

Time of Grace Ministry
I Have a Friend: Whose Marriage Is Falling Apart
1 Corinthians 7:1-16
September 10, 2017

Pastor Mike Novotny

Welcome to Time of Grace; I'm Pastor Mike Novotny. Could I ask you, wherever you are right now, to put your hands together like this? Squeeze them together tightly and now try to pull them apart. It's difficult but it's possible, right? Now try to do the same thing with your arm; to pull it into two pieces would be graphic, right?

It's kind of like marriage and divorce. When two people are friends or even dating, getting pulled apart into two separate people, is a little painful but not much. But bringing people together into the one flesh of marriage and ripping them apart in divorce cannot not be painful.

Today, Pastor Mark Jeske is going to remind us what Jesus taught about divorce. He's going to open the Scripture so that we can see the incredible love and forgiveness that God has for his people and he's going to give us the tools to equip us so that one flesh can remain one and we can enjoy the joy of marriage.

Pastor Mark Jeske

Marriage, which has always been a troubled institution, it has always been hard for two sinners to stay loyal and committed to each other until death us do part – it has now just gotten grievously worse. In fact, people are not only quicker to ditch the marriage, they are even slower to get into it. Our culture simply resists it. People are getting married at a later and later time because they don't think they need it; it's no longer perceived as good and they are quicker to bail out of it when it isn't any fun.

Last week, I talked to you about starting a new Bible study series called "I have a friend," and we tackled the tough issue of what do you do when somebody you know is caught up in an addiction. Today, I'd like to tackle an equally tough topic: What do you do when you have a friend whose marriage is really weak and you're afraid may even be coming apart? I'd like to invite you to dig with me into the word and St. Paul had some powerful things to say in 1 Corinthians 7. Would you look that up with me? The people that Paul had helped evangelize and build a congregation out of, they were a counter-culture. They were surrounded by people who had no use for what they were saying and believing in and were constantly at risk of Satan beating them down and making them think they were stupid for being in such a minority. How do you hold onto your faith when you are a minority; when everybody else seems to be against you or does not believe in what you say? How can you hold up the sacredness of marriage when there is a place to worship the goddess of love at the top of the hill and the priests that you are brought up with are telling you that this is the way that you can please the gods?

Well, Paul taught them a better way and he's going to teach us a better way, too. Let's read this. Paul writes: "Now for the matters you wrote about." He had messengers who had delivered

letters and itemized how this congregation was being troubled. There were many problems in that congregation in Corinth. They were completely full of cliques and little groups resenting one another and being overly proud of their own group and who they followed. They were always quarreling and fighting with each other. Here's another problem: "Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry." Now that's insane. You think here I'm going to be talking to you about how awesome it is to be married and it kicks off with isn't it awesome to be single? That's a paradox, isn't it? It's a seeming contradiction and yet, they're both true.

Is it better to be single or is it better to be married and the answer is "Yes." They're both awesome. You don't ever have it all. When you're single, and Paul recommended it – he said, "It's good for you not to marry." In verse 7 he says, "I wish all men were as I, I'm single. To unmarried peoples and to widows and widowers, I say it's good for them to stay unmarried," that's in verse eight. So three times he says, "The single life, ah! That's the life!" He loved being single. He had the gift of chastity. I'm sure he felt sexual temptation from Satan but he was able to control it and he said, "You know what? You never have everything. I have my independence. I love my ability to travel. I can throw myself into what my passion is, which is evangelism and proclaiming the word of God. I am wired to be a church planter and I'm also called to do that. I can put my life at risk and don't have to worry that I will leave a widow and orphans behind. I love my life." So he says, "It's good not to marry. But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband." So there he says, "But I wish everyone were married." Is your brain big enough to hold two conflicting ideas at the same time without going insane? They're both true and your situation in life will determine how you handle what you're dealing with.

"Each man should have his own wife because there's so much immorality." Nothing has changed. And don't underestimate your own vulnerability. If you have a pretty healthy sexual appetite then put serious energy into dating and finding a life partner so that you may laugh at the devil and have sex whenever you want without sinning. "The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife and likewise, the wife to her husband. The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife." You're one flesh now! In God's crazy wedding math, the day after the wedding, in God's crazy mathematics, one plus one equals one. So don't use yourself, don't play games with it, don't allow the sexual relationship between a husband and a wife to be a power game where you use it for leverage to gain advantage either by giving or withholding. That's a very dangerous game, a nuclear game, and that is a great way to fry your partner. That should be just about the last thing you do to get what you want and be super careful of that and as a single guy, Paul was amazingly in tune to this. God must have tipped him off how important this is as his Spirit inspired him to write these things down.

