

The Honor Principle

1 Corinthians 7:1-16

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



One of the core beliefs of CCC and the EFCA is that the Bible is the ultimate authority upon which every human endeavor is to be judged. This means that the Bible is to be our central guide and voice for our lives and was given to us by God for our flourishing. Some passages in the Bible are easier than others to understand and apply to our lives. Others are more difficult. When we interpret the Bible, we have to remember that the Bible was written for us, but it wasn't written to us. Here is what that statement means. "For us" – The Bible is God's Word for all people at all times and is the ultimate authority for our lives. "Not to us" – Each book in the Bible has an original audience, and there is no passage in which we are the original audience. So that means we need to understand how the original audience understood the text before we can apply it to our lives. This week's passage is one of those tough passages in which we absolutely need to understand the context first, and then we can apply it to our lives. When we do this, we will find something really beautiful.

Verse four in this section is a verse that can be misquoted and misapplied. Tragically, it has been applied in ways that excuse or even enable abusive and toxic behavior. But that is absolutely not what Paul is doing in this verse or even in this section. In the section, at large, Paul is discussing marriage and the freedom to marry or not to marry, and what to do if you are married to a non-believing person. To these things, Paul says, get married if you want, stay single if you want, and remain in your marriage unless there is a legitimate reason for divorce. And there are legitimate Biblical reasons for divorce. But what do we do with verse four?

We learn that we are to honor one another. This isn't the only passage where Paul applies this honoring logic. He also does it in Ephesians chapter five. In Paul's mind, it is clear that we have been honored by Christ, and so now we are to honor each other with mutual dignity, equality, respect, and value. Yes, this passage is directly about marriage, so we are to honor our spouses and serve them as mutual co-heirs. But we can apply the honor principle to every relationship as well. We honor each other by extending humility, gentleness, patience, and love. The very things we received from Christ. And because we've received honor from Christ, **honoring one another is foundational for a disciple**. It is to become how we naturally operate out of our new identity.

1. What is Paul saying and not saying?

a. Not saying – license for abuse

- i. There is no license given nor any room for abuse or toxic behavior in this passage. And to apply it to justify those hideous actions would be tragically wrong.
- ii. **A clarifying word** – This is one of those passages in the Bible that teaches something profoundly beautiful and noble. However, too often, it has been used to justify inappropriate, wrong, or downright evil stuff in the name of “righteousness” and “faithfulness to the Bible.” In reality, it has been the process of poor or nonexistent scholarship that has drawn these conclusions and does not reflect what God is actually trying to teach us.
 1. Kathy Keller shares her experiences in this area in her booklet – “Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles.”¹
- iii. If you have had anyone in the church ever justify inappropriate, wrong, or evil things for this passage, I am sorry and hope that today we can see that God and his Word are indeed good and for our flourishing.
 1. God never condones or dismisses the wrongs or injustices that we experience. Instead, he calls his people to act with both truth and compassion, and he will hold every injustice accountable in the end.
- iv. In order to mine the gold from this tough passage, we must be willing to step out of our context and into the context of the Ephesians. After all, this letter was written to them, and we must understand it from their perspective if we are to apply it correctly to our context.

b. Is saying – You are to honor each other because you have been honored by Christ.

- i. Neither spouse has *authority* (*exousiazei*) over his or her own body. Husbands’ and wives’ bodies belong to their spouses, and therefore there is no warrant for one spouse to say to the other that he or she has decided to abstain from sex out of devotion to God. What is striking to us today is the remarkable mutuality of the marriage relationship here, such that Paul can even say that wives exercise authority over the bodies of their husbands.²
- ii. This is a remarkably “sex positive” paragraph, and Paul (as ever) has a theological rationale for it (**v 4**): “The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband,” he explains. This statement would presumably have gone down well with the men in the church, and with most men in the ancient world as well as plenty in the modern one; when she gets married, a woman yields authority over her body to her husband. But his next line is a game-changer: “In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife”. Greek men certainly did not believe that their wives had authority over their bodies. It would have sounded absurd to them. But Paul is adamant: marriage is not one-sided. It requires just as much self-yielding from a man as it requires from a woman. Sexual relations—like marriage as a whole—only work properly when both partners yield to the other, preferring the other to themselves and looking to serve them in any way they can.³

¹ Kathy Keller, *Jesus, Justice, and Gender Roles: A Case for Gender Roles in Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 31ff.

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 136.

³ Andrew Wilson, *1 Corinthians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2021), 74–75.

