

Sermon follow-up

Divorce: When Man Separates What God Has Joined Together

1 Cor. 7:10-16, Matthew 19:1-10

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On the evils of no-fault divorce, see Stephen Baskerville's article:

<http://touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=22-01-019-f>

See also Albert Mohler:

<http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/09/30/divorce-the-scandal-of-the-evangelical-conscience/>

On biblical grounds for divorce and freedom to remarry, I suggest looking at Jay Adams' *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* and the PCA's position paper in the *PCA Digest*. Some interesting and helpful thoughts are also found in Ray Sutton's *Second Chance*.

Why doesn't Paul call for church discipline in the case of a Christian couple that gets an unbiblical, and therefore sinful, divorce? Many years ago, I wrote on this issue to address a pastoral case that arose in the church I was serving. Here is a portion of that paper:

#### I. INTRODUCTION

The question of when a believer has a right to divorce is easily answerable from passages such as Mt. 5:32, 19:3ff, and 1 Cor. 7:12ff. Brief reflection on these passages will show that a believer has only two legitimate opportunities for divorce:

1. In the case of marital unfaithfulness, the innocent party is free to divorce (I personally believe this right continues to exist even if the guilty party clearly evidences repentance, but I will not be dealing with that question here).
2. In cases of a mixed marriage where the unbelieving spouse wants to leave, the believer is "not under bondage" (1 Cor. 7:15). What constitutes desertion could be debated, but is not relevant to the topic of this paper.

It should be noted that in both cases where divorce becomes permissible for the believer, there is a corresponding freedom to remarry.

The question could obviously be asked, what if one member of a believing couple decides to pursue divorce for some reason other than adultery or desertion? When a Christian seeks a divorce with no biblical warrant, what is the church's responsibility? The obvious answer may seem to be that the church should discipline such an erring member; sin of such a public nature would certainly require ecclesiastical sanctions. However, some think that 1 Cor. 7:10-11 leaves a loophole for someone who obtains an illegitimate

divorce to remain in good standing in the church, provided he or she vows to either “remain unmarried or be reconciled.” In other words, repentance can be adequately demonstrated by permanent singleness; in essence, this becomes equivalent to reconciliation. While I can see how this interpretation may have some plausibility at first glance, I think it can be shown to be false for several reasons. In fact such a reading of the verse would require a radical overhaul of the way orthodox Christians have treated the bulk of Scripture’s teaching on marriage, divorce, and church discipline.

## II. INTERPRETATIVE CONSIDERATIONS

To begin with, it must be admitted that 1 Cor. 7 is a very unique and very difficult passage in Scripture. Because we do not have the Corinthians’ correspondence (see 7:1) to Paul, reading this section (as well as several other portions of 1 Cor.) is like listening to just one end of a phone conversation. We never know the full picture or all the relevant issues the Corinthians had raised in their letter to Paul; all we can do is piece together the clues that we do have from Paul’s side of the conversation. In addition Paul does something quite odd in v10,12,23 - he contrasts his own teaching with that of the Lord. As several reformed commentators have pointed out, over and against most liberal interpretations, the contrast in these verses is not between what is inspired and what is uninspired, as though only portions of Paul’s canonical letters were the product of the Holy Spirit’s infallible leading. Nor is he contrasting divine command with personal advice. As Murray puts it, “The distinction is rather between teaching that was expressly given by Christ in the days of his flesh and teaching that did not come within the compass of Christ’s own deliverances while upon earth.” (Divorce, p.63). In 7:10,11 Paul is merely restating something the Lord taught in his earthly ministry; there is absolutely nothing new being propounded here. In 7:12, 25 Paul is offering new commands for situations our Lord did not explicitly address. This reference to our Lord’s earthly teaching is an important point, as will be seen below. Finally, the total context of 1 Cor. 7 must be taken into account. Paul’s entire discussion is qualified by his statement in 7:26. While there are certainly many plausible interpretations of this verse (some would claim the unique circumstances mentioned are not limited to first century Corinth, but pertain to all Christians living between the two advents of Christ; others come to a similar conclusion by pointing to the language of v.28, “trouble in the flesh”, and claim that marriage in any historical context brings unique difficulties), it seems most likely that Paul has in view a temporary emergency situation, and so his statements do not apply to all Christians in all times and places in the same way they did to the letter’s immediate recipients (see Adams, Chr. Living in Home, p.46). While marriage does bring about new trials in any cultural setting, it seems Paul wants the Corinthian believers to count the cost before tying the knot because of the coming bloodbath (Roman persecution of Christians was right around the corner).

