

Paul's Ethics: Lecture 4

Continuation of the Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 7

Vs. 10-16 These contain Paul's instructions relating to divorce. Vs. 10 contains one of Paul's exceedingly rare quotations of Jesus. It is, I suspect, important for Paul to quote Jesus in this context because his instruction on divorce differed not only from those of first century Judaism, but also from the Old Testament itself. Deuteronomy 24 allows divorce, and was, of course, considered inspired scripture and therefore authoritative, by the early Christians. In his prohibition of divorce it is, therefore, important for Paul to bring a higher authority to bear. Note again the emphasis on the parallel positions of husband and wife. All through this chapter Paul emphasizes pointedly the mutuality and equality asked of partners who are Christians. This constitutes a major theme of this chapter and needs to be seen against the background of Jewish and pagan practice of the times. Paul is shifting what was a basically hierarchical pattern in the expression of authority to a much more collegial or consensus one. To make this point, Paul is not afraid to modify the words of Jesus. In the Gospels, which also quote Jesus on the question of divorce (Luke 16:18, Matthew 19:9, 5:6) the woman's position is not considered. Paul's emphasis on mutuality is not a part of how the authors of the gospels perceive the words of Jesus. Mark 10:12 does consider the woman's position, but is anachronistic as a word of Jesus because divorce was not permitted to women in Judaism. Many scholars see that text as an expansion of Jesus' word to bring it into line with the practice of Roman law where women could divorce their husbands. In no gospel is there the systematic emphasis on mutuality and consensus which we find in Paul.

The last part of vs. 11 shows that Paul does not interpret this divorce legislation in an absolute way. He recognizes that marriage, even between Christians, may break up. Broken marriages do not put the partners outside the church; they are still part of the fellowship. (If they were not, any attempt on the part of the fellowship to legislate their future actions would be futile.)

Vs. 12-16 This section discusses mixed marriage between Christian and pagan. There is an interesting although not (perhaps) important translation problem here. The Jerusalem Bible translates vs. 12, "the rest is from me and not from the Lord," meaning the rest of Paul's statement about divorce. Most other Bibles translate the same passage "to the rest" meaning to the rest of the Corinthian congregation. The latter is to be

preferred; Paul has discussed the unmarried, (vs. 8-9), the married who wish to stay that way and need to have their place in a community of ascetics defended, (vs. 2-6). The whole passage would then be addressed to the ascetic faction in Corinth, admitting that their position in favor of celibacy is permissible for themselves, but refusing it determinative status for the rest of the community. The only category of marital condition left is that of mixed marriage, Christian and pagan. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that that is what Paul intends to discuss.

In this discussion Paul tries to answer two questions.

1. May Christians and pagans live together in marriage at all?

And this following question, which is a tougher not to crack in the light of Paul's attitude toward divorce.

2. If the pagan partner in a marriage secures a divorce is the Christian partner still bound to consider him or herself married?

Again, notice that Paul is stressing the identical nature, for both men and women, of the rules relating to the situation. Paul first says that if the partner who is a pagan is willing to continue the marriage it should continue. Christians, of all people, do not dissolve deep relationships and communities; they see them as a field for creation rather than something to shy away from in fear. In vs. 14 Paul gives his reason for this ruling, and it is a very obscure one. It is obvious from vs. 16 that the unbelieving partner is not saved by the mere fact of being married to a Christian, but that marriage is the means of his or her possible salvation. I believe that the holiness imputed to the non-Christian partner in a marriage is a hope that through the marriage relationship a real holiness and union with God will come.

(Please note: as a pastoral insight, from me, not from Paul: We cannot know when a person is saved or not. We do not witness to people, or tell them about the church or Christ in order to save them. We don't know whether they are saved or not. We minister to others because that's what Christians do no matter what. We tell people about Christ because what we have to say is true and true to our experience. Their salvation is out of our hands, and it's a good thing. I remain convinced that God is more merciful than we.)

