

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: miracles

Ask the lord to reveal Himself to you in some miracle of favour. You may find this difficult to ask, but think about this carefully. You can ask the lord for healing, to show you His will, to give you an answer to some conundrum. Such things would all be miracles of grace and favour.

For myself

Ask the Lord your God to take away from you the tiredness of faith which sometimes comes upon you. Tell your enemy, the devil, to stop pulling you down, and ask the Holy Spirit to protect you and bless you with energy and life.

For others

Lord Jesus Christ, You have made the world, and You must grieve over the loss of life that happens because of war, and because of the exploitation of people, especially children. I pray for all those who are involved in trying to get rid of war and its effects in this world; governments, peace-keepers, the United Nations, and non-governmental organisations. May they succeed in placing people before ideology and so giving an example of true the peacefulness that comes from God alone. AMEN

Meditation

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit; breathe.

Breathe so we may feel You in the rushing breeze,
And take into ourselves the things of God.

Breathe so we may hold Your unconditional love,
And throw aside the stress of worldly living.

Breathe so we may touch Your truly awesome power,
And find the 'impossible' cannot bars faith's way.

Breathe so we may take Your unconditional gifts,
And seize faith's guarantee and means of ministry.

Breathe so we may appreciate Your loving presence,
And realise the healing presence of the Father.

Breathe so we may wonder at Your eternal mysteries
And reach the everlasting truth beyond ourselves.

Breathe on us, Holy Spirit; breathe.

Bible Passage

1 Corinthians 7:1-16

¹ Now, regarding the matters about which you wrote: 'Is it right that a man should not touch a woman?'

² Well, because of all the sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman should have her own husband. ³ The husband should give to his wife her marital rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴ For the wife is not the owner of her own body, but the husband; likewise, the husband is not the owner of his own body, but the wife. ⁵ Do not refuse one another, except only for a limited time by mutual agreement to devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you through lack of self-control. ⁶ I say this as a concession, and not as a command. ⁷ For I wish that all men were as I am, myself; but each has his own gift from God, one having one kind and another, a different kind.

⁸ I say to the unmarried and the widows that it is good for them to stay as they are as I do. ⁹ But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. ¹⁰ I give this command to those who are married, not I, but the Lord. A wife should not separate from her husband, ¹¹ however, if she has separated, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband; and a husband must not divorce his wife.

¹² I say to the rest, that is I, not the Lord, that if any man who is a believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. ¹³ If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but actually, they are holy. ¹⁵ Now, if the one who is an unbeliever separates, let the separation stand, a brother or sister is not bound in such cases; for God has called you to peace. ¹⁶ Wife, for all you know you might save your husband! Husband, for all you know you might save your wife!

¹⁷ So then, let each one lead a life as the Lord has provided and as God has called, for this is the instruction I give in all the churches. ¹⁸ Those who were already circumcised when they were called should not seek to be uncircumcised, and those who were uncircumcised should not be circumcised. ¹⁹ For circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is keeping the commandments of God; ²⁰ each one of you should remain in the state in which you were called.

Review

It is now a delight to read a more positive passage after the last two chapters! The difficulties about sexual immorality (chs 5,6) are put to one side, and today's reading offers more positive teaching about sex and marriage, best split the passage into four sections. First, about marital relationships (7:2-7), then about single people and widows (7:8-10), after this, his strange and fascinating advice about people married to unbelievers (7:10-16), and finally, his advice about focussing on the Lord's guidance for the individual (7:17-20).

Before this, verse one reveals that Paul is responding here to a question asked of him by the Corinthians, 'is it right that a man should not touch a woman?' (7:1). Alongside all the other issues put to him by the Corinthian church, this question was more easily dealt with, but perhaps the church had indeed been scandalised by the sexual immorality found within the church, and being unable to deal with it properly, had reacted by suggesting that the root of the problems was sex itself, not people. They therefore promoted total abstinence! Paul attempts to bring some godliness and careful advice into this complex situation!

Sex advice for married people - love and self control!

Paul's approach to love and sex is direct and practical. Much to the benefit of us all, he advocates the plain common sense of fidelity within marriage, echoing Jesus' teaching about marriage (Matt 19:1-12). But Paul goes further into the subject of sex, teaching that it is a proper and necessary part of marriage. However, Paul was speaking to people who had a very different understanding of these things to us. Men were expected to be dominant and women submissive, and too many men regarded women as their property and little more. The question put to Paul, 'is it right that a man should not touch a woman' (7:1) is about sex from a man's point of view, and we might expect Paul to reflect this bias, but instead he talks about husband and wife as equals! Everything he says of the husband he says equally of the wife, and vice versa. This was radical advice!

Alongside this, Paul advises that sex has no 'rules' apart from due respect, one for the other (7:2,3), and the idea of mutual ownership in verse 4 is remarkable; he describes husband and wife as not owning their own bodies, but as being responsible for each other (7:4)! The love and respect required for this is extraordinary! In addition, Paul commands husband and wife not to '*refuse one another*' (7:5). This all reflects the true interdependence of those who are one in marriage, bound together in love. Lastly, Paul suggests that while abstinence from sex can be a form of devotion when mutually agreed (7:5), he is conscious of Satan's power to manipulate sex. He would rather husband and wife be fulfilled than pursue their devotion by giving up sex!

What was Paul's personal state?

Verse 7 is sometimes misunderstood, for even though Paul writes positively about the marriage and sex, he ends with a caution. He describes his advice as a '*concession ... not a command*' (7:7), and adds, '*for I wish that all men were as I am, myself*'. Paul was single at the time of his missionary work, and we do not know whether he was ever married; tradition says he may have been married in earlier life, but we know nothing of his wife. Nevertheless, Paul seems dismissive of marriage here, though this should not dampen our reaction to his more positive comments. Most importantly, he describes each marital state as '*a gift of God*', which is consistent with all other Scriptural teaching, including that of Jesus (Gen 2:21-24, Proverbs 5:18f. Matt 19:1-12).

