

# Divorce *and* Remarriage

John Thomas Boruff

January 21, 2011

NKJV Bible

---

*If the unbeliever departs, let him (or her) depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace.*

– 1 Corinthians 7:15

---

**The Old Testament Definition of Adultery:**

“You shall not *commit* adultery” (Exodus 20:14).

**The New Testament Definition of Adultery:**

“Whoever *looks* at a woman (or man) to lust for her (or him) has already committed adultery with her (or him) in his heart” (Matthew 5:28).

---

Excerpts from various conservative Evangelical Bible commentators on **1 Corinthians 7:15**:

**If the unbeliever departs, let him (or her) depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace.**

**Matthew Henry:**

To the advice itself, which is that if an unbelieving husband or wife were pleased to dwell with a Christian relative, the other should not separate. The husband should not put away an unbelieving wife, nor the wife leave an unbelieving husband, v. 12, 13. The Christian calling did not dissolve the marriage covenant, but bind it the faster, by bringing it back to the original institution, limiting it to two persons, and binding them together for life. The believer is not by faith in Christ loosed from matrimonial bonds to an unbeliever, but is at once bound and made apt to be a better relative.

But, though a believing wife or husband should not separate from an unbelieving mate, yet if the unbelieving relative desert the believer, and no means can reconcile to a cohabitation, in such **a case a brother or sister is not in bondage** (v. 15), not tied up to the unreasonable humour, and bound servilely to follow or cleave to the malicious deserter, or not bound to live unmarried after all proper means for reconciliation have been tried, at least of the deserter contract another marriage or be guilty of adultery, which was a very easy supposition, because a very common instance among the heathen inhabitants of Corinth. In such a case the deserted person must be free to marry again, and

it is granted on all hands. And some think that such a malicious desertion is as much a dissolution of the marriage-covenant as death itself.

For how is it possible that **the two shall be one flesh** when the one is maliciously bent to part from or put away the other? Indeed, the deserter seems still bound by the matrimonial contract; and therefore the apostle says (v. 11), **If the woman depart from her husband** upon the account of his infidelity, **let her remain unmarried**. But the deserted party seems to be left more at liberty (I mean supposing all the proper means have been used to reclaim the deserter, and other circumstances make it necessary) to marry another person.

It does not seem reasonable that they should be still bound, when it is rendered impossible to perform conjugal duties or enjoy conjugal comforts, through the mere fault of their mate: in such a case marriage would be a state of servitude indeed. But, whatever liberty be indulged Christians in such a case as this, they are not allowed, for the mere infidelity of a husband or wife, to separate; but, if the unbeliever be willing, they should continue in the relation, and cohabit as those who are thus related. This is the apostle's general direction.

**The KJV Bible Commentary:**

**But if the unbelieving depart** (Gr *chōrizō*, in the middle voice, almost a technical term for divorce, Moulton & Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*, pp. 695–696). In the foregoing instruction, the apostle presumes that the unbeliever is content to remain with the believer. But what of the situation where the unbeliever takes

the initiative in dissolving the marriage? In such a case, Paul's advice is that the believer is **not under bondage**. There is no conflict here between Paul's advice and that of our Lord in Matthew 5:32.

The point is that the divine standard cannot be imposed upon the unregenerate. There is nothing the believer can do but submit to the divorce. The overriding principle is that **God hath called us to peace**. The mild adversative clues us as to Paul's meaning in the use of this principle. He does not herein justify the divorce, even though the believing partner is free. Rather, there should be every effort on the part of the believer to avoid the separation if possible. This understanding fits well with the previous context, and also helps us understand the intent of the next verse.

*Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary:*

If an unbeliever seeks to divorce a believing spouse, the Christian is **not under bondage** or obligation to continue the marriage. There is no conflict here between Paul's advice and that of our Lord in Matt. 5:32. The point is that the divine standard cannot be imposed upon the unregenerate. There is nothing the believer can do but submit to the divorce. The overriding principle is that **God has called us to peace**.

*Believer's Bible Commentary:*

But what should be the attitude of a Christian if the unsaved partner desires to leave? The answer is that he or she should be allowed to **depart**. The expression "**a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases**" is very difficult to explain with finality. Some believe that

it means that if the unbeliever deserts the believer, and there is every reason to believe that the desertion is final, then the believer is free to obtain a divorce. Those who hold this view teach that verse 15 is a parenthesis, and that verse 16 is connected with verse 14 as follows:

1. Verse 14 states that the ideal situation is for a believer to remain with an unbelieving partner because of the sanctifying influence of a Christian in the home.
2. Verse 16 suggests that through staying in the home, the believer may win the unbeliever to Christ.
3. Verse 15 is a parenthesis, allowing the believer to be divorced (and possibly to remarry) if he or she is deserted by the unbeliever.

The hope of eventual salvation is connected with continued union rather than with the unbeliever's leaving the home.

But other Bible students insist that verse 15 deals only with the subject of separation and not with divorce and remarriage. To them, it simply means that if the unbeliever departs, he should be allowed to do so peacefully. The wife is not under any obligation to keep the marriage together beyond what she has already done. **God has called us to peace**, and we are not required to use emotional displays or legal processes to prevent the unbeliever from departing.

