

## “Not the Way Things Ought to Be”

### 1 Corinthians 7:8-11

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#### Text Comment

Remember, now: chapter 7 began with Paul taking up an issue raised by the Corinthians in a letter to him. That issue was the idea of a sexless marriage which Paul forbids. Now he proceeds to other related matters.

v.8 Probably “unmarried” is to be taken as a general category including those who have never been married, those who have been divorced, and those who have suffered the death of a spouse. Widows is a specific category, mentioned perhaps because of the special difficulties that faced widows in the Greco-Roman world. Paul recommends that they remain unmarried and will give some account of his reasons later in the chapter. But, remember, he fully understands that marriage is the state to which God has called most people. There may be good reasons for remaining unmarried for certain people in certain circumstances, but that condition of life is not for everyone, as Paul goes right on to say.

v.9 Commentators fall all over themselves and propose all manner of unconvincing interpretations of this verse because they think it would be embarrassing to have Paul propose marriage as simply an expedient to forestall sexual sin. But that is hardly Paul’s whole doctrine of marriage. He is simply stating the obvious. He is saying what the Bible elsewhere says: viz. that an erotically fulfilling marriage is the true antidote to sexual sin. It is fundamentally the same truth, after all, that he has just affirmed in the previous paragraph when he argued that marriage must be an erotic affair lest one of the key blessings and benefits of marriage be lost, viz. the provision it makes for sexual fulfillment in a wholesome and holy context.

In an interesting passage in *The Journals of Jim Elliot* [446-447], amidst his account of missionary activity, gospel witness, some new converts, and his burgeoning romance with Elizabeth, we find this: “June 13: I am clean mad for a woman this afternoon. ... At times this sheer physical *need* is the strongest argument for marriage that I know, stronger than love or social adjustment or anything. When God saw that it was not good for a man to be alone, He saw something that is terribly obvious, and He *did not* meet the need by making a second man!” Elliot has wonderful things to say in his journals about his love for Elizabeth and the beauty and purity of that love, but he was also a realist, as was the Apostle Paul.

v.10 In this case, Paul clearly is addressing a marriage in which both spouses are believers. He will deal with spiritually mixed marriages later. This is one of the rare instances in Paul’s letters when he refers directly to the teaching of the Lord Jesus. You remember the Lord’s strong teaching on the inviolability of the marriage bond. A second point: do not confuse the word “separate” here with our concept of legal separation, something less

than divorce. In the Greco-Roman world, divorces could be prosecuted in court and made a matter of legal judgment, but ordinarily they just happened. The husband sent the wife away or one or the other of them just left. "Separate" here means the same thing as "divorce." The usage of the term in the Greek of that period confirms this.

- v.11 You sometimes hear Christians say that someone who should not have been divorced is still married in God's eyes. Paul does not take that point of view: he calls the divorced, even the improperly divorced, "unmarried."

Things very often do not turn out the way we expect. We have flower boxes decorating the deck of our summer place in the Colorado mountains. A month ago, my mother had no sooner filled those flower boxes with geraniums than we had a terrific hailstorm, hail falling thick and hard for a very long time, until the ground was covered with it, the whole valley white. The flowers, of course, were battered, the petals beaten off, and for the rest of the vacation there was nothing but stems sticking out of the dirt. That is a picture of the way things turn out very often in this world, is it not? You plant just before the hailstorm! Things don't turn out as you expected, or as you hoped.