"Do not deprive each other," meaning to be apart, "except by mutual consent," like, 'We've got some things we need to work on and we need a timeout.' And "for a time," with an expiration date so that we have a time when you come back together. I've got to tell you that separation is an option; I am aware that God sort of puts his tentative blessing on it and I've talked to couples over the years that I thought needed a timeout. But I don't recommend it very cheerfully and I don't do it very often because it can boomerang and if you're already feeling emotionally

disconnected, if you're already having problems communicating, if you already feel like your lives are drifting apart, like they're diverging, living apart is only going to make it worse. If you're having trouble communicating, not being in the same room or not being in the same house anymore is probably not going to make your communication any better. So that is an extreme option but it needs to be done with a plan, it needs to be done mutually so that you both realize we've got to work on some things and that you pray about it and that you come back together prayerfully with a reunification time pre-planned. Otherwise, this can just be step one to the crackup of the family.

“Then come together again.” Why? “So that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” You have an enemy who is trying to destroy your marriage and as you are pondering – I ask you today to think about a couple that you know who's having problems – think about them right now. Satan is going after them in any way he can think of to have them fry their patience with each other, to steal away and drain off their love, to make them jittery and impatient, to let their anger and resentment boil up, to hold on to their memory of past grudges and grievances and wounds, keep those wounds unhealed, keep rubbing salt in them, keep those wounds bleeding and infected, don't ever let anything heal, and get them so upset and angry and exhausted and miserable that they would rather have anything, any kind of life, other than being chained to this tormentor. That's how Satan is whispering and working and he's coming at every marriage because by destroying your marriage, he has a way to get his pry bar into your relationship with your God, too. Those things go hand in hand. It's the same as your relationship with your children and your relationship with God are all of the same fabric and when he damages one, he will almost certainly damage the other.

“I say this as a concession, not as a command. I wish you all could be like I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another that.” So Paul's saying that his singleness is a gift. He knows he has the gift. You might recall that when Jesus and his disciples and the Pharisees were talking about marriage one day, the disciples were shocked that Jesus said God's intent from the beginning was that you would be married until death do us part and the Pharisees didn't want to hear that. They thought – they believed in no fault divorce; that if a husband gets tired of her, all he's got to do is get a certificate and give it to her so that she can prove he's ditching me not because I committed adultery, I am not an adulteress. I am not an “other” woman; I am not a tramp. It's your “I'm not a tramp” letter to certify that you're still marriageable. That's what the Pharisees wanted.

When Jesus' disciples heard him say until death do us part, they shook their heads and said, “Oh, man! Like I'm stuck for life? Seriously?” If that's the way it is with marriage, it would be better – what did they say? Not to marry. Jesus' counter-cultural words were so shocking, even his friends were shocked to hear that that's what marriage really was like in God's design and intent. So I guess this is just always going to be a counter-cultural idea.

Some more – I already talked about verse 8; onto verse ten. “Now to the married I give this command (not I but the Lord),” and he's not saying, “Well, I don't agree with this but God said it.” He just means the Lord already brought this up. He's quoting the gospels. He already knew what Jesus had said years earlier. “A wife must not separate from her husband but if she does,

she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled. And a husband must not divorce his wife.” Jesus said that, right? We’re all clear on that; that doesn’t need elaboration.

“To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord),” and you’ve got to understand what he means by that. He doesn’t mean that I’m offering now my personal advice but this isn’t a direct teaching of God; that’s not at all what he means. What he means is that Jesus himself in the gospels never addressed this particular point. I am telling you this; you won’t hear this quoted from the lips of Christ himself but I’m telling you this but it still is coming from – it still is the word of God. And a little aside on that – some people think that the only teachings about human behavior you really have to pay attention to are those words that come directly from Jesus and everything else in the New Testament is of human origin. That is pure bologna. That is something that God never said or intended. All of his word – from Genesis to Revelation – is given to us through divine inspiration and revealing. All of it is profitable for us to listen to and be governed by. All of it carries authority from God.

