

## TJW, HT, 4.2.08, 1 Corinthians 7.12-16

---

Let me describe a city to you - a city in which divorce was easy to get, and fairly socially acceptable -  
a city in which sex with prostitutes was seen as just a natural thing for men to do.

So it's a city in which there's a lot of pressure on marriages.

And in this city there's a Christian church - and in that church there are a lot of followers of Christ who are married to a partner who's not a committed Christian.

It was obvious that these Christians in spiritually mixed marriages were in a different situation from couples where both husband and wife were following Christ. They had their own particular issues and struggles.

And it seems that these Christians, married to non-Christians, were often made to feel uncomfortable about the situation they were in.

Some other Christians were giving them the impression that being married to a non-Christian was bad - that it meant you could never be truly as spiritual as God wanted you to be - and that you could never belong to the family of the church as closely as you should.

The city I'm describing is Corinth, in ancient Greece. That's the city to which the apostle Paul wrote the letter that we call 1 Corinthians, that we're looking at this morning.

But you can see, can't you, how the Bible is a message from God for us today - because our world is really no different from ancient Corinth.

In our world, just like in theirs, divorce (although painful) is relatively easy to obtain, sex has been cheapened, and marriages are under pressure.

And in our church, too, like in theirs, there are many believers married to non-Christians.

And in our church those people sometimes feel that they'll never really be committed properly to the church-family - and they'll never be as fully devoted to Christ as they want to be.

In fact, this is one of the most common pastoral issues I talk through with Christians - how to handle being married to someone who's not a Christian.

Now this passage, in 1 Corinthians 7, is the part of the Bible that speaks most clearly about this. I turn to it often to help Christians in spiritually mixed marriages.

And for those of us who aren't in that situation - well, we'll want to know, won't we, what the Bible says about it, so that we can support our brothers and sisters who are in that situation.

In these few verses, 12-16, Paul tells Christians married to non-Christians the main thing they've got to do - and then he gives them a huge encouragement for doing it.

And the main thing to do is: **1. Stay married if you can (verses 12-13).**

It's good for us to have this open in front of us - 1 Corinthians chapter 7. And listen to verse 12 [READ verses 12-13].

When you read through 1 Corinthians, you find that Paul is tackling a problem he sees in the church.

Many of the Christians there had got hold of the idea of being a Christian as being born again, and being brought from spiritual death to spiritual life, and filled with the Holy Spirit.

All that is right - but they'd drawn a wrong conclusion.

They thought that a Christian could not stay married to a non-Christian: how could a Spirit-filled born-again person be united with someone who's not?

And it seems that they were instructing those believers to leave their spouses, because they're marriages weren't truly spiritual ones.

It seems shocking, although you can maybe see their logic. But Paul says, "No! If your spouse is willing to live with you, even though you're a Christian - you mustn't separate from them just because they're not a Christian."

You see what he's saying, don't you: your marriage is still a real marriage before God. You don't have to go cold on your marriage, in order to be really faithful to God, to really belong to the church-family.

And then in the next verses Paul gives the principle that lies behind this teaching - verse 17 [READ] - and the same thing in verse 20 [READ] - and a third time in verse 24 [READ].

If you've become a Christian and your spouse hasn't, God knows where he has put you. He's your king, and your shepherd and your Father - he's assigned you to your situation - and so stay in it.

A couple I know have recently adopted two young children.

They're taking them as their own children in the full knowledge that the children's past has made them what they are, and will continue to affect them. They won't demand them to be something they can't be.

When God called you to follow Christ, he was already sovereign over your life. He doesn't call you to change what can't be changed - and what shouldn't be changed.

The main thing for a Christian married to a non-Christian is: stay married.

And then Paul gives:

**2. a huge encouragement** for doing this: **the advantages your family has because of you (verse 14).**

See verse 14 [READ].

Now in the Bible the word 'sanctified' often means virtually the same as 'saved', or 'justified', often having in mind the growth in holiness that must come when we're saved by Christ.

But it can't mean that here, can it. You're partner isn't saved just because you are - they have to choose Christ for themselves.

And it's the same with children being 'holy'. They don't belong to Christ just because you do - they have to accept him for themselves.

But what God is saying here is this: your family are in a sense 'set apart' for the gospel.

They have a real opportunity to hear about Jesus from your lips.

They get something that not everyone gets: they get to live with a Christian, and to see the difference that the gospel makes to someone's life.

Is it Sainsbury's who have a "Taste the Difference" range? Your family get that all the time with you - tasting in you the difference that Christ makes to life.

There's one other part of the Bible that speaks about this, and it's worth looking at now. Keep a finger here in 1 Corinthians, and turn on a bit to p.1153, 1 Peter ch.3 [READ verses 1-2].

I know that when we read that, lots of people who are married to non-Christians just feel worse. You think of all the times at home when you've been horrible to your spouse - and you say to yourself: "my life is supposed to be a Christian witness to them, and it isn't."