Of course, in a way, we expect things not to go right in the world of unbelief. We expect that the way of the transgressor will be hard and that those who rebel against God will find that life does not turn out for them as they had hoped. There is so much disappointment and so many unfulfilled wishes in this world. On our way home, last Wednesday, we had a picnic lunch at a rest stop near Baker, Oregon. It was a lovely sunny day and we were standing around a picnic table making our sandwiches and laughing about this and that. Our pleasant lunchtime was interrupted by a couple who had just driven up and parked their car. The man was yelling at the woman, his wife we supposed, screaming at her really. There she sat, not only taking his abuse, but taking it in front of others. The man was yelling so loudly a number of people stopped to look and listen. And then off they drove, a car full of anger, hatred, bitterness, and a crushed spirit. I guarantee you the relationship was not begun in the expectation of that! Thursday, I was leaving the office and going to my car and a man was standing outside the back door of a car parked, running, here on Shirley Street, right in front of the church parking lot. A small boy was sitting in the back seat and the man was yelling angrily at him. Another young fellow, perhaps a teenager looked like he was trying to protect the boy in the backseat from the wrath of the man standing by his window. In a moment it was all over, the man got back behind the wheel and drove away. A little boy in the back seat, just having been crushed as surely as if the man had used his fists. And, then, as if the Lord was sure I would not miss the point, Jamie and I came home from my mother's Thursday evening and parked in front of our house, and across the street a man and a woman were screaming at one another at the top of their lungs: hateful, cruel, cutting things, one mean-spirited burst after another.

Relationships that began in love and desire go bad and turn sour and bitter. That too is a picture of life in this world. There is so much that does not turn out as people hoped or dreamed.

But, the fact is, that is also true in the kingdom of God in this world. We think it should not be. Naturally, we think that Christians should be able to show the rest of the world the great difference that the grace of God makes. Our marriages should be deliciously happy, secure, and

permanent. Our relationships should be wholesome, peaceful, and fruitful. Our lives should be proof that in Christ is truly found the life worthy to be called life. And, to be sure, there is much in the life of the Christian community that is the proof of that. There is much that *does* demonstrate the power and the goodness of God to transform, to purify, and to bless human life. But, we all know that many things do not turn out the way we might have expected; certainly not the way we hoped. Even Christian marriages sometimes do not always last, the marriages of real Christians. Family life is not always happy. Relationships go sour. It embarrasses us that it should be so. We feel rightly that when this is so we have not lived up to our calling, that we have betrayed the grace of God, that we have embarrassed the Lord before the watching world.

But, be that as it may, such is the case and there is no denying it. And what I find very important in our text this morning is that the Apostle Paul himself does not deny it. The longer I serve as a pastor, the more Christian life that I observe, the more striking and important seems to me Paul's qualification, in v. 11, of his prohibition against divorce. "A wife must not separate from her husband – and as he continues in the next verse the same applies to the husband, he must not divorce his wife. That is clear enough. *But then Paul goes on:* "but *if she does*, she or he must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband and he to his wife."

If you stop and think, I think you will agree that we would not really have expected Paul to say that. That remark is really quite surprising. We do not expect the great Apostle to say that if someone does what is wrong, well, then, so be it, but at least don't compound the wrong by doing something worse, in this case, remarrying. He seems virtually to be permitting Christian marriages to fail! The Lord did not make any such concession in his teaching about divorce! He didn't say, "You cannot divorce, except for adultery, *but, if you do*, you should remain unmarried."

Paul was in Ephesus when he wrote this letter. He was planning to visit Corinth on his way back to Jerusalem. He had sent this letter, the letter we know as 1 Corinthians, on ahead. But he had plans to be there in person in several months time. I don't think it would have surprised any careful, faithful reader of the Bible, if what Paul had said instead was something like this.

"I hear that there are those in the church there in Corinth who have divorced without cause. Christian men and women who were married are now divorced who had no grounds to seek a divorce. They may not have got along, they may have ceased to enjoy one another's company, they may have tired of married life, at least married life such as they knew it, but no one had committed adultery. And, in defiance of our Lord's commandment, they got a divorce. This is what I hear has happened. Now, hear me. Let me be perfectly clear. I am soon to be on my way to Corinth; I will be there in three or four months. When I arrive I expect these divorced spouses to be back together again as husband and wife. Christians do not get divorced. They are under orders from their Lord and Master who said that the marriage bond is inviolable. The faithful, as the Scripture has always said, keep their vow even when it hurts. It is their calling to show to the world that Christians are faithful people, that Christians know that there are more important things than personal peace and happiness, that we really can do all things through Christ who strengthens us and that we really mean what we say when we speak about soon having to give an answer to the Lord our judge for the deeds done in the body.

So, these men and women have a choice: they can reconcile and restore their marriages, or they can get out of the church. They can put their marriages right, or they can give up the pretense that they are Christians. Christians are people who do what God says. Make your choice.