1. Paul is offering this amazing and striking reversal to Greek and Roman culture. This reversal is not a polite or mild adjustment but a true 180 degree change.
- c. Headship (authority) in their context. - **Greek Household codes.**
- i. This is key in understanding what Paul is about to unpack in this passage. And it helps us to understand why Paul's exhortation to them was so controversial.
 - ii. Aristotle's concept of household codes, or *oikonomia*, was articulated primarily in his work *Politics*. In this text, Aristotle views the household (*oikos*) as the basic unit of society and explores its internal structure and relationships. His understanding of the household revolves around three key relationships: master-slave, husband-wife, and parent-child.
 - iii. Aristotle's household codes reflect a hierarchical structure where the relationships are based on a concept of natural authority and subordination, with the purpose of maintaining order and achieving the good life both within the household and in the larger political community.
 - iv. **Aristotle on God** - Aristotle also states the expectations in terms of love for the superior by the one over whom he stands when he states: **"For it would be ludicrous if one were to accuse God because he does not return love in the same way as he is loved, or for a subject to make this accusation against a ruler; for it is the part of a ruler to be loved, not to love or else to love in another way"** (Eth. eud. 7.3.4). The difference was a reflection of the asymmetrical relationship between the head and the body for the good of the whole, an understanding that resulted in a set of expectations conforming to the nature of each part's position.⁴
- d. **The headship of Jesus – Self-sacrificing love.**
- i. Paul points to Jesus over and over in 1 Corinthians and in Ephesians 5. His life and example are the very model that we are to us in order to understand the tough principles and truths of the Scriptures.
 - ii. Sometimes we can downplay what Paul is encouraging by dismissing the controversial nature of his exhortation by saying that Paul was couching his advice in socially accepted terms.
 1. Lee-Barnewall helps us to understand that is not the case. Speaking on Ephesians 5 and the call to mutuality and service she says, **"When Paul asks husbands as heads to sacrifice themselves for their wives, he asks them to do something that goes against this fundamental order of society, which would be considered disruptive and even dangerous."**⁵
 2. Paul doesn't let them or us off of the hook in this passage.
 - a. He doesn't water it down to a culturally acceptable idea that they might be more willing to apply and integrate into their lives.
 - iii. The ideas of equality and dignity are so well ingrained in our modern minds that we can assume that is how it has always been. However, a quick study of history reveals a very different story. That is why it is so important to note the significant contributions that Christianity has given society from an ethical standpoint.
 1. Rebecca McLaughlin sums this idea up well when she writes, **"To our 21st-century, Western ears, love across racial and cultural difference, the equality of**

⁴ Lee-Barnewall, Michelle. Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate (p. 226). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Lee-Barnewall, Michelle. Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate (p. 226). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

men and women, and the idea that the poor, oppressed, and marginalized can make moral claims on the strong, rich, and powerful sound like basic moral common sense. But they are not. These truths have come to us from Christianity. Rip that foundation out, and you won't uncover a better basis for human equality and rights. You'll uncover an abyss that cannot even tell you what a human being is."⁶

- e. The passage is directly about marriage, but we can apply this honor principle to all relationships.

2. The honor principle.

a. The overarching principle – Honor others as you have been honored.

- i. Karl Barth expresses the focus on the larger principle this way: What matters to Paul is not the establishment, maintenance, and welfare of the family as such but that every aspect of a person's life be seen in the light of the great antithesis, including this most significant and concrete reality of life. Even in their natural state, these relationships of ordered interdependence reflect our fundamental dependence on God in Christ; they are honored as Christian relationships to the extent that they reflect the divine-human relation. The obedience enjoined here is appropriate for that purpose and that purpose alone. The fear of Christ (Eph 5:21) both justifies these relationships and guarantees that they are not absolute relationships. Marriage is a mystery (Eph 5:32): it is by nature finite, yet it points to the promise of a future eternal transformation. Likewise, the relationships of parents to children exist for the purpose of training and admonition unto the Lord (Eph 6:4). The social orders witness to *one* Lord who orders all things, namely, God. This passage is not as conservative or implausible as it sounds when read out of context. It is more revolutionary than it may first appear, but the revolution to which it witnesses is from above.⁷

- 1. Lee-Barnewall agrees in saying – **“We will see that while kephalē can have connotations of “authority,” the main significance of its use is the way in which Paul reverses the cultural expectations of the “head” according to the radical new values of the Christian community.”**⁸

- b. **The general exhortation to mutual submissiveness.** (Eph 5:21) → Christians should not be self-assertive, each insisting on getting his or her own way. **As the Philippian believers are told, they should be humble enough to count others better than themselves and put the interests of others before their own, following the example of Christ, who “emptied himself,” “humbled himself,” and “became obedient,” even when the path of obedience led to death on the cross (Phil. 2:3–8).** Out of reverence for their Lord, who set such a precedent, his followers should place themselves at one another's disposal, living so that their forbearance is a matter of public knowledge (Phil. 4:7), even when others are encouraged on this account to take advantage of them (1 Cor. 6:7). Even those who fill positions of responsibility and honor in the Christian community, to whom their fellow-believers are urged to render submission and loving respect (1 Cor. 16:16; 1 Thess. 5:12–13), earn such recognition by being servants, not

⁶ McLaughlin, Rebecca. *The Secular Creed: Engaging Five Contemporary Claims* (p. 7). (Function). Kindle Edition

⁷ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, ed. R. David Nelson, trans. Ross M. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 145–146.

