



Christian/Non-Christian Marriage

What's a Christian to Do?

by

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[GraceLife Ministries and Fellowship began answering reader's questions online in 1995. This question concerns a subject that impacts hundreds of thousands of Christians every year.]

We received a question from a reader recently about Christians who are married to non-Christians. What does the Bible teach about it? Here's our answer to the writer. We hope it helps you or someone you know who is in a similar situation. God's Word is powerful in its ability to help Christians in every aspect of their life.

Greetings! So nice to hear from you. The verse you are looking for is 1 Corinthians 7:14. Here's the context:

"And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy."

The key words are "believeth" and "sanctified." A believing wife or husband (Christian wife or husband) who has an unbelieving husband or wife (non-Christian husband or wife) should not leave him or her (physically leave the marriage relationship through divorce). Why? Because the non-Christian spouse is sanctified (set apart for holy service) by the Christian spouse.

That is a powerful concept and worthy of the deepest consideration. Many believing husbands and wives have questioned God and themselves through the years about what to do when they find themselves in unequal spiritual relationships with an unsaved marriage partner. God, through Paul's writing, makes it clear that He does not want Christians to leave the marriage relationship with their unsaved partners. Why? Is it to punish them? Make them continue in misery? Keep them from fulfilling their spiritual duties to God by being unequally yoked with an unbeliever? By forcing them to one day say goodbye to their loved one knowing he or she will go to hell when they die? Absolutely not! God wants believing husbands and wives to continue living with their unsaved partners because they have an amazing spiritual opportunity! That is to "sanctify" the unbelieving husband or wife.

Sanctification is not a human process. It is not something Christians do in their own power or strength. It is the holy work of the Holy Spirit! God's Spirit is deeply involved in a Christian's marriage relationship. I've been involved with marriage counseling for decades and have seen so many Christian husbands and wives deeply distressed by their marriage relationship to an unsaved person. Thanks to God for this wonderful portion of Scripture in 1 Corinthians 7 where we can encourage the Christian spouse in their ministry to participate with the Holy Spirit in "sanctifying" their unsaved partner.

What does that mean? It means that God will do a special work in the heart, mind and soul of an unsaved person who is married to a Christian. They are "set apart for holy service" (sanctify - Greek *hagiasmos*, sanctified - Greek *hagiazō*). The Greek word was used for things like the gold in the temple of Jerusalem and the gold and food laid on the altar. Those earthly things were "sanctified" and presented to God for holy service. The gold in itself was not holy, but the presentation to God in the way God provided was the process of sanctifying it to God. The same with food and anything else set on the altar of God. God told the people of Israel how to do it in the correct way, so that common things could become holy (sanctified) for God's service.

That is precisely what God has in mind for unsaved people married to saved people. When a Christian does as God says and continues to live with an unsaved spouse, that unsaved person is set apart to God and their children are also set apart (holy - Greek *hagiasmos*) to God. The duty of a Christian is to obey God in every aspect of life. That includes marriage and raising children. It is not an easy road to walk, but be encouraged that the Holy Spirit of God is involved in touching an unsaved spouse's heart, mind and soul as they obey God. He or she is sanctified because of the Christian partner in the marriage.

I should emphasize that the saved partner has a duty to obey God "in every aspect of life." I've seen situations where a believing partner was disobedient to God in many areas of their lives while still clinging to hope and demanding that God do something with their unsaved partner. Christians who want God to bless and save their unsaved partners while they (the saved partner) live their life contrary to God's Word does not always yield the desired results. Christians must live their lives in a sanctified way (on the altar). Romans 12:1-2 is a good reminder for all of us. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."

Sanctification is a spiritual process. It is a special partnership a Christian has with the Holy Spirit. God has promised Christians that He will set apart their unsaved spouses and their children for holy service. Christians are to do everything they can to influence their spouses and children through a powerful, personal walk with Christ. God will do what we cannot do. He will sanctify them (set them apart).

Here is the entire context of what Paul wrote to the Corinthians. It's important to note every aspect of this. Paul tells Christians how to handle anything that happens to them in a single or marriage relationship.

"Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband. Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency. But I speak this by permission, and not of commandment. For I would that all men were even as I myself. But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that. I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, It is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn. And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife. But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving

wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy. But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases: but God hath called us to peace. For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife? But as God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk. And so ordain I in all churches. Is any man called being circumcised? let him not become uncircumcised. Is any called in uncircumcision? let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God. Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called. Art thou called being a servant? care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant. Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men. Brethren, let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God. Now concerning virgins I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment, as one that hath obtained mercy of the Lord to be faithful. I suppose therefore that this is good for the present distress, I say, that it is good for a man so to be. Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned. Nevertheless such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you. But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none; And they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they

rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away. But I would have you without carefulness. He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife. There is difference also between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit: but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband. And this I speak for your own profit; not that I may cast a snare upon you, but for that which is comely, and that ye may attend upon the Lord without distraction. But if any man think that he behaveth himself uncomely toward his virgin, if she pass the flower of her age, and need so require, let him do what he will, he sinneth not: let them marry. Nevertheless he that standeth stedfast in his heart, having no necessity, but hath power over his own will, and hath so decreed in his heart that he will keep his virgin, doeth well. So then he that giveth her in marriage doeth well; but he that giveth her not in marriage doeth better. The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord. But she is happier if she so abide, after my judgment: and I think also that I have the Spirit of God." (1 Corinthians 7:1-40)

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