

15. Learning to Minister to an Unbelieving Partner

In our last topic, we saw that we are to conduct our lives in such a way that our lives will bring glory to God. This is true whether we are married or single. As a result, we saw that the Corinthians asked Paul a number of questions about marriage. In the answers that Paul gave to those questions, he gave us guidance to help our children learn how to help people with their questions about marriage. Today, we are going to see that Paul gave guidance for another situation that is often faced in marriage. That is the situation where a Christian is married to an unbelieving partner. We want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to understand the answer of Paul to this question so that they can help others.

In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, we read, “Now to the married I command, *yet* not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from *her* husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to *her* husband. And a husband is not to divorce *his* wife.” In these verses, we see that one of the questions of the Corinthians was about separation or divorce. Here, we see that in a Christian marriage it is God’s plan for a wife not to depart from her husband and for a husband not to divorce his wife. Here, we see that it is not the plan of the Lord for a Christian couple to separate from one another. However, we also see that if they do separate from one another they are to remain unmarried or to be reconciled to one another. This is a reminder that the Lord can restore a marriage even when a couple is separated from one another.

The Pharisees had asked a similar question of Christ in an effort to justify their own divorces. In Matthew 19:3, we see how the Pharisees had questioned Christ. That verse says, “The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for *just* any reason?’” Christ quoted Genesis 2 and pointed out that God makes two people one. Then, the Pharisees said in Matthew 19:7-8, ... “‘Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?’ He said to them, ‘Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.’” We see that Moses wrote the law that divorce was permitted but that it was never required. We also see why the law permitted divorce. Christ said that the reason that divorce was permitted was due to the hardness of the hearts of people.

As we learn to yield our lives to the control of the Holy Spirit, the Lord causes hard hearts to become forgiving hearts. That is why 1 Corinthians says that if a couple is separated or divorced they are to remain unmarried so that it will become possible for them to be reconciled to their partner. As long as neither partner has remarried, it is still possible for that couple to be reconciled. Deuteronomy 24:4 points out that the thing that really breaks a marriage is when either partner has remarried so that reconciliation is not possible. That verse says, “*Then* her former husband who divorced her must not take her back to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that *is* an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God is giving you *as* an inheritance.” Many couples that are separated are reconciled once they become Christians because they learn to yield to the Lord and forgive one another.

Next, Paul goes on to answer the question regarding a couple where one partner is a Christian and

the other partner is not a Christian. 1 Corinthians 7:12-14 says, “But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.” It is common for one partner to become a Christian before the second partner becomes a Christian. In other cases, a person who is a Christian may have been disobedient to the Lord and married a person that was not a Christian. Whatever the case, we see that these verses give words of encouragement to the believing partner.

Many times, the unbelieving partner is very willing to remain with the believing partner. As a result, Paul said that the believing partner is not to leave and divorce the unbelieving partner. Instead, the believing partner is to realize that his or her life can have a powerful impact on the unbelieving partner. 1 Corinthians 7:16 says, “For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save *your* husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save *your* wife?” In 1 Peter 3:1-2, Peter tells the wives who have unbelieving husbands, “Wives, likewise, *be* submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct *accompanied* by fear.” Here, we see that the changed actions of the Christian partner will often draw the non-Christian partner to the Lord.

Peter tells us why the changed behavior of the Christian partner is so powerful. 1 Peter 3:3-4 says, “Do not let your adornment be *merely* outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on *fine* apparel—rather *let it be* the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible *beauty* of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God.” Peter said that the outward appearance is not the thing that will win the partner to the Lord. Instead, Peter says that the inner attitudes of a godly woman will draw the husband to the Lord. That is why the God says that a gentle and quiet spirit is very precious in the sight of God. God says that there is great beauty in a gentle and quiet spirit. The outward, changed behavior demonstrates that gentle and quiet spirit to the partner and uses that spirit to draw the partner to the Lord. In the same way, the changed life of a Christian husband will draw the wife to the Lord if the wife is not a Christian.

Paul also said that the believing partner sanctifies the unbelieving partner. The word “sanctify” means *to set apart to God*. The very fact that one partner is a Christian causes the other partner to receive certain blessings from the Lord. The Lord promises to hear and answer the prayers of Christians that are according to His will. 2 Peter 3:9 says, “The Lord is not slack concerning *His* promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” As the Christian prays daily for the salvation of the partner, 1 John 5:14-15 says, “Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.” The Christian partner will often see the unbelieving partner become a Christian as the Christian develops changed behavior. This will happen due to a gentle and quiet spirit and daily prayer for the salvation of the partner.

In addition, if the parent that is a Christian is obedient to the Lord, the Lord will use the godly life of the Christian partner to draw the children to the Lord because they are also sanctified by the believing parent. This is illustrated by the example of Timothy. Acts 16:3 points out that the father of Timothy was a Greek and not a follower of the Lord. That verse says, “Paul wanted to have him go on with him. And he took *him* and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek.” However, in 2 Timothy 1:5 we read, “When I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also.” Then, 2 Timothy 3:15 adds, “And that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” The mother and grandmother of Timothy taught him the Word of God and he became a faithful follower of the Lord.

In 1 Corinthians 7:15, we see that the unbelieving partner may in some cases make the choice to depart and leave the Christian. That verse says, “But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such *cases*. But God has called us to peace.” There are some individuals who become so angry when a partner becomes a Christian that they choose to leave and divorce the partner. God says that in such cases, the Christian is not under bondage. The Christian should not try to force the unbelieving partner to remain against their will.

In such cases, God reminds us that He has called us to peace. Instead of becoming angry or fearful, Philippians 4:5-7 tells us how to have peace in any situation. Those verses say, “Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord *is* at hand. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.” Here, we see that when an unbelieving partner chooses to leave, the Lord wants to give the Christian His peace. God says that His peace will guard both our hearts and our minds through Christ Jesus.

As we see in these verses, God will use the godly character of the believing partner to win the unbelieving partner to the Lord in many cases. In a few cases, the unbelieving partner will be so angry against God that the unbelieving partner may choose to leave. However, in either case the Lord wants to give the believing partner His peace. It will bring peace and joy to the heart of the believing partner if their changed behavior draws the unbelieving partner to the Lord. In those cases where the unbelieving partner chooses to leave the marriage, God says that He is able to give His peace to the believing partner. We want to help both our physical and spiritual children learn how to explain these things to the believing partner. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children learn to understand how to help Christians who have an unbelieving partner.