put right everything that we can, we can move from mess into God-honoring relationships.

That might involve regularizing a divorce that has to be taken, and a proper marriage that has to be entered into to regularize a situation that's de facto happening already.

[42 : 48] But there is grace in the gospel for repentance. And there is grace for regeneration and for a new start for every single human being. And finally, I want to say this, there is grace also for restoration.

Even for Christians who have sinned and have ended marriages wrongly perhaps, or according to things that Paul here and Jesus himself says shouldn't happen.

If that's you tonight, if you've listened to some of these things and found them very hard, as you will have, please make sure you also hear this, there is grace for reconciliation and for restoration.

The gospel is good news, it's not just good advice about morality. There's restoring grace in the gospel of Jesus. grace. This sin is not the unforgivable sin.

The sin of having messed up and mucked up a marriage and done the wrong thing is not the only sin that we commit. It's not even the worst sin that we commit. It is sin, but it's not the unforgivable sin.

[44 : 06] There is restoring grace. There's no cheap grace, there's no grace of God to be presumed upon, of course not, not ever, we mustn't do that, but there is real grace.

There is grace for every penitent human being. There is grace for the poor in spirit. There's the grace and the truth that we find in our Saviour, Jesus Christ. We've seen his fire, his holy passion, his absolutely stern and rigid commands about the sanctity of marriage, the real sin is its destruction.

Yes, we've seen that. And yet, as we'll sing in a minute, to those who falter, oh, how kind, how good to those who seek.

He knows our frame, he remembers that we're dust. In our calamity, in our sin, nevertheless, a bruised reed he will not break. He's the high priest that we sang about, for us and near us.

Think of the woman at the well, five times married, now living with a man, not her husband. Think how gentle and how kind and how dignified the Lord Jesus was with that woman.

[45 : 21] That's his grace. Yes, of course, there was truth also. He convicted of her sin, but truth and grace. Think of the woman taken in adultery.

It was exactly the same, wasn't it? Neither do I condemn you, he said. Sheer grace to forgive. But also, of course, grace to impart a new life, a holy life.

Go and sin no more, he said too. There is a fresh start, even for the fallen Christian believer, perhaps especially for the fallen Christian believer, the child of God.

Not for the self-justifying. No, there can never be. Christ can't be anything but true and right with us. Can't sweep it under the carpet.

But for the sinner who repents, there is always the grace of a loving Savior. There is grace for restoration and for new beginning with Jesus.

[46 : 33] And so there must also, mustn't there be grace for restoration and new beginning among the people of Jesus. That's us. so as we think about these difficult things, these hard areas, these painful things, remember the Lord Jesus, his words and his ways.

And let's ask God to help us to be just such a people of grace and truth that reflect our Savior's reality and hatred of sin, that equally affect his love and his compassion and his grace for sinners.

There is grace for reconciliation, for redemption and for restoration because we have a Savior.

Well, let's pray. Let's pray. Lord Jesus Christ, every one of us as we think on these difficult things is made to realize that every one of us falls so far short of your ideal for us and yet we are the people for whom you gave your life.

How we rejoice in that and how we love you and how we pray, Lord, that your love, your grace and your truth would be the marks of our lives and of our life here together as a fellowship.

[48 : 11] Help us, we pray, to honor the gift of marriage and of family life and all that you have given for the blessing of your people.

But help us also to honor the saving grace of our Savior, that together we may witness to him the joy of restoration and the grace that makes new lives out of what was once marred and will go on doing so forever until we see your face.

So encourage our hearts, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.