Bound Does Not Mean Trapped

1 Corinthians 7:39-40

Some of you may have noticed that as I finished up with my sermon last week, I didn’t complete 1 Corinthians chapter 7. That is because verses 39 and 40 are going to take a little more time. The apostle Paul has, in a letter to the Corinthians, been discussing several different aspects of marriage. It seems that overall he is trying to help people consider the seriousness of matrimony so that they wouldn’t rush into anything. He also seems to affirm the fact that marriage isn’t for everyone. Chapter 7 concludes in this way…

“39 A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but only if he loves the Lord. 40 But in my opinion it would be better for her to stay single, and I think I am giving you counsel from God’s Spirit when I say this.”

1 Corinthians 7:39-40 NLT

When I read these verses I am immediately reminded of what God said in the beginning when he designed the union between man and woman.

“…the Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him.” **19**So the Lord God formed from the ground all the wild animals and all the birds of the sky. He brought them to the man[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=genesis+2&version=NLT#fen-NLT-50c)] to see what he would call them, and the man chose a name for each one. **20**He gave names to all the livestock, all the birds of the sky, and all the wild animals. But still there was no helper just right for him.

**21**So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. While the man slept, the Lord God took out one of the man’s ribs[[d](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=genesis+2&version=NLT#fen-NLT-52d)] and closed up the opening. **22**Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib, and he brought her to the man.

**23**“At last!” the man exclaimed.

“This one is bone from my bone,
    and flesh from my flesh!
She will be called ‘woman,’
    because she was taken from ‘man.’”

**24**This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.

**25**Now the man and his wife were both naked, but they felt no shame.

Genesis 2:18-25 NLT

Wouldn’t that be nice…to live before sin. Crazy to think how good it would be to be able to actually feel no shame, especially in that context.

God designed man and woman to come together as one for intimacy and to produce children (who are literally from the one flesh).

And the bond that comes from marriage and sexual intimacy seems to be a bond that will always be there at least a little bit. In fact, anyone who is married or has been married knows that you are bound to each other as long as you are alive. But, I would add, that even death doesn’t seem to break the special bond that is between a husband and wife. This is why I believe Paul, in these verses, is talking about a widow’s legal obligation to husband.

As one commentator wrote:

“The apostle repeats what he had enjoined at the proceeding part of the chapter, namely that married Christian women were not to leave their husbands on account of troubles which in that time of persecution attended the married state. But if her husband be dead—Or if he be justly divorced from her, or maliciously deserts her; she is at liberty to be married, but only in the Lord.”

Benson Commentary

What I would like to point out today is that even if someone was previously married and shared in the bonds of marriage, legal or otherwise. It does not mean that they cannot be married again to someone else. And, Paul when he says that the widow should only marry the man who loves the Lord implies that this second marriage definitely has the possibility of being sanctioned by the Lord.

Being married and bound to someone does not mean that you are trapped. Being bound to your husband or wife was God’s design for bringing oneness and unity between each other. It was never meant to be something to hold over people in order to shame them into staying married or unmarried. Two who have come together, shouldn’t necessarily stay together.

If you remember earlier in our study of 1 Corinthians, in chapter 6, Paul’s letter said:

15 Don’t you realize that your bodies are actually parts of Christ? Should a man take his body, which is part of Christ, and join it to a prostitute? Never! 16 And don’t you realize that if a man joins himself to a prostitute, he becomes one body with her? For the Scriptures say, “The two are united into one.” 17 But the person who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him.

1 Corinthians 6:15-17 NLT

“If you knew someone who got together with a prostitute, would you tell them that they should marry them and that they were now bound to them for life?”

I would hope that you wouldn’t. Because, though it is true that there is some type of one flesh bond, Paul is implying that you should get out of the relationship.

What I would like to suggest is that although divorce was not God’s intention from the beginning and even though people who have been married will always have some kind of bond, it does not mean that God always hates divorce. Divorce is a result of sin, but sometimes it may be the best of choice between to bad possibilities.

Remember God gave Adam and Eve clothes to cover up their shame even though His design was for them to be naked and unashamed. So God’s allowance of divorce is a concession because of our messiness and shame. I do believe that there are way too many people who try to get out of their marital vows, but it should not be considered the unpardonable sin. This stigmatism is often promoted by people throwing around the version of Malachi 2:15-16 that has been translated to say something like “God Hates Divorce.”

The best translations of the Bible do not say that.

One writer says:

“The Hebrew doesn’t say, “I hate divorce” or "God hates divorce." The translation of this verse from the ancient Hebrew language to English is incorrect. The earliest English Bibles (Wycliffe, Geneva, Bishops, and the Great Bible) didn't translate it as "I hate divorce" or "God hates divorce." And the three most recent English Bibles don't either.”

The Holman Christian Standard Bible translates Malachi 2:15-16 as follows:

“So watch yourselves carefully, and do not act treacherously against the wife of your youth. “If he hates and divorces his wife,” says the LORD God of Israel, “he covers his garment with injustice,” as says the LORD of Hosts. Therefore, watch yourselves carefully, and do not act treacherously. —Malachi 2:15b-16 HCSB

This verse is not about God’s anger at divorce, but his anger at hypocritical, unfaithful, violent husbands who dump their wives without just cause.

This reminds me of Jesus’ discussion with his disciples and some pharisees. It is found in Matthew 19:

**19**When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went down to the region of Judea east of the Jordan River. **2**Large crowds followed him there, and he healed their sick.

**3**Some Pharisees came and tried to trap him with this question: “Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife for just any reason?”