In addition to these interpretive factors, I must mention that no commentary I have looked at deals with the hard issues raised by 1 Cor. 7:10,11. Everyone seems to dodge this bullet. Issues of divorce as it relates to church discipline are just not discussed. Perhaps many commentators think the answer to these questions is obvious or it is beyond the scope of their exegetical concerns. But for those doing real life ministry with real life Christians (who are, of course, also real life sinners), and for those who are concerned about the purity of Christ's bride as well as the healing of broken relationships, dealing with this issue is mandatory. [By the way the closest someone comes to dealing with this issue is Adams, M,D,R, p. 89 - he seems to reach the same conclusion I do, but doesn't deal with 1 Cor. 7:11 specifically there.]

I will assume the "departing" of 1 Cor. 7:11 is equivalent to divorce. Many commentators think it is a separation, a leaving, but not a total dissolution of marriage bond (cf Hodge, Murray, Clark). I am not convinced this is the case for two reasons: First, Paul says the one who departs should "remain unmarried" and it seems the unmarried state could only result from an actual divorce, or "putting away", not from a mere "leaving" that did not include formal divorce. Secondly, Paul is reiterating a command of our Lord and nowhere in the canonical Scriptures did Jesus speak of a "separation" that was less than divorce; instead, he refers to divorce as a result of hardness of heart. If something less severe than divorce is in view, I don't think it weakens the following argument - if Scripture forbids mere separation, how much more does it forbid divorce! In support of my assumption, Jay Adams says emphatically, "In the bible the modern idea of separation as something less than divorce (whether legal or otherwise) was totally unknown as a viable alternative to divorce" (M,D,R, p. 33).

### III. A "LOOPHOLE" IN SCRIPTURE?

I contend that the "loophole view" (as I will call it) puts entirely too much stress on one verse ( 1 Cor. 7:11), to exclusion of other relevant Scriptural data. In addition, it requires that several things be read into 1 Cor 7:11 that simply are not there.

Recalling that 1 Cor 7:10,11 are simply a restatement of our Lord's earthly teaching on marriage sheds much light on this passage. There can be little doubt, I think, that Paul has in view Mk. 10:1-10, or its parallel, Mt. 19:1-10. In this passage, the Pharisees have asked Jesus about lawful divorce. In Mt. 19:4-6, Jesus answers them but in a very indirect fashion. He doesn't really answer them until v.8,9. But v.4-6 are crucial because they show the Pharisees had the wrong emphasis: rather than focusing on what God required of marriage partners (clearly lifelong commitment), they were apparently looking for a way out of what God required (as if to say, "If marriage doesn't work, we can always get a divorce, right?"). Jesus points them back to God's original pattern for marriage by quoting, not from Dt. 24

(the passage in dispute), but from Gen. 1:27 and 2:24. Jesus was clearly teaching that marriage is to be an unbreakable bond - the two, male and female, become one flesh, separated only by death. His conclusion is clear: "Therefore what God has joined, let not man separate." It is this teaching of Jesus out of Genesis on marriage that must be the presupposition of any discussion of divorce.

Paul's statement is, of course, identical with the conclusion of Jesus: "A wife is not to depart from her husband...and a husband is not to divorce his wife." This is where the emphasis must rest. This is where our obligations, if we are married, rest. From the original paradigm of marriage, it is clear that divorce is simply not an option; marriage must always be viewed as a covenant bond for life. Jesus' phrase "at the beginning" points to a normative description of marriage rooted in creation. Any alteration of this must be viewed strictly as a result of man's rebellion and fall into sin. And, indeed this is just what Jesus says explicitly in Mt. 19:8: divorce was conceded because of the "hardness of your hearts".

I will not take up in detail the question of Dt. 24 and whether or not divorce was permitted in the OT for lesser reasons than adultery and desertion; the question is important to such issues as OT/NT con't/discon't, but is not germane to our discussion because it is simply either altered or confirmed by Jesus' teaching in Mt. 19:8,9. If confirmed, we learn nothing different from Dt. 24 than from Mt. 19; if altered, it is the altered requirement and not the original concession that is binding on us. I am very inclined to think that the teaching of Jesus in Mt. 5:31,32 and 19:8,9 are simply his explanation of the Mosaic law, and therefore Jesus is not changing the teaching of the OT on this point. Ample evidence for this is found in Mt. 5:17-20 as well as the following section in the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus corrects Pharisaical misinterpretations of the OT law. Andrews says "[The Pharisees] had taken Dt 24:1 as an excuse to divorce their wives for any frivolous reason whatever, so Jesus corrected them in Mt. 5:31, 32 with the proper interpretation of that OT verse, explaining that the only cause for divorce given in that Scripture was sexual immorality ("uncleanness")." (The Family, p. 364)

In light of Mt. 19:8, it is simply impossible to conceive of divorce of any sort apart from hardness of heart in one or both spouses. Whether the cause be adultery, desertion, or something else (obviously something less severe and therefore illegitimate), the root cause is hardness of heart. From this we can infer that if a husband (or wife) is guilty of adultery or willful desertion, that person has a hard heart and needs to repent. But we can also infer that if a husband (or wife) pursues divorce for illegitimate reasons, he (or she) has a hard heart and needs to repent. The conclusion is inescapable: If divorce is the result of sin (which it is) then at least one spouse in any divorce has what Jesus calls a hard heart. If someone divorces his or her spouse for a less than

biblical reason, we have no choice but to conclude that person is guilty of breaking a covenant bond that should have remained intact, and at the root of this covenant breaking is hardness of heart.

