

May 19, 2013
 Port Gardner Church
 Chuck Hickman

1 Corinthians Part 15
The Goodness of Singleness
1 Corinthians 7:25-38
 Portions adapted from the notes of Sam Ford

Intro: The Idolatry of Marriage and Singleness

READ 1Corinthians 7:25-38

1 Corinthians 7:25-38 *[25] Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. [26] I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. [27] Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. [28] But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. [29] This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, [30] and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, [31] and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.*

[32] I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. [33] But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, [34] and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. [35] I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

[36] If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. [37] But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. [38] So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

Just as we expect singles to receive God's Word on marriage, so we expect that those that are married will receive God's word about singleness.

Culture connects our identity and our marital status in an unhealthy way.

Historically, culture has celebrated what we might consider traditional marriage and family, because they emphasized legacy. In the eyes of the Jew, marriage was a sacred duty. Getting married and having children were essential to ensuring a heritage for future generations—marriage and family were the ideal and any other option was a disappointing plan B.

Contemporary culture couldn't be any more different.

The value of marriage has changed dramatically. *A survey done by Pew and Time magazine in 2010 of 2,691 Americans found that nearly four in 10 Americans said that marriage was becoming obsolete. Forty-four percent of those 18-20 said it was obsolete.*

Today, barely half of US adults are married—the lowest percentage ever. Many are getting married later in life and many more are simply choosing to live together and play house. Singleness is idolized and marriage is redefined to accommodate it. Marriage is viewed as restrictive to personal freedom and a hindrance to independence.

Many now believe that life-fulfillment is found in self-satisfaction. With no one to support or pamper, they are free to indulge in pedicures, explore new hobbies, buy big toys, and visit multiple golf courses. Their happiness comes from doing what makes them happy.

In combating this new shift, the church has tried to elevate the value of marriage.

Sermons are preached, books written, conferences held, and political statements made. Christians are called to find fulfillment in being a husband, a wife, a father, or a mother. As they listen to their pastors, men and women begin center their lives around building a home, date nights, vacations, and kid's activities.

This is what they sacrifice time, money, energy, and even other relationships. They find ultimate satisfaction in another person (or people) and their happiness is generated by making others happy. And while there is nothing wrong with a return to celebrating God's gift of marriage relationships, I wonder what impact it has had on those who remain unmarried. **In truth, we have traded one idolatry for another.**

Paul addresses both married/unmarried who are desiring a different situation than the one they are in. **Both are denying that God is wise enough to know what is best, good enough to give me his best, or powerful enough to make it best. Neither is content in their situation,** so they ask Paul questions about what is the preferable state.

This results in the same thing we have today—double idolatry. Not only do you have single people idolizing singleness, a few begin to see marriage as the cure for all of their loneliness. And not only do you have married people making a god out of their families, a few of them fantasize about returning to the single life.

Both are failing to find their identity in Christ first. Our identity is not found in our marital status but in our redemptive status. Married, widowed, single, or engaged, men, women, teenagers, children, teachers, plumbers, or pastors, WE ARE CHRISTIANS FIRST, and that reality has to govern our attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors in all other roles or statuses.

The Place of Singleness and Marriage

Having addressed the married directly, Paul addresses the unmarried or engaged. He clarifies that what he says is not a command, but it is a divinely-inspired opinion God wants us to learn from. He prefers singleness for several reasons beyond the fact that he is unmarried. He does not intend to belittle marriage, but he does want to **make a case for the goodness of Christian singleness.**

One of his primary reasons for his preference for singleness is what he calls the "PRESENT DISTRESS" so as to spare the unmarried from any worldly troubles. It is unclear what Paul means by present distress. Many believe that what Paul is speaking about is the suffering that would accompany the second coming of Jesus—something he expected to happen soon. I believe Paul means something more general and immediate.

The Corinthian Christians experience life the way we do—in what feels like a meat grinder sometimes. Through faith, we have a promised rest-filled future, but our lives are lived out in a broken world. The King reigns but his kingdom is not yet fully realized on earth. **We have hope, as Paul does, that OUR TIME IS SHORT, this is not all there is.** And though we must engage in the things of the world, we also know that all of this is passing away, including marriage. So we live radically different lives according to radically different values, because we know that every situation, every place, and every thing is temporal. We marry, or remain single, celebrate or suffer, buy or sell, always with a view of eternity—or we should. When we are sitting with Jesus for 70 million years, we are going to look back at the speck of time that was our life on earth and consider everything rubbish in comparison to Christ.

The God-ness of Singleness and Marriage

Without an eternal perspective, our perceptions and decisions about marriage will be superficial and selfish. Paul

wants us to live deliberate lives on earth, not ones where we're always imagining that being with or without someone is a happier place. There is a real danger of using marriage (true love) or singleness (true freedom) as a functional savior to replace Jesus.

Paul argues that people should remain where they are. The issue is staying where they were, rather, Paul believes that CHRISTIANS should enjoy and serve in whatever situation they find themselves in. Nothing needs to change to enjoy what God has already given or withheld. Whether I should get married or remain unmarried is not the question we must ask ourselves—**how can I trust and enjoy God wherever God has assigned me.**

For those dissatisfied with their marriage, but especially with their singleness, find it hard to believe that THIS is God's will for their lives. This is an issue of theology—**who you believe God to be.** Either God knows you and your circumstances, past, present, future, and possible, or He does not. Either God is perfectly good, wise, and in control or He is not. And in all these things, if He is God, then these are not changing attitudes that He holds—they are unchanging attributes He possesses.