**4**“Haven’t you read the Scriptures?” Jesus replied. “They record that from the beginning ‘God made them male and female.’[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+19&version=NLT#fen-NLT-23741a)]” **5**And he said, “‘This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.’ **6**Since they are no longer two but one, let no one split apart what God has joined together.”

**7**“Then why did Moses say in the law that a man could give his wife a written notice of divorce and send her away?”[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+19&version=NLT#fen-NLT-23744c)] they asked.

**8**Jesus replied, “Moses permitted divorce only as a concession to your hard hearts, but it was not what God had originally intended. **9**And I tell you this, whoever divorces his wife and marries someone else commits adultery—unless his wife has been unfaithful.[[d](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+19&version=NLT#fen-NLT-23746d)]”

**10**Jesus’ disciples then said to him, “If this is the case, it is better not to marry!”

**11**“Not everyone can accept this statement,” Jesus said. “Only those whom God helps. **12**Some are born as eunuchs, some have been made eunuchs by others, and some choose not to marry[[e](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+19&version=NLT#fen-NLT-23749e)] for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”

Matthew 19:1-11 NLT

These Pharisees were wanting to justify getting rid of their wives and getting new ones for any reason of their choosing. God despises that kind of unfaithfulness. The bonds of marriage were meant for the protection and unity of man and woman not as some kind of law to be navigated with legalistic rules.

In the book of Ezra, after many in Israel had taken unbelieving wives, sending them away was actually posed as the correct course of action…

2 Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel, a descendant of Elam, said to Ezra, “We have been unfaithful to our God, for we have married these pagan women of the land. But in spite of this there is hope for Israel. 3 Let us now make a covenant with our God to divorce our pagan wives and to send them away with their children. We will follow the advice given by you and by the others who respect the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law of God. 4 Get up, for it is your duty to tell us how to proceed in setting things straight. We are behind you, so be strong and take action.”

5 So Ezra stood up and demanded that the leaders of the priests and the Levites and all the people of Israel swear that they would do as Shecaniah had said. And they all swore a solemn oath…”

Ezra 10:2-6 NLT

And in the book of Hosea

God told Hosea…

“Go and marry a prostitute, so that some of her children will be conceived in prostitution. This will illustrate how Israel has acted like a prostitute by turning against the Lord and worshiping other gods.” Hosea 1:2

And then…

Lord said to (Hosea), “Go and love your wife again, even though she commits adultery with another lover. This will illustrate that the Lord still loves Israel, even though the people have turned to other gods and love to worship them.” Hosea 3:1

In this God illustrates His faithfulness versus ours. Often times people are looking for justification with regard to divorce or remarriage or remarriage after being widowed.

Some Christians believe there are no acceptable reasons for divorce

Some Christians believe there are two reasons adultery or abandonment by an unbeliever.

Some believe there are four reasons adultery, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and abandonment.

Often there is no hard and fast answer that will set your conscience free. And I think that is because it was God’s design for a husband and wife to be united as one, but sin brought death, shame, and separation.

Let me sum up a bit with a few questions.

As a widow is it better to stay unmarried? Yes

As a widow are you free to remarry? Yes

Will you still have some kind of bond to your first spouse? Yes

Are there some reasons, in a terrible marriage, where you are free to get a divorce? Yes

Will you still have some kind of bond to your first spouse? Yes

Can you stay married in a treacherous marriage? Yes

Are there some people who should stay married even though they are having major difficulties, like abuse, adultery, and emotional and physical neglect and abandonment? Yes

I will end by saying I am thankful that God is faithful to us even though we are like Gomer and Israel in our unfaithfulness. God has the right to divorce us, but doesn’t.

In fact, in Jeremiah chapter 3, God

“Have you seen what backsliding Israel has done? She has gone up on every high mountain and under every green tree, and there played the harlot. 7 And I said, after she had done all these things, ‘Return to Me.’ But she did not return. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it. 8 Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce;” Jeremiah 3:6-8 NLT

But right after that Jeremiah was told to proclaim:

‘Return, backsliding Israel,’ says the Lord;
‘I will not cause My anger to fall on you.
For I *am* merciful,’ says the Lord;
‘I will not remain angry forever.
**13**Only acknowledge your iniquity,
That you have transgressed against the Lord your God,
And have scattered your [[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jeremiah+3&version=NKJV#fen-NKJV-19016b)]charms
To alien deities under every green tree,
And you have not obeyed My voice,’ says the Lord.

**14**“Return, O backsliding children,” says the Lord; “for I am married to you. I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion. **15**And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.

Jeremiah 3:12-15 NLT

Getting married, staying married, or staying unmarried are not about some rules to follow so that you can be righteous.

It is about showing love and mercy to one another in the way that God shows love and mercy to us.

For most getting married is about what they can get out of the marriage, fortunately God chose to bind Himself to us because of what He could give to the marriage.

“Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her 26 to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God’s word. 27 He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault. 28 In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies. For a man who loves his wife actually shows love for himself. 29 No one hates his own body but feeds and cares for it, just as Christ cares for the church. 30 And we are members of his body.

31 As the Scriptures say, “A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.” 32 This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one.” Ephesians 5:26-32 NLT

Our oneness with Christ is not meant to be a trap or a prison that we are looking to escape from. Neither is our oneness with our spouse.

Both the husband and the wife are to think of themselves as one and make every effort to faithfully fulfill their vows to one another. And both the husband and the wife are to make every effort to forgive the faults of their spouse.

And the bonds of marriage are never to be used as a means to shirk your marital responsibilities.