It is precisely this hardness of heart that, by God's grace, the church discipline process aims to eradicate. The bearing of this on 1 Cor. 7:11 should be clear. The choice to divorce, regardless the decision to remain unmarried or to seek marriage to another, displays hardness of heart. With Mt. 19 as background, we see that Paul is not equating the two phrases "remain unmarried" and "be reconciled." To pursue reconciliation would be to show repentance of the hardness of heart that occasioned divorce. But it must be asked at this point: why does Paul mention remaining unmarried at all? This was not explicitly mentioned by our Lord in Mt. 19, so how can Paul be claiming to restate our Lord's earthly teaching? This question is answered by looking at what Jesus does explicitly say in Mt 19. In v.9, he says that if an illegitimately divorced person marries another, he commits adultery; also, if his wife marries another, that man commits adultery. Clearly, the hardness of heart evidenced in unlawfully breaking the covenant bond of marriage is only intensified by entering into marriage covenant with another. The spouse who originally obtained the divorce has now increased his (or her) guilt and become involved in an inextricable mess. His (or her) obligation was to be reconciled; now that is impossible (Dt. 24:1-4). Thus it is easy to see why Paul says the divorced person must remain unmarried or be reconciled. To marry another would be to enter into an adulterous marriage; the command "remain unmarried" is equivalent to saying "do not commit adultery, which is even worse than merely a sinful divorce."

Perhaps I can lay this out more clearly. If someone gets divorced for improper reasons, there are only three possibilities the "guilty" spouse can choose:

1. Be reconciled to the original partner
2. Remain sinfully divorced, yet unmarried
3. After the sinful divorce, marry another and thus commit adultery.

Clearly, "remain unmarried" = "do not commit adultery." It is not hard to see how the apostle's teaching meshes neatly with our Lord's at this point. The two texts use slightly different wording but they dovetail in meaning perfectly.

Those who hold to the "loophole" position have no problem seeing that option #3 is not really an option if one wants to remain in good standing in Christ's church. That's not to say repentance could never be manifested if a person chose this route, but further complications always arise out of additional sin. The person could never fulfill his or her original marital obligations in the proper way; the sinful divorce could never be corrected (cf Dt. 24). However, certainly if a change of heart is manifested at any point,

the person should be welcomed back by the church with open arms; the church is and must always remain a place of refuge for repenting sinners.

The problem I have with the “loophole” position is that it is virtually forced to say that option #2 is, at least for the purposes of church discipline, the functional equivalent of option #1. The loopholers manage this by accepting a “vow to remain unmarried” in place of actual reconciliation. But all those familiar with Scripture’s view of marriage should know intuitively this is a false equation. We ought to concede without argument that restoration of the marriage covenant, with renewed commitment to discharge one’s marital duties (as outlined in such passages as 1 Cor. 7:3-6, Eph. 5:22-33, and 1 Pt. 3:1-7) is far superior to simply remaining unmarried/refraining from adultery. This is the ideal and how it was “from the beginning”. Remaining unmarried, no matter what kind of vow is made concerning future plans, simply does not heal the breach, nor does it evidence repentance of the hardness of heart that led to divorce in the first place. Remaining unmarried does nothing for the spouse who is “innocent” (I realize that in virtually all cases, the divorcee is far from “innocent” - but as long as the divorcee wants reconciliation and genuinely desires the restoration of the relationship, including a willingness to fulfill his or her marital duties, he or she should be considered the one who has been “sinned against”, to use the language of Mt. 18) - he or she still has a legitimate right to all the privileges of marriage and simply knowing that reconciliation remains a theoretical possibility certainly cannot be very satisfying in the meantime. In other words, the “guilty” spouse has marital obligations to fulfill that simply cannot be performed apart from reconciliation; he or she has no right to continue the separation and remains hard of heart so long as reconciliation is refused.. Not only is this separation in violation of our Lord’s teaching, but it puts both spouses in a very dangerous place, exposed to all sorts of temptation. They both become potential adulterers (Mt. 5:31, 32).