⁸ Lee-Barnewall, Michelle. *Neither Complementarian nor Egalitarian: A Kingdom Corrective to the Evangelical Gender Debate* (p. 218). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

lords (cf. 1 Pet. 5:3). For all his exercise of apostolic authority when the situation called for it, Paul invites his converts to regard him and his colleagues as “your slaves for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5).⁹

c. We honor others when we are...

d. Humble – Thinking of myself less often.

i. A rightsized perspective of yourself.

1. If you operate with an achieved identity, you have to compare yourself to others. This means your worth and value is only in relationship to others around you. This posture of comparison routinely leads us away from joy and contentment.
2. If you operate with a received identity, your value and worth come from someone who esteems you greatly. In Christianity, that is God. This means your identity is both stable and rightsized through God’s Word.

ii. It is really hard to think of yourself less often if you only ever think of yourself.

1. When we have a rightsized perspective we operate in confidence, security, and sensitivity for others.

iii. Concern & sensitivity for others.

1. **Have you ever been in the grocery store, at a game, or in class, and you were so focused on what it was that you were doing that you missed someone or something right in front of you? This is what happens when we focus on ourselves, we can’t see others around us.**
2. When we operate in humility, we grow in our concern and sensitivity for others.

iv. Purposeful responsiveness.

1. The natural outflow of seeing the needs of others is to purposely respond to them.
2. We can’t forget, purposeful responsiveness is not about responding to every possible need, but it is about responding intentionally with our time, talents, and treasure for the good of others and the glory of God.

e. Patient – Seeing the big picture even when something bothers you.

i. A commitment to the big picture and the long view of things.

1. Patient people tend to be those who can see the bigger picture or how something plays out over the long run. This allows them to choose their reaction to the immediate situation that will help get to the preferred vision in the future.
2. When we operate with short-sighted vision we can overreact and lose control quickly.

ii. Operating out of a healthy sense of identity.

1. Being able to see the big picture requires a healthy self-awareness and awareness of the greatest good of others in the situation.
2. There is a leadership maxim that states, “You cannot lead someone to a place that you have not been before.” This is a helpful reminder even for our own self-identity. When we bump up against difficult situations and people, we are going to have a difficult time seeing the big picture for the situation if we haven’t seen the big picture in our own lives. This doesn’t mean that we have to be experts, but we have to be aware. And there is no greater threat to awareness than insecurity.
 - a. Insecurity causes us to be tunnel-visioned.

⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 382.

iii. Working to establish understanding and shared purpose.

1. One of the things patient people do when they see the big picture is that they work to establish mutual purpose with those they are in conflict with. Often, everyone in the situation wants a very similar outcome. Patient people are self-controlled people and they are able to articulate the mutual purpose.
2. One of the crucial steps in establishing understanding and mutual purpose is not writing a negative backstory for another person. This comes back to the virtue of gentleness, where we gave the benefit of the doubt.
 - a. We all write stories in situations that we face. And too often, even when we're in the wrong, the story we tell is that we are in the right.
 - b. If we are going to be patient people who work for the good of others, we have to get in the habit of telling accurate stories where we represent each person in the situation (including ourselves) honestly.
 - i. We'll only be able to do this through maturity and having a secure identity.

f. Gentle – Self-control to remain composed in a difficult or stressful situation.

i. A commitment to self-control.

1. Gentle people do not lose control. This is not some magical gift or supernatural power.
2. Self-control can be cultivated and developed.
 - a. One of the best steps in developing self-control is to rehearse your response ahead of time with the intention of staying in control.
3. **The truth is that all of these virtues can be developed and cultivated. Especially, since we are indwelt with the Holy Spirit who helps and empowers us to live in a God honoring way.**

ii. Giving the benefit of the doubt.

1. Too often we ramp ourselves up when going into difficult situations by creating a backstory where we assume the worst intent of the other person.
2. People who remain self-controlled begin by not ramping themselves up through assuming the best of those they are in conflict with.
3. Giving the benefit of the doubt does not mean that we excuse poor behavior or wrongdoings. It does mean that we work to understand the other person.

iii. Understanding the significance of your response.