And there is a load of information of historical incidents and doctrine and teachings that come from the book of Acts through the end of Revelation and it all is applicable to you and to me including these words right here. So here’s what Paul says: “If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she’s willing to live with him, he must not divorce her.” Like if you are two unbelievers and one of them comes to faith and your partner won’t come along, that does not give you the right to ditch them. Stay with them. Maybe you can bring them along. “If a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him for the unbelieving husband has often been sanctified through his wife.” In other words, it happens that the believer slowly over times pulls the unbeliever along and that person then later in life comes to faith. Or vice versa – the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing children.

Think of the kids – otherwise your children would be unclean. If you are the Christian and you cut loose, you take off from your family, what about your children that you’re leaving behind? They will then grow up as unbelievers but as it is, they are holy. In other words, they are receiving the washing of forgiveness through your inspiration and they are also receiving God’s words through your faithful teaching. So the fact that you may have a Christian and unchristian married together, there are ways to make that work if the person – if they’re both willing.

But, verse 15 and here – next to committing adultery – here is the only other place where the Scripture gives a Christian moral freedom to seek a divorce: “If the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.” To ditch your relationships, to do behaviors that destroy the marriage relationship, are the actions, words, and deeds of an unbeliever, and if one partner is persistent in doing that, the believer is not obligated to stay chained into a relationship where the person has adopted the actions of unbeliever. Which, of course, is a statement of principle; now applying that, of course, is really hard. We’re not going to get into that today.

What I would like to do is have just a “so what?” moment with you right now and ask what have we learned from this little essay on God’s intent and on relationships and what’s important? First of all, to know what God really intended. Realize that marriage is not something that our

culture has produced or is a human invention that can flex and change. This is God's timeless intent, invented all the way back in Genesis 2 and Jesus himself quotes Genesis 2 to show what God's intent was. He told the people at the time that no-fault divorce was not God's intent from the beginning. God put up with your behaviors – and notice he didn't say "their" behaviors – he's talking to Pharisees in real time with him and he said, "Your hearts were hard." In other words, the same reason why God tried to bring some order out of a terribly messy situation was not because it was right but because he was trying to protect people in the middle of societal meltdown and he tried to give women a little bit of dignity so that they would be able to find another husband and would not be branded as some kind of tramp and be unmarriageable. This was the age, of course, when there were no government benefit programs and where if it wasn't for your family, you were cruelly at the mercy of survival tactics. And so God had Moses tell the people of Israel, to those tribal leaders, to the men: "If you are going to ditch your wives, you must give them some documents to show that this is just your change of taste. You are not blaming them for committing adultery. Hopefully they will be able to find another husband. But it's because of the hardness of your hearts" and he looked right at them and said those same poisonous attitudes live within you. And he saw the same thing happening with his disciples.

First of all, have the courage to tell the truth. What good is it to have friends if you're messing up and they don't give it straight to you? That's why we need our friends; to tell us when we're talking foolishness, to tell us when we're acting like idiots. But they have the right to expect the same from you. Tell people the truth in love. Call it what it is. Show an interest in what's going on in their homes. If they are acting badly, if you know one of your man friends has got some kind of action going on the side, don't just laugh. Don't just say, "Well, his home life must be miserable and so he's got to go get a little honey someplace; got to go get his own little sugar on the side." Don't let him get away with that. Tell him you are committing marital and spiritual suicide.

The previous chapter says in 1 Corinthians – just the previous chapter; chapter six – says that adulterers and marriage-wreckers will not inherit the kingdom of God. If you live like that without repenting, you're going to risk forfeiting your salvation because it's a direct contradiction to the revealed will of God.

Tell them though not only the bad news, but tell them the good news, too. Give people hope! First of all, come with some humility because you may not have such a perfect stainless record yourself. If you're going to advise somebody else on how to be married, they make look at your marriage and say, "Well, yours don't look so hot, either." Or they know some of your weaknesses or slip-ups. The fact that you have sinned does not disqualify you from speaking because you know and embrace the fact that you need the forgiveness of sins for yourself and you now are able to offer that same comfort to people who have a string of bad decisions behind them. It's hard to change if you don't feel there's hope. If all we do as Christians is just lay out more rules to people, they'll say I've had enough rules. I'm going to figure this out by myself. But when you give them hope that God can wash away the guilt of your deeds of the past, it gives you a little bit of encouragement that you can step forward and that God still has some good things for you. For what he's interested in is a repentant heart. Not just people who are pretty good at keeping his rules, but his rules are there for protection of people. They're good for us. What he's really interested in is a living relationship; one that allows God to speak to us to

show us where we are in need of a Savior and also give us the awesome message of God's unconditional love through Christ Jesus.

