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**“To the unmarried, I say . . .”
1 Corinthians 7:6-9, 25-40**

Back in the mid-1950’s men and women were getting married at a much younger age than they do today. In 1956 the United States Census Bureau revealed that the average age at which a man was married for the first time was 22.5. For women it was 20.1. Today, the best evidence indicates that the average age for men to get married is nearly 30 and for women it is 27.

Many of you probably think this is a bad thing. But there is no need to panic or sound the alarm as if something horrible has happened in our society. In fact, I would suggest that it may be beneficial to the kingdom of God. If Christian men and women are remaining unmarried for a longer period of time, it means they are free for a longer period of time from the entanglements of marriage and thus more available to serve without reservation in the cause of the gospel. Of course, there is always the case of people waiting to get married because they are lazy and irresponsible and immature. But on the other hand, it could just as easily be true that they are waiting so that they might devote all the more time and energy to the gospel of Christ and the advance of God’s kingdom. And in the case of some, it may be that they feel called by God to remain unmarried for life. If you wonder why anyone would make that choice, this message is for you.

Of course, there are other factors that may well contribute to men and women waiting longer to get married. One author suggested that it may be due to “an increasing consumerism in dating and marriage, where people are pickier because there are more choices (especially through new media, like online dating).” This same author went on to say that “maybe it is the lengthening of adolescence, in which twenty-somethings less and less feel the need to grow up and take on responsibilities of starting a family, owning a home, and more. Maybe it’s the success of women in the workplace, creating more vocational opportunities for females that could delay the pursuit of a partner and family.” Whatever the root cause, it’s a reality with which we need to cope. My point is simply that it isn’t necessarily and always a bad thing!

I seriously doubt if any of us who are married consciously make an effort to discriminate against the unmarried or to overlook them. But we do. Single Christians are often misunderstood, taken for granted, ignored, passed over when leadership roles open up, and generally regarded as second-class citizens in God’s kingdom. Now, if that is an unfair characterization, fine. I apologize. But let’s honestly evaluate how we view singles and how we speak of them and treat them.

The simple fact of the matter is that many unmarried people here at Bridgeway have at one time or another asked questions like: “Is there something wrong with me? Am I flawed? Is God even present in my life? Does he care about my happiness? Am I as valuable to him as all my married friends? Does God even love me? Can I really believe that he has good things in store for me in the days ahead?”

I have two goals in my message today. First, I want to speak directly to all of you who are unmarried and say with utmost sincerity and biblical conviction that you should never view yourself as odd or unqualified or in some sense spiritually inferior to other believers who are married. Soul-satisfying intimacy and joy in Jesus can be experienced by singles, often times more readily than is true of those who are married.

My second goal today is to speak directly to all of us who are married. My aim is to bring a measure of correction to how you think about those who are unmarried and to encourage and instruct you in how to relate to them in ways that are helpful and a blessing to them.

The Biblical Perspective on the Unmarried

First, as glorious and wonderful as is the propagation of children through marriage, we must never forget that the kingdom of God does not grow in this way but rather through spiritual regeneration that leads to faith in Christ. There is a statement in Isaiah 53 that we have often overlooked. In v. 10 we read that “it was the will of the Lord to crush

him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, *he shall see his offspring*; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.”

The point is that Christ’s atoning sacrifice yields the fruit of many children, children who are not formed by physical procreation but through the work of the Holy Spirit in consequence of what Christ did on the cross. This truth is found numerous times in the NT. Jesus told Nicodemus that unless one is “born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). In Galatians 3, Paul speaks to both Jews and Gentiles and says: “Know then that it is those *of faith* who are the sons of Abraham. . . . In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, *through faith*” (Galatians 3:7, 26). In other words, it is not physical descent from Abraham that makes you part of the covenant people of God but faith in Christ.

And Peter says that our inheritance comes not through marriage and offspring but through the work of Christ and the new birth: “According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be *born again* to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:3-4).