Belief in the God of the Bible means you believe that God can never be and will never be less loving or good toward you. God does not shortchange His children; rather, He gives them what is best always. We must get to the point where we can say (as Paige Brown suggests) and believe: **I am single/married because God is so abundantly wise, powerful, and good to me, that THIS is his best for me. Can you say that?**

The Goodness of Singleness and Marriage

So if there is a GOD-NESS to singleness then there has to be a GOODNESS to singleness. Paul says that getting married or remaining single is not sinful.

³⁸ *So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.*

But he does, unapologetically, prefer singleness over marriage. At the heart of this preference is the reality of additional load that marriage brings to an individual. Paul's desire is for the individual to be free of unnecessary cares. He writes:

³² *I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord.* ³³ *But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife,* ³⁴ *and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband.* ³⁵ *I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.*

Marriage does carry extra responsibilities. Those who are married have interests that are divided. Paul does not speak of division negatively, but realistically. **The single person does not have a covenant with someone to which they have material, emotional, and even sexual obligations.** By command, the husband must concern himself with pleasing his wife and the wife must concern herself with pleasing her husband. This is the design of God and the nature of the commitment.

But the single person has only to concern themselves with pleasing the Lord. Being single is often a better way to serve the Lord—even if temporarily. This is not the result of some super-power of singleness, but the realistic freedom that comes with independence.

In putting forward singleness as a good option, Paul expresses his heart. His desire is to have single people keeping their eyes focused on the true goal of all of our life: **single-minded service to God.** We must be careful here because this isn't just preached to single people. He does not intend to restrain singles from marrying so

that he can build a big missionary force. On the contrary, **he is urging Christians to consider pursuing what will BEST empower you to serve Christ without anxiety or distraction.**

For some people, and some callings, marriage will be a hindrance to the mission and your relationship with God. For some people, marriage will enhance and empower that mission. They are both gifts but they can both be abused. In other words, people can get married and remain single for the wrong reasons—but they are free in Christ to do either one. We are charged to pursue either one with a God-centered motivation.

The Gift of Singleness and Marriage

Both marriage and singleness are a gift. All too often, the church has interpreted the gift of singleness to describe individuals who have absolutely no desire to be married or intimate with another person. **The most common response to that view is, “I definitely don’t have that gift.”** Singleness in the church has become viewed more like a curse. We suggest that marriage is some kind of a reward for our faithfulness. We wonder if our own sanctification is somehow connected to our being married or single.

These attitudes have made the gift of singleness feel like plan B, a less than experience. This is not what single men like Paul and Jesus want for us. Instead, they want us to embrace singleness as something to steward—not endure—until God decides to give you a spouse OR bring you home to Himself.

But in order to elevate singleness, we need to correct some false truths and preach some biblical ones.

1. **Singleness is not your identity.** Your identity is not found in your marital status but in your redemptive status. Fulfillment is not found in some earth-shattering romance with another person, but with Christ. You are a single Christian NOT a Christian single.
2. **Singleness is not a death sentence of loneliness.** You are not alone, but you can easily live like it. Made in the image of God, we are relational creatures. We are commanded to love all people, but we are not commanded to marry. In other words, our relational options are not limited to marriage.
3. **Singleness is not a license for self-absorption.** You can waste your money, your time, your energy, and your gifts just like you can waste your singleness on yourself.
4. **Singleness is not always permanent.** You may desire to marry, but right now God doesn’t desire you to. The question is, therefore, how are you preparing for the future spouse you may have?
5. **Singleness is sanctifying.** God’s intention for us is to look more like Jesus. He will use whatever tool, situation, or person to accomplish this. It can be painful, but it is always the right tool for the job.
6. **Singleness is an opportunity to serve.** The single person has a unique opportunity to give of their time, talent, and treasure that the married person is not afforded. As a single person, there is very little that hinders you from serving God—young or old. It is part of God’s mission.
7. **Singleness is important to God’s church.** Singleness is essential to the church. We need single people to be a part of our family.
8. **Singleness is important to God.** Refusing to believe this is not disappointment with God’s plan, but rejection of who He is. Singleness is not less than. Your situation is not plan B, but God’s plan A for you right now

9. **Singleness is a sermon.** The single person can preach all kinds of sermons to friends, to the world, and even to themselves. By grace, the single adult sold out to Jesus bears testimony that in God, not family or marriage, there is hope.
10. **Singleness is a gift entrusted to you.** In marriage, a person is given by God as a gift to another person to care for and cultivate. In the same way, your singleness has been given as a gift. Don't waste the gift God has given you waiting for the gift He hasn't.

Conclusion: The Desire for Singleness and Marriage

Paul ends his comments to the unmarried reminding them of the goodness of marriage—just in case his pro-singleness rant is taken the wrong way. It is not only a good thing to be married; it is a great thing for those who cannot exercise self-control. It echoes what he wrote in verse 8 and 9:

⁸To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. ⁹But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

As the final verses indicate, he is speaking largely to those who are already in engaged relationships—not people who want to find a relationship. In other words, there is a big difference between wanting to marry SOMEONE and wanting to marry a particular SOMEONE. One takes time, the other takes a signature.

Paul's main concern for the individual and the church is purity. So, for those who are dating, I would encourage you in several ways:

1. Pursue oneness not just attraction. Go comprehensive, look at the tree and for the fruit of Christ.
2. Pursue love not just romance. Work to get beyond the romance stage and see each as sinners.
3. Pursue faith not just religion: Be equally yoked spiritually.
4. Pursue unity not just commonality: Be equally yoked practically.
5. Pursue purity not just pleasures. Read 1Corinthians 5 and 6.
6. Pursue marriage not just dates. Know why you are dating and make your intentions clear
7. Pursue input not just your feelings. Live out your relationship in community.

NEVER EVER FORGET THAT THERE IS ONLY ONE RELATIONSHIP GUARANTEED TO LAST IN ETERNITY.