Back to vs. 14. Let's look at it in context. If I am correct in seeing Paul as opposed to an ascetic party in Corinth then that party probably argued that even if marriage between Christians were permissible mixed Christian-pagan marriages were not. The non-Christian would defile both the spouse and the

children. (See vs. 14b for a hint of this mode of thought.) This desire to abandon mixed marriages comes from a particular vision of what the church is, one that has been common in ascetical groups throughout Christian history. It assumes that the church is gathered out of and separated from the world. Thus the family, as a secondary institution, needs to be wholly within the church. This attitude generally reflects a group's anxiety to preserve its worthiness before God or their special ability to communicate with him. Paul's view is the exact opposite. He believes that ultimately there is more chance of the Christian healing the non-Christian than the non-Christian destroying the Christian's faith. This is extremely characteristic of Paul's general outlook on relations between the church and the world. The Christian does not need to fear the world or be isolated from it. Indeed, they cannot be, since their job is to carry the good news to it. If the church is doing its job, Paul sees it as more a threat to the way of the world than the way of the world to the church. Hence, in vs. 16 Paul can tell the Christian partner in a mixed marriage not to dissolve the marriage out of fear for his or her Christian life or the condition of their children before God. The Christian may even be the way of salvation for his/her spouse. The whole question is a good example of Paul's hopefulness that was discussed in the first lecture. Behind this hope lies the notion of a free God setting out to order the universe according to his will and his love.

I might add that to see mixed marriages in the contemporary world as missionary fields is a delicate and dangerous thing to do. It is the love between a couple that is stronger than their differences, not the doctrines and beliefs of the church. To force assent to a doctrine at the expense of love is un-Christian, so is the making of a statement of belief a condition for peace in a marriage. To foster love is to foster the presence of Christ, even when religion is not agreed on.

In summary, the Christian partner is not to take the initiative in divorce. Christians can live as Christians in mixed marriages too. To live with a non-Christian spouse does not break one's place in the Christian community, although it may make life in itself difficult. But we have no guarantees about that anyway. It is central in understanding Paul to note that here, again, he upholds the openness of the community against those who might wish to close it and whose fundamental vision is that of the church over against the world. The freedom of God needs room to work.

Finally, Paul does not bind the Christian spouse to a marriage if the pagan partner has gotten a divorce. Despite the forbidding of divorce, Paul says it is permissible for a Christian who has been divorced by a pagan spouse to consider him

or her self free of the marriage. This is evidence that Paul is not considering these guidelines in a strictly legalistic fashion; since if the law were strict and legalistic, the actions of the pagan partner would not affect the Christian's position in the marriage. Paul's justification for this exception is that God has called us to a life of peace. To continue to live out the mechanical realities of a marriage that has in fact died with the utter rejection of the Christian spouse by the pagan is to live a lie. It is to give the unquiet realities of the past power over who we are now. For the Christian partner to continue to act as if married does not point to peace, but to the separation and conflict of the ended marriage. Paul does not believe that people ought to be subject to the power of the past in this way, but only to the creative power of God. This interpretation is reinforced because in vs. 15 the meaning is that the Christian brother or sister is not enslaved by the fact of the broken marriage -- that is, to the mechanical retention of a relationship that is no longer real. To be enslaved is not to be at peace, especially if one is enslaved to something that is not even any longer real.

Thus we have, in principle, a radical shift in the understanding of grounds for marriage. For Paul, authentic marriage must be marked by the quality of peace. Thus it is no longer legal formula that determine the reality of marriage, but the quality of the relationship between the spouses.

This passage is an excellent example of how Paul's pastoral experience influences his interpretation even of the words of Jesus. Somehow the prohibition of divorce does not apply here, even though it has been previously phrased in the most absolute of terms. Paul clearly knew of the words of Jesus concerning divorce and was quite willing to bend them to fit a situation not addressed in their original formulation. Paul was no defender of the legalism of the Word! In fact, in all the Pauline corpus there are only four direct quotes from Jesus used to justify certain ethical behaviors. For Paul, the origin of Christian ethics is not in the teachings of Jesus.