Let me say two things about that.

First, keep dusting yourself off and starting again. Don't give up growing in holiness - it's a battle - it's meant to be a battle.

And second: Your Christian witness to your family will always be greater than you think it is. They probably won't tell you the differences they see in you - but they will see them. You might be calmer when things don't go your way. You might be more forgiving. If you're a Christian, God is making these changes in you, and the family will see them.

I once heard a young daughter talking about her Mum, after she'd finished the "Christianity Explored Course" and become a Christian. "She's a much nicer Mummy since she went to God-club", she said. She didn't say "perfect" - she said "nicer".

Here's the thing you need to hear, if you're in this situation. Who's the really powerful one in your life - in your marriage? Isn't it God?!

If any spiritual influence is going to happen in your marriage, surely it'll be from you to your family, not from them to you - not because you're strong - but God is, and his Spirit is in you.

Let's be clear - there are no guarantees of a happy ending - verse 16, back in 1 Corinthians 7 [READ verse 16].

Your partner might be saved, or they might not. You can't make it happen - but God can - and he might.

Stay married if you can. And be encouraged: your family has huge advantages because of you.

In a moment we need to think through some of the consequences of this for us.

But first let's see one qualification that Paul adds - verse 15 [READ].

A married Christian is called by Christ to seek reconciliation with their partner.

But if the other one insists on leaving because you're a Christian, and they refuse all reconciliation, you're not bound to keep banging your head against a door that the other person has banged shut.

If you're married to a non-Christian - as far as it concerns you, stay married, and be encouraged that your family has great advantages because of you.

Now, let's think through some issues together, that come from this.

There's one thing I need to say first about this passage as a whole. See how verse 12 begins [READ verse 12a].

This does not mean that Paul's words here are not the word of God, but just human advice that we can take or leave.

He's simply making clear that some of this teaching was given directly by Christ himself during his time on earth - for example in verse 10 [READ verse 10a]. And some of it, as in verses 12-16, was given by the Holy Spirit through Paul. But it's still all God's Word.

Now let's think about God's word here in relation to people in different circumstances.

What if you're a Christian married to a non-Christian?

The truth is that it will often be harder going for you as a Christian, than for someone married to a Christian.

You don't share with your spouse the one thing that's most important to you.

You probably won't be able to give all the time, and money, and effort, to Christian service outside the home that you want to.

You will sometimes decide not to attend a particular church meeting, not to come on a particular Sunday, because it would antagonise your spouse. And you know that the Lord called you as a Christian, not to split up your marriage, but to make you more faithful in your marriage.

All of that is true. But none of it means you are any less committed to Christ, or any less committed to this church-family.

In fact, you make those choices because you want to be committed to Christ, in the situation he's put you in.

Of course, as the Vicar I need to encourage us all to give money to pay for our ministry - to come to church each week - to commit to our Church-Family Nights. And I can't legislate for everyone's circumstances every time I give a brief notice.

But if you're married to a non-Christian, and you're not at a meeting because of that, we know why. And it's fine. You're not less committed to Christ, or to your Christian family, because of that.

Your situation will be harder for you - but God didn't promise any of us an easy ride in following Christ.

And you can keep up with things. If you had to miss last Thursday Church Family Night, ask someone who was there what was said and taught. If you missed a Sunday, catch up the sermon on tape, or on-line. Don't despair. It is difficult - but you are where God has assigned you.

Another group of people to think about is unmarried people. God urges you in his word not to marry someone who's not a Christian - look over at verse 39 [READ]. What this says to widows must apply to every unmarried Christian. A Christian married to a non-Christian does have particular difficulties and struggles. Why would you choose to walk into those struggles, when you have a free choice?

If you're someone who chose to marry a non-Christian when you were already a Christian, you might feel this as a deep rebuke about your past. You mustn't do that - don't take this too hard. You see, God is a wonderful, gracious, redeeming God. He starts with us where we are; he is forgiving and patient. Don't beat yourself about your past as a Christian; just be faithful to the Lord today in the situation he's put you in.

Another group of people - perhaps a smaller group. There may be someone here who is wondering about committing themselves to

Christ, but is holding back because you're not sure if your family will follow you, and the last thing you want is to split your family.

I want to re-assure you that that need not hold you back.

If you give yourself to Christ, his love and power will only make you a better wife and Mum, or husband and Dad, in your family.

And finally, what about those of us not in these situations - those of us married to a Christian.

We must do all we can to show our brothers and sisters who are married to non-Christians that they really do belong to Christ; that they really are committed to the church-family.

We must invite them round to our houses with their partner, just as much as we do Christian couples, even if we don't know their partner yet.

We should notice when they're not at a Church Family Night, take notes for them, and phone them to tell them what was said.

We could spot that they're not in church when a good book is being recommended and sold, and buy it for them.

That is how we must love them, and give them no reason to doubt their relationship with Christ, or that they belong at the heart of the church family.