If Paul had said that, we would have understood precisely what he meant and felt the force of his argument. But, Paul did not say that. And the longer I live and work as a pastor and the longer I read the Bible the more struck I am with what he does say. He is as much as saying that, even in the kingdom of God, things don't always work out the way we expect, the way they should, the way we know is right and proper. Things often end up wrong and we can't make them right. Even the church, even the elders of the church, can't make them right, even when dealing with genuinely Christian people.

It is easy to think, and many Christians have thought, and many today do think, that things *can* be made clear and plain and put right in the church: either by reconciliation or excommunication. Either Christians stay married to one another and live in faithfulness to their marriage vows or they are put out of the church. Either way, the church remains faithful, either way there are no improperly divorced people in her membership. Her witness remains clear, her testimony undefiled. She stands by her convictions and shows them to the world. I have heard many Christians and many Christian leaders speak this way. They are "the line in the dust" kind of people, the hard-liners, if you will. They see no reason why what's wrong can't be put right, one way or another.

But, however persuasive that logic, Paul did not embrace it. He says – he cannot be read to be saying anything else – that some Christian marriages end and they cannot be put right and the folk themselves are not to be put out of the church. There are some problems – even problems that stem from disobedience to God – that can't be fixed in this world and have rather to be borne, to be endured, even, finally to be overlooked. That is Paul's point. And, when you compare his concession here in v.11 to other things we read in the Bible we learn something very important; we gain an important piece of the puzzle that is the holy, faithful, Christ-like life. There is something important here about humility, about patience, about forbearance, and about waiting for the Lord to put right what is beyond our power to put right. We learn to accept that there is going to be some gray, some ambiguity in the church's life and witness. We may wish it were not, but it is so.

You remember the Lord's famous parable about the wheat and the tares. Weeds were planted by an enemy among the good seed and the weeds grew up among the wheat. The servants of that farmer asked what would seem to be a perfectly sensible question: should they pull the weeds out so that the wheat will be able to flourish, unhindered by the weeds, not having to share the nourishment of the soil with the weeds? No, said the wise farmer, leave the weeds alone to grow up with the wheat. For if you try to pull up the weeds, you are bound to get some of the wheat by mistake. Better to leave the weeds than to ruin some of the wheat. And that, Jesus said, is a picture of how things will be in the church, in the kingdom of God. There will be a mixture of believers and unbelievers and there is little that can be done to prevent that. The church must take care to ask and demand a credible profession of faith in Christ on the part of its members, it should set and maintain high standards, it should discipline those who refuse to live a faithful

Christian life, all this is true and taught plainly in the Bible. But, still, the membership of the church will be a mixture of the saved and the unsaved and that cannot be prevented.

We might well think, and many Christians have thought through the ages, that the church should have in its membership only true believers, genuine Christians. But every effort to effect that result has ended in disaster and real Christians have been harmed in an effort to rid the body of false believers.

Well, that is just another instance of this same phenomenon. There is another way in which we are taught that there is a good deal that we are going to have to put up with in the church of God. Things are not going to be as they should be and there is nothing that we can do to prevent it. There are going to be unbelievers, false sons and daughters of God, in the church and we can't prevent it. They will weaken the church, their presence will depress the spiritual vitality of the people of God, but we cannot prevent this from happening. For we do not know for sure who they are and we cannot get rid of them without doing some real Christians harm.

Or take another example, another kind of example. Take what surely must be one of the most startling admissions in all of the New Testament, viz. that the Apostle Paul and his partner in missionary work, the celebrated Barnabas, had a falling out so severe, so intractable that they could not longer work together and went their separate ways. *"Wait a minute!" we say. How can that be?* These two great men and great men of faith; these men who had worked miracles and, by the grace of God, created the church in many cities where it had not existed before; these men who had suffered so much together for the cause of the gospel, had an argument and split up? That can't be! Surely someone, perhaps some other apostles, went to those two mighty men of God and said to them: "Brothers, you set the standard for every other Christian; we look to you; you have taught us that if we have no love we are nothing and that love does not quarrel; you have taught us to live at peace with all men; you have taught us that nothing is more important than simply doing the will of Jesus Christ; *and now you are going to permit this public spat to embarrass the gospel and the Christian church?* No, it cannot be permitted. You two go into a room and don't come out until you have sorted this out and are friends again."