1. Not every situation demands the same response. Gentle and self-controlled people think through the level and type of response that is warranted in every situation. They do this because they understand that their response is significant, not just in proportion to the situation that they are responding to, but ultimately to the outcome they are hoping to achieve.

3. Marriage and Divorce

- a. **A needed note** – Andrew Wilson offers an important note on Paul's perspective on marriage and singleness. – "This comment is so counter-cultural, both then and now, that it stops us in our tracks. Paul seems to be saying—shock horror!—that he thinks the single life is preferable to the married one, although he is happy to admit that we all have different gifts, so they can both be good. It is an astonishing remark that will be spelled out at more length, and in fact reinforced, later on (v 8–9, 25–38). For now, it is worth noticing the nuance and wisdom with

which Paul handles the challenge we mentioned earlier. How do we walk the tightrope of affirming the goodness of sex within marriage, yet at the same time affirming the goodness of the celibate single life? Like this. (Though I would also recommend reading and applying Sam Allberry's excellent book *Seven Myths About Singleness*.)"¹⁰

- i. **Paul relies on Jesus' teaching about marriage and divorce in this section, so let's allow Jesus to help us on these topics.**
- b. **Jesus on marriage.**
 - i. **Marriage is sacred and is to be taken seriously. – Matt. 5:32**
 1. This is not a controversial point. We understand the importance of the sacredness of marriage. The difficulty comes for us in our modern moment when we seem to think that we can carry on as if nothing ever happened after a divorce. In some ways, we need to hear Jesus' words here as a reminder of just how sacred marriage actually is.
 2. The challenge in the passage comes on divorce and what is Jesus actually saying here. We'll talk about that in a moment.
- c. **Jesus on divorce.**
 - i. The question of divorce was as significant then as it is today. Sure, there were different social implications then, but it is still as serious of a matter today. The key to understanding Jesus' teaching here is the Greek word *porneia*. Scholars agree that it implies more than just sexual infidelity and includes neglect, abuse, and all sorts of awful actions. The simple truth in this section is not that Jesus commands us to stay in abusive marriages but that God's commands and boundaries are not designed to minimize our freedom. They are designed so that we might live in the fullness of freedom.
 - ii. Jews and Jewish law were agreed that divorce was permissible. The more conservative school of Shammai argued that the sole ground was "indecency," that is, adultery, whereas the liberal school of Hillel argued that divorce could be granted "for any matter" (NIV, "for any and every reason"; Matt 19:3), that is, for many causes beyond adultery. Not even among the Essenes at Qumran, the most conservative faction of Judaism in Jesus' day, was divorce expressly forbidden.¹¹ → The Pharisees reflect the view that marriage is a disposable contractual arrangement. Twice they inquire about possible grounds of its dissolution (Mk. 10:2, 4). Their attitude reminds us of a person who has just been granted a bank loan and then asks under what conditions he might be absolved from repaying it.¹²
 1. Jesus makes it clear whether the divorce was initiated by the man or woman; if it is done for the wrong reasons it results in sin.
 - iii. *Matt. 5:31 - It was said* is the same way of introducing Scripture as in the previous sections, but in an abbreviated form. It is a summary of the way the passage was understood rather than an exact quotation, which accords with the fact that Jesus is opposing scribal interpretations rather than Scripture. Among the Jews divorce was a simple procedure for a man. He must write a bill of divorce in the correct form (it must include words that expressly permit the divorced woman to marry), and there must be

¹⁰ Andrew Wilson, *1 Corinthians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God's Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2021), 75.

¹¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 300.

¹² James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 301.

proper witnesses; there is to be no doubt as to what is taking place (see the note on 1:19 for the requirements in wording and witnesses). The verb rendered *divorces* means more literally “releases,” but it is the usual word for sending a wife away in divorce. The *bill of divorce* is a general word for relinquishing rights, but it was commonly used for divorce, the giving up of one’s claim on a wife.¹³

- iv. Matt. 5:32 - It is important to understand that the divorced woman is made to commit adultery and that the man who marries her is also made to commit adultery. Among the Jews a man was not held to have committed adultery by engaging in sexual acts outside marriage unless his partner was herself a married woman. But Jesus does not distinguish between the man and the woman: either may commit adultery. It seems to have been a Christian idea that a man could commit adultery; others regarded sexual adventures as a normal part of life for a man. Jesus lays down the highest standard for both sexes. Divorce might happen, but it was not meant to be. Marriage is for life.¹⁴

1. **Important - Jesus doesn’t command us to stay in abusive marriages.**
2. **Important - Jesus stresses that God’s commands and boundaries are designed so that we might truly flourish.**

¹³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 120–121.

¹⁴ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 122.