Singles and widows

The next passage contains some important advice for Christians who have been called to singleness. Paul gives clear approval for this (7:8-9), and his reasons are generally that this leaves the Christian with less distraction for doing the Lord's work. Of course, this is his own 'state', so he is bound to see its benefits (7:8).

Verse 9 then offers caution to such people about sexual passion. He advises that if '*self control*' is an issue, people should marry rather than '*burn with passion*'. The whole phrase is rather remote from the beauties of true love, as many a romantic author has observed. Paul gives himself away a little by offering his opinion that this is not so much his own advice but what he feels bound to say, of '*the Lord*' (7:10).

No divorce

Paul now becomes embroiled in a fascinating discussion about marriage, with many ramifications. His basic position is that it is wrong for man and woman to separate, or divorce. This Biblical subject has caused great difficulty today, but if we look carefully, we will find there are some interesting edges to this subject which may give much hope to those who live in difficult marriage and family circumstances.

To begin with, a woman who has separated from her husband is given the difficult advice either to return to the marriage or remain celibate (7:11). Then contrary to advice in Scripture (see Duet. 22:19, 24:1), he forbids men to divorce; there is no bias against women here! But this is only the beginning of a detailed discussion about marriage between Christian and non-Christian partners (7:13-14). We can imagine a woman becoming a Christian and her husband not committing to the same; something similar the other way round may have been rarer in ancient times, simply because of the subservience of women, but there is no doubt this was a grave issue for many women. Yet Paul's advice is clear; the woman must not initiate divorce or separation from a man, even if he is not a Christian. However, if a non-Christian man divorces a Christian woman, there is little she can do about it except do her best and be at '*peace*' (7:15).

Family relationships and salvation

Within all this, Paul addresses what is probably one of the most taxing issues faced by people in this situation, which is the question of the eternal state of the non-believing partner, and also the family of such a union. Paul says, '*for the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband; other wise your children would be unclean, but actually, they are clean.*' (7:14). This extraordinary comment has the effect of raising the hope of a Christian partner that through the marriage union, a non-Christian partner might somehow be saved! The answer depends on whether there is a difference between '*holiness*' and being '*saved*'.

All of this should stop and make us think, for more than this, Paul also says in an aside comment that children (7:14) are made '*holy*' before God through the faith of a Christian parent! It is extraordinary that Paul says this, for above all, he has laid the foundation stones of traditional Christian belief in '*salvation through faith in Christ alone*' (e.g. Romans 1:16,17, 3:21f.). If, however, we were to ask Paul about whether the faith of one partner in marriage is sufficient for the other, he would likely say that such judgement belongs to God alone. He certainly presents us with an intriguing possibility, based on Paul's Scriptural view that a husband and wife

are through sex united as 'one flesh'. Moreover, this is a union that reflecting the deep mysteries of God's love and His relationship with His people.

Discipleship

Application

Marriage and sex within marriage

Paul does not deal with all marital circumstances in this passage, and we would be foolish to imagine it. He sets down some principles about marriage and divorce theologically in line with the teaching of the Lord; and he also gives helpful comments about the marriages of Christians and non-Christians. The only way we can apply this text today is to advocate marriage and the practice of sex exclusively within it. If what Paul said was shocking in his day, then it continues to hold a few surprises for people today. Marriage preparation is often required by clergy if they are to marry people in the church, and having seen the courses available, they teach mainly about personal responsibility within marriage, finance, sexual responsibility and the duties of parenting, honouring God in the home, and more. I would suggest that a thorough study of this passage of scripture would not go amiss, because I am not convinced that most who marry today, even in church, have as egalitarian a view of marriage and sex as is contained within this text!

Divorce?

Today, we might wish to ask both Paul and Jesus about other circumstances of marriage in which divorce or separation clearly happens, whether one or both parties are Christian or not. We are increasingly aware of the acute problem of abusive relationships, and their prevalence even in the life of the church. We ask, would Paul and Jesus have been united in their advice to remain married under 'all' circumstances? I suggest that both might insist that marriage is absolute, because to allow for anything else would simply not work. However, I believe that where human relationships have broken down, both Jesus and Paul would have shown the utmost understanding and loving attitude towards any who might be abused in any way. But there are no guidelines or rules for dealing with such things. Today, if a marriage is violent for example, then a pastor should prayerfully consider whether to accept that an abused person might leave an abusive husband or wife without sanction from the church. I do not believe that God stands in heaven firing condemnation at any who struggle with such issues in the midst of abuse; they offer compassion. It is therefore important that when the church speaks about marriage, it does not imply that God will have nothing to do with people's real problems.

Ideas for what to do

- *How many people do you who are divorced? Pray for your friends who find themselves in this position and commend them to God in love*
- *What do you think about the implicit connection in this passage between Christian service and singleness? Is this a helpful connection or an unhelpful one?*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. *In what ways does this passage help married people with their problems today? What does it say to help single people?*
2. *Discuss in your group whether the prayers of a husband or wife are sufficient for the salvation of a non-Christian partner.*
3. *What are the blessings of marriage and what are the blessings of celibacy?*

Final Prayer

Dear Lord and Father, bless your people today who are marriage. Strengthen those who are married and seek to live according to Your Word, and help all who aspire to godly marriage relationships though who are as yet single. Help all who struggle with sexual matters, within or outside of marriage, and heal the hurts created by sin. We ask this in Your name Lord Jesus, AMEN