That's a load of stuff for you to be thinking about but I encourage you not just to stay mum as people within your extended family and people in your friend network are going through various struggles. Hold up God's beautiful design to them. I know we're all sinners and we all fall short, but here is the path to a happy life. This is what God designed and where his blessings come from. The Spirit will give you words. The Spirit will give people the power and ability to think straight. The Spirit will give people, through his word, the power to act on what their minds have then become convinced is the right thing to do. Looking for good in people is what Jesus does to us. In fact, basically that's just treating people the way Jesus Christ treats us: With unconditional love – meaning, you give worth to people not based on their past performance. You choose to forgive. If you never forgive your partner, you will simply accumulate resentments indefinitely. As Christ has washed away all your sins, you can choose to see yourself as loved and forgiven and you can choose to see your own spouse and your own family members as unconditionally loved and completely forgiven and you can inspire other people to show that same mercy to show the people in their lives.

Heavenly Father, you love marriage. Help us to love it as much as you do. Lord Jesus, you are the one who makes it possible for one sinner to live with another sinner. As you have washed us and made us clean, may we love and forgive each other. Holy Spirit, teach us to think straight and act right.

Pastor Mike Novotny

I recently preached a message about divorce but before I did, I wanted to talk to as many divorced people as I could. I won't forget the conversation I had with a member of our own church. I asked him what it was like to go through a divorce, what caused his divorce, what he wished he would have done differently. But what I learned most of all from that conversation was this: That when someone you know is thinking about divorce, the best thing to do is listen. Especially as Christians and those who know what Pastor Jeske just taught us, we might be tempted to jump in to a situation to declare what God wants them to do. And that moment might come but first what matters is to listen.

Jesus' brother James put it this way: "Everyone should be quick to listen and slow to speak." If someone you know is struggling with their marriage, be quick to listen, understand, sympathize, and empathize. They need God's truth but first they need to know that they're loved. Remember that and I'll be back with you in a moment to pray.

We here at Time of Grace love strong families. When marriages are strong, families are blessed. And when families are blessed, God's church is blessed, too. So thank you for all of you who pray for our ministry, who allow us to share this message of grace that encourages husbands and wives and mothers and fathers and all of God's children. Your prayers and your support are truly appreciated. Without you, we could not do what we do.

So would you please join me and pray?

Dear Father in Heaven, you know all of your sons and daughters who are thinking about divorce. You know all those that might have a right to a divorce and they need to have clean consciences so drive them back to your word. You know those who are struggling with selfishness and they need a firm word from you and the promise that you can change things that we don't imagine can be changed.

And God, for all of us who know and love someone who's going through a divorce right now, would you give us wisdom to know when to speak and when to be silent? To know what to say when we open our lips? To know how to balance the truth of your word with the unconditional love that you show all people? God, we would love to keep one flesh as one flesh; to not see one family torn apart in two. So give us wisdom that we can encourage each other, build one another up, and support each other through the difficult days of our relationships.

We pray all these things in Jesus' powerful name, Amen.

For Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Mike Novotny and it all starts now.



TIME OF GRACE

Grace notes

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I Have a Friend: Whose Marriage Is Falling Apart

1 Corinthians 7:1-16: ¹Now for the matters you wrote about: 'It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.' ²But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. ³The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. ⁵Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. ⁶I say this as a concession, not as a command. ⁷I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. ⁸Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. ⁹But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. ¹⁰To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. ¹¹But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. ¹²To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. ¹³And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. ¹⁶How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?"

Points to Ponder

1. Why does Paul say it is better to be single?

2. What reasons does Paul give for being married?

3. Why do you think the devil works so hard at destroying marriages and God's plan for marriage?

4. Based on this message, list some ways that you can help those who are struggling in their marriages.

5. Oftentimes we feel like we don't know what to say to friends or family in these situations. Who does God promise will help us and give us the words to say?

God's plan for marriage is timeless. He didn't intend for it to flex and change based on our opinions or societal shifts. We can share his plan with those who are struggling. In humility and love we can show others the forgiveness for marital sins that they have through Jesus and show them that God will give them strength to work things out.

What else does God say?

Matthew 19:4-6: "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Colossians 3:18,19: Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.