But the loopholers have additional problems with their position. It is actually absurd. Suppose for a moment that #2 really is equivalent to #1, at least from the standpoint of church discipline. The result is one that no Christian could be comfortable with. Any believer could get a divorce for any reason at all - or for no reason at all - so long as he or she pledged to not take another spouse. Divorce, with a vow to celibacy, would have to be considered a legitimate option from the outset of the marriage relationship. We’d have to rewrite our marriage vows - “till death do us part - or until divorce with a vow to not remarry do us part.” Is anyone really satisfied with this? I think not - or at least I hope not! It should be evident by now that the loophole, allowing for a sinful divorce so long as there is no sinful remarriage, has been closed off.

#### IV. OTHER FACTORS

There are several more things to consider that are very relevant to our discussion of divorce, reconciliation, and a vow to not remarry. Rather than fully develop these, I will briefly list them below:

1.No matter how one interprets 1 Cor. 7:11, to allow the ruptured relationship to exist within the church is in violation of Mt. 5:23, 24. It is impossible to properly worship God (“bring your gift to the altar”) when horizontal relationships are broken. Clearly, in the case of a sinful divorce, relationships are broken and need to be mended before worshipping. Certainly, it would be wrong to partake of the Lord’s Supper since a prerequisite to proper eating and drinking is coming together without factions and divisions (1 Cor 11:18,19) and “discerning the Lord’s body” (namely, the unity of the body of Christ, which is the church). This is why church discipline can be satisfied with nothing less than complete restoration within the body.

2.This section of 1 Cor. simply says nothing about church discipline. Of course, we shouldn’t expect it to since Paul is simply reissuing a command of our Lord found in Mt. 19. Clearly, Mt 19 says nothing about church discipline either; for that we must go to Mt. 18. To say that Jesus or Paul should have singled out discipline for a sinful divorce if they wanted it enforced is beside the point. Jesus does not say that adultery should be disciplined in Mt. 19:9 and yet it certainly should be; the same applies to an unlawful divorce. There is simply nothing in the context of 1 Cor. 7 or Mt 19 that precludes the complete church discipline process.

3.To claim that a vow to “remain unmarried” evidences repentance for the “hardness of heart” that led one to get a sinful divorce is a bit of a stretch, as we have already hinted. But it becomes downright forced when one considers there are many reasons someone may take a vow to not remarry that would have nothing to do with repentance. For example, someone may consider their marriage experience to have been so awful that the prospect of a future marriage with anyone is very unappealing. At the very least, this is a very bad test for repentance, if it can be considered one at all.

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## VI. CONCLUSION

The “loophole” view as I have described it uses Paul’s statement in 1 Cor 7:11 to justify allowing a sinfully divorced person to remain in good standing in the church provided he or she vows to not marry another and thus become an adulterer. This view is simply untenable. It puts entirely too much stress on one verse (and an unclear one at that) to the exclusion of the rest of what Scripture teaches on marriage, divorce, remarriage, church discipline, and vows. To be fixated on 1 Cor 7:10,11 is to miss entirely what these verses are

saying, for v10 clearly points us away from their immediate context to our Lord's teaching in the gospels. Here we find that divorce is the result of hardness of heart. Nothing in our Lord's teaching allows room for the loophole position. Remaining unmarried (with or without a vow) is certainly better than committing adultery, but in no way is it the equivalent of reconciliation. Indeed, refusing to be reconciled is itself sinful and an occasion for church discipline. There is no way around this: the one who sinfully obtained a divorce must repent and be reconciled. If the church refuses to take the action that she should, things will only grow worse. All matters must be put to rest; the church can allow no dangling loose ends or unreconciled relationships to exist.

At that time, it seemed inconceivable that the church could simply forebear sinfully divorced persons in her membership. Isn't there an ultimatum to be live at peace, and shouldn't that peace include restoration of the marriage? Did the couple not have the obligation to be reconciled in order to participate in worship (Matt. 5:23-26)? Isn't it necessary to discern the body at the Lord's Table, so that we are in fellowship with God's people as we partake (1 Cor. 11:17ff)? Wouldn't it be sin for one believer to take another believer to court, as is required in a divorce (1 Cor. 5)? I think what has changed in my reading of 1 Cor. 7:11 is that I no longer think there is any reason to postulate an equivalence between the options Paul gives the improperly divorced person. The sinfully divorced person is to remain unmarried so they do not enter into the greater sin of adultery, but also so that reconciliation remains a possibility. Reconciliation is Paul's aim, of course, but he does not necessarily require the use of church discipline to bring it about.

Today, I am much more inclined to agree with the view articulated by Robert Rayburn ([http://www.faithtacoma.org/sermons/1Corinthians/1Cor\\_7.8-11.Aug4.02.htm](http://www.faithtacoma.org/sermons/1Corinthians/1Cor_7.8-11.Aug4.02.htm)):

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.

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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 Christian's 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.