But it did not happen. They went their separate ways because they had such a sharp disagreement that they could no longer work together. Unbelievable! But it happened. And it has happened many times since. It would demoralize you were I to mention to you how many great men, men we admire and idolize as great Christians and preachers and missionaries and Christian leaders, could not get along with other men whom we also idolize and admire and whose names we hold in Christian reverence.

Well so it has been in many ways. Things have not been as they should have been. So it has been often in Christian marriages, whether or not there has been a divorce that shouldn't have been. But hear the great Apostle once more: *"but if she does, that is, if she goes ahead and does what she should not do, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband."* He is as much as saying that all problems cannot be fixed in this world and that even in the kingdom of Jesus Christ, much will be that ought not to be and we must live with it.

True, this makes harder work for the church's elders. They must be able to discern when discipline, even excommunication is called for – as Paul insisted upon in a previous chapter of this same letter (you remember the matter of the man living with his step-mother) – and, on the other hand, they must know when the failings of Christians must simply be borne. That is no easy distinction to make, believe me. What is more, this concession of the Apostle Paul poses a real temptation. Every extension of God's mercy and kindness tempts us to demand less of ourselves. You know very well that there is a natural tendency for Christian people to hear Paul saying in this text that Christians can get away with a wrong, an improper divorce. That they can leave an unhappy marriage and suffer no spiritual consequence. Sure, it may not be the best, but Paul says I can do it as a Christian, does he not? And, of course, Paul isn't saying that at all. First, he insists – take careful notice – on a single life afterward which is not the intention of most Christians who divorce improperly and, even if it is at the time, later, they will want their freedom to marry again. What is more, he is not denying that our sins have consequences, both in this life and the life that is to come. He does not say that God will not respond to the disobedience of his son or daughter or that others, children especially, will not suffer for that disobedience. He is merely saying what position the church should and should not take in addressing the problem of broken marriages between Christians spouses.

No, let no Christian take Paul's concession here as an invitation to break a marriage vow. We should no more do that than to take the fact of Paul and Barnabas' dispute to excuse our own antagonisms and alienations, our own spirit of censoriousness and wounded pride, our own hard-heartedness toward others, our own divisions and separations from other believers.

No, what we are to carry away from Paul's remarkable instruction in v. 11 – that Christians may in fact do what everyone knows is wrong, even in a matter as consequential as marriage and divorce, and that their failure must to some extent be borne in the church – what we are to carry away, I say, is a spirit of patience, longsuffering, sympathy. We may be called upon to be perfect as our father in heaven is perfect, but we are never taught, it is never suggested that we will attain to that standard in this life. We all fail in many ways. That too is a fact of our life as Christians. The church in this world is and will remain a community of screw-ups! The perfect life that Christ has promised us will not be ours until we are in the next world. Meantime, we sinners must bear with one another in kindness and understanding. Even when we strongly wish that people had done other than they did, we are to remember that Christ has forgiven us many, many sins – more than we begin to know – and that he continually bears with our repeated failures. We must do the same with our brethren. We are not to be among those who pass harsh judgment on the sins of others while gaily receiving daily mercy from the Lord who does not treat us, who does not begin to treat us as our sins deserve.

This too is the mercy of God – we see it there in v. 11. How much he bears and endures from us. How little we succeed in living the life he has summoned us to live, the life that Christ suffered and died that we might live. And yet he continues our Father and we his children. And that great mercy should become a spirit of mercy, of longsuffering, of kindly forgiveness, understanding, and sympathy in all our hearts. The steely resolve to obey and serve must remain, of course, but not without the mercy.

And if the difference between Christians and non-Christians is not as plain and clear and unmistakable as it ought to be, well, then, may that unhappy fact have this effect: that we are kept looking for and waiting for and longing for the coming of our Lord and Savior when Christians will become all that they ought to be and when we will see in every believer that same perfection that is in Jesus Christ today.