My point is simply that *you and I are born into God’s family and granted an incredible eternal inheritance not by marriage and biological procreation by the work of the Holy Spirit in causing us to be born anew and brought to faith in Jesus*. The only conclusion I can draw from this is that unmarried men and women who have come to faith in Jesus are no less the children of God than those who are married. And they are just as capable of being used by God to bring others into the family of faith even though they may never produce biological children of their own.

Second, and related to my first point, is the fact that the most important family relationship one can experience is in the family known as the church. One’s relationship to other Christians who share nothing in common biologically is greater and more important and more lasting than any relationship that one has with those to whom you may be connected by blood.

When his own mother and brothers asked to see him, Jesus said, “‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!’” (Matthew 12:48-49). Jesus isn’t saying that he doesn’t love Mary, his biological mother, or that he doesn’t love his half-brothers and sisters. But those are all natural and temporary relationships. His primary goal in coming into this world was to call out a people for his name from all the families into a new family where single people in Christ are full-fledged family members on a par with all others, bearing fruit for God and becoming mothers and fathers of the eternal kind.

You may remember when a woman in the crowd cried out to Jesus: “Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!” Jesus responded by saying: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” (Luke 11:27). Yes, Mary was blessed to be the mother of the Messiah. But an even greater blessing rests on anyone, whether married or single, who hears God’s word and obeys.

Again, Jesus said: “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:29-30). So I say to you who are unmarried: if you want eternal relationships in a spiritual family, follow Jesus and obey his word!

Thus, “To be single in Christ is, therefore, not a falling short of God’s best, but a path of Christ-exalting, covenant-keeping obedience that many are called to walk” (Piper).

Third, the good news for the unmarried is that *no one in Christ is single, and no one in heaven is married*. Our feelings of loneliness and our struggle with various longings find their solution in the gospel. Christ is always present with you in a way a spouse can’t be. There are certain intimate ways in which Ann and I relate to each other that the unmarried can’t experience. But the deepest and most important intimacy is experienced by the bride of Christ, the church, whether you are married or unmarried. That is why there is a very important sense in which no Christian is ever truly single.

We must never forget that *marriage is temporary*. “In the resurrection,” Jesus said, “they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Matthew 22:30). In other words, everyone will be single in the eternal

state. Marriage in this life is not designed to last forever but serves primarily to point us to the relationship between Christ and his bride, the Church, a relationship that will endure into eternity future.

Why will marriage be left out of eternity? It's because its purpose and meaning are only needed here and now. When the new creation is consummated, the picture to which marriage pointed will be realized. Marriage now is a temporary experience meant to direct our hearts to a far greater relationship and reality to come, when we are with Christ in his presence.

I'm not saying this just to make unmarried people feel good about themselves. I'm trying to draw attention to the inescapable fact that whereas marriage and biological families are temporary, intended by God only for this present age, the family of God, the Church, is eternal. Thus, it is not necessarily a sign of God's blessing that you are a member of a biological family. But if you are a child of God by the new birth you are the recipient of a blessing that no mere earthly family can give you.

Fourth, Paul's "wish" is that others would remain unmarried like himself. Now, there is considerable evidence that Paul had at one time been married and that his wife had died. But he writes 1 Corinthians as a single man who sees tremendous benefit for the kingdom of God in those who are unmarried.

Fifth, observe how Paul says that both being married and remaining unmarried is a *"gift from God"* (1 Cor. 7:6). That's right: a gift, not a curse! In other words, for many, remaining unmarried is a blessing for which a person should give thanks. That's what you do when God bestows on you a "gift." Being single brings with it more time, flexibility, availability, and money to be used for the kingdom of God. Remaining unmarried brings increased opportunities for a wide variety of friendships. The single man or woman is more easily able to prioritize their lives and how they use the resources God has given them.

Sixth, being unmarried can also bring greater attention to the sufficiency of God's grace and the adequacy of Christ in a way that being married cannot. We who are married often make an idol of our spouses and children and rely on them for comfort and value and purpose in life. We have a tendency to look to them to do for us what only God can do. Those who are unmarried have no choice but to rely more consistently and directly on Jesus.

Seventh, Paul highlights the benefits of the unmarried life here in 1 Corinthians 7.

"I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned" (1 Cor. 7:26-28).

We don't know with certainty what *"the present distress"* is that Paul mentions. It might be the persecution that Christians were facing. It may be the economic deprivation or oppression that Christians will suffer. Some believe he is referring to a widespread famine and the social unrest that would follow. Whatever the case, if you are unmarried you only have yourself to provide for. The financial burden of caring for a spouse and children is not there. Or it may be that Paul has in view the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple that Jesus prophesied in Matthew 24 and the horrific treatment of the Jewish people and their dispersal. Or it may be some "distress" unique to the city of Corinth that for whatever reason Paul chose not to identify.

But the point is that he is encouraging people that in times of distress it is preferable to remain unmarried. There is opportunity for undivided devotion to the Lord. One's mind is not distracted by family obligations. One's energy is not depleted. Yes, Genesis 2:18 says that "it is not good that the man should be alone." However, Paul is suggesting that there are times when it actually would be better to be alone.

I love how John Piper expressed this truth. He said:

"The lesson I draw from this is that while it is normal and right and proper in the ordinary order of creation for marriage to be pursued, nevertheless, now that Christ has come into the world, there are redemptive priorities — saving priorities — where it's right for redemptive and saving purposes for a person to forego marriage."

Eighth, one of the more challenging statements of Jesus is found in Matthew 19:12. There he said:

“There are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and *there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven*. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.”

Jesus is not advocating self-mutilation or physical sterilization. Jesus was not recommending that we literally blind ourselves when he said that one should “tear out” his eye if it causes him to stumble. What he is telling us is that he approves of those who *voluntarily choose to renounce marriage and remain single* in order that they might be more effective servants in the kingdom of God.

That is the choice that Paul made after his wife had died and he encourages others to consider making it for themselves:

“I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, 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. 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” (1 Cor. 7:32-35).

Finally, let’s never forget that the two most influential people in the history of the human race were single: Jesus and the Apostle Paul.

Practical Counsel to the Married

(1) The divide that exists between the un-married and the married can often be as wide as the divide between different ethnicities and different socio-economic groups. Make an effort to cross that divide at every opportunity.

(2) Learn to *celebrate singleness*. When you get married people throw you a shower. When you have a baby they throw you another shower. Wedding anniversaries are celebrated every year. Gifts are exchanged. But most single adults are rarely if ever celebrated for anything. So go out your way to recognize their birthdays and their graduations and their promotions at work and their business success. We need to learn how to recognize and honor others even if what God is doing in them is altogether different from what he’s doing for us.

(3) We who are married need to acknowledge that being unmarried is a complex matter and that we actually know very little about it and the struggles singles face. One author put it this way: “A lot of people seem to think that singleness is to marriage as junior varsity is to varsity. As a result, married people sometimes mistakenly believe that they know something about singleness when in fact they don’t. *Singleness isn’t a junior varsity version of marriage. It’s an entirely different sport – and if you haven’t played it, you haven’t mastered it.*”

Ann and I got married after our junior year at OU. I was 21 and she was 20. I’ve had very little experience at living a single life. So I have to be honest and say that I don’t actually know much about what the unmarried people in our church are going through. I need to learn from them, and so do most of you.

(4) I suggest we drop the word “yet” from our vocabulary. To say someone is “not *yet* married” implies that they will be married someday. But maybe they won’t. Maybe God hasn’t called them to get married. So refer to them simply as “not married.”

(5) Be quick and consistent to invite singles to your home. Embrace them as part of your family. Don’t think this is an act of pity. Learn from them!