Which is the right interpretation? We find it impossible to decide definitely. It does seem to us that the Lord taught in Matthew 19:9 that divorce is permitted where one party has been guilty of unfaithfulness (adultery). We believe that in

such a case, the innocent party is free to remarry. As far as 1 Corinthians 7:15 is concerned, we cannot be positive that it permits divorce and remarriage where an unbeliever has deserted his Christian partner. However, anyone who is guilty of this form of desertion will almost inevitably enter into a new relationship very soon, and thus the original union will be broken anyway. J. M. Davies writes:

The unbeliever who departs would very soon be married to another, which would automatically break the marriage bond. To insist that the deserted party remain unmarried would put a yoke upon him/her which in the majority of cases, they would not be able to bear.

### **What I See as Permissible in the Case of Desertion: A New, Peaceful, and Godly Christian Marriage**

“By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established” (1 Cor. 13:1). Here I have provided four. We have the established word of Matthew Henry, *The KJV Bible Commentary*, *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary*, and the *Believer’s Bible Commentary*. These are well-respected and theologically conservative Evangelical commentaries on Scripture. We should rest assured, that our consciences be at peace in this matter, with the interpretations of these men on 1 Corinthians 7:15. For several reasons:

1. Although their words are not the words of Scripture itself, in general, **the minds of these men are in line with the basic doctrines of Evangelical Christianity.**

2. In keeping with **good faith** and all **clear conscience**, these godly Bible commentators have attempted to explain one of the most difficult passages of Scripture (1 Corinthians 7:15)—with all **sincerity before God and men**, as if it were in a Heavenly Court of Law.
3. Being the godly, and Bible-believing, and practicing Christians that they are, **these commentators were not—as far as I know—in any way bent towards Antinomianism or unethical licentiousness**. Therefore, it would be logical to conclude, that any ***license to remarry*** a new and born again Christian spouse, that these commentators might permit with their **sanctified reasoning**, is not coming out of carnal appetites, or a twisting of God’s law, or a zeal to commit fornication.

But out of a **sincere and sanctified attempt, to set innocent deserted parties free, from the legal bondage of an abused marriage contract, and to experience the freedom of remarriage, to a new and godly Christian spouse, if they so desire**. In other words, these godly commentators are all agreed in their spiritual vision—that when a godly Christian is abandoned by a non-Christian spouse, the abandoned one is more than free (I may even say encouraged) to prayerfully seek a new wife or husband that is a godly and practicing Christian. Why is this? Simply put: “A brother or a sister is *not under bondage* in such cases. But God has called us to *peace*.”

4. **But what of those who quote Matthew 19:9, and say that even remarriage to a godly Christian spouse is “adultery”?** Jesus said, “Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and *marries another*, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery” (Matt. 19:9). Legalistically, they say that if you have no documented evidence of the deserter, committing *the physical act of adultery* with another person, then legally before God, it would be considered adultery by the innocent deserted party’s part, to remarry a new and godly Christian spouse.

When men say such things—I would make the point that **Christ redefined adultery in Matthew 5:28**: “Whoever *looks* at a woman (or man) to lust for her (or him) has already committed adultery with her (or him) in his heart.” Adultery doesn’t have to be a physical act of sex to be considered adultery in the New Testament sense. *Adultery of the heart*—in the feelings, will, and imagination—this is the New Testament definition of adultery. And if a deserter departs from a godly Christian spouse, then the deserter has already committed unfaithfulness and adultery in the heart.

Even more—in addition to the physical act of desertion—a maritally unfaithful physical action already committed against the Christian spouse, we should take note that *every human heart has adulterous inclinations*: “Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, **adulteries, fornications**, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Matt. 15:19).

It is logical to conclude, that because every human heart has some level darkness in it, even Christians in-



dwelt with the Holy Spirit—it is all the more reasonable to conclude that non-Christians or even “churchgoers” who do not bear the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23)—*have by their nature already committed adultery of the heart towards someone else*—especially if the deserter has already left the home of the Christian spouse. This is all the more reason for the Christian spouse to prayerfully feel free to file for divorce from the deserter, who has not only abused the marriage covenant, and spiritually tortured the Christian spouse, but has already committed adultery of the heart with someone else according to both Matthew 5:28 and 15:19.

### **Godly Christians Are Free to Remarry Godly Christians**

I don’t see why any reasonable Christian, who has looked at all marital situations and circumstances, with a godly motivation, in all good faith and conscience before God—would ever bring himself to bind the conscience of a deserted Christian, and say that he or she is an “adulterer,” if he or she chooses to remarry and new and godly Christian spouse. Rather, the apostle Paul’s word is this: “A brother or a sister is *not under bondage* in such cases. But God has called us to *peace*” (1 Cor. 7:15). In other words, a deserted Christian is not under legal bondage to a marriage contract. Rather, God has called all Christians to a life of peace, including deserted Christians. And the only way for a deserted Christian to attain a life of peace, is to legally divorce the deserter, and move on with life. This may or may not involve marriage to a new and godly Christian.