(6) Don’t be afraid to talk to singles about the pain and loneliness of being single. They feel it. Don’t pretend that they don’t.

(7) Don't ask: "How come you're not married?" They could as easily turn the question around and ask: "How come you *are* married?" Don't ever think there are three groups in your church: men, women, and singles. That is dehumanizing. It defines singles not as human but as a condition or status.

(8) Avoid saying things like: "Well, God will reward your patience with a prince/princess." He may, but he may also have other plans for them that call for lifelong celibacy. Or, again, avoid saying: "Don't worry sweetie. God has someone special prepared for you and you'll find him/her at just the right time." Really? How do you know that? God never promised to provide a spouse to all who trust Christ.

(9) Don't say to them: "Marriage is the primary way that God makes us holy." Really? Where do you find that in Scripture? If that were true we would have to conclude that single people like Jesus and Paul must not have made much progress in their spiritual lives.

(10) Sunday morning can be the most difficult and loneliest time of the week for singles. Invite them to sit with you. Worship with them. Don't ever forget that following a service like this one most of you return home with your family. Most singles go home alone. Invite them to lunch. Invite them to your family gatherings.

(11) As a local church, we need to make sure that our events aren't always geared toward married people with children.

(12) Think about all the things you take for granted as a married person: a conversation partner, someone will always be there to hear about your day, you don't ever have to spend a holiday alone, someone will always remember your birthday, you have a family to spend a vacation with. Take these and extend the same blessings to singles.

(13) Whereas married people typically focus more on family and children, singles focus more on work and career. Honor that and ask questions.

(14) There are a number of other things you shouldn't say or ask. Don't ask a single person: "Have you tried e-harmony or some other on-line dating service?" Don't ever say to a single person: "Stop looking for a spouse and God will bring you one." Don't ever say: "God will bring you a mate once you've learned how to be content in being single."

(15) Stay in touch with singles on a regular basis. If they get sick or suffer some tragedy, they may need you to help them get through it.

(16) Don't speculate about same-sex attraction. What a horrible disservice to the single man or woman that your immediate conclusion is that they are gay. Of course, it is true that many who struggle with same-sex attraction remain single and are determined by God's gracious help to remain celibate. But just because someone isn't married doesn't mean he or she is a homosexual.

(17) We who are married need to recognize that we are privileged, that the deck is stacked in our favor. Virtually everything we say and do here at Bridgeway in terms of ministry and service is geared toward married people with children. Most of the illustrations I use in a sermon are about married people. All of our Elders and Pastors are married. We are deficient in terms of what the unmarried experience, feel, and need. If you think I'm exaggerating, just consider the fact that on Amazon, for every 1 Christian book on being single there are nearly 300 on being married.

(18) We must put an end to any thought that one's marital status is somehow tied to godliness or spiritual maturity. Singles have told me that they often feel stereotyped as morally dangerous and unstable and unqualified for leadership simply because they don't have a spouse. Guess what. If you turn to Galatians 5 and read about the fruit of the Spirit you will immediately discover that being married isn't one of them!

Some Practical Encouragement for the Unmarried

(1) We need to stop communicating the idea that marriage is a necessary qualification for a happy and meaningful life. Singles need to stop thinking of themselves as incomplete or insignificant or as half a human. You can be whole without a mate. I fear we have emphasized or prioritized marriage over remaining single as the superior pathway to personal fulfillment and effective ministry.

- (2) Although you may not be chosen by a spouse, rejoice that you have been chosen by God!
- (3) Singleness is not a disease nor a mental illness nor a sign of some personality disorder.
- (4) Personal worth is not determined by your relation to a man or woman on this earth but by your relationship with the God-man now in heaven, Jesus Christ.
- (5) Your primary loyalty is not to your physical family but to your spiritual family.
- (6) To singles: Satan is out to get you by discouragement, self-condemnation, and ingratitude for what God hasn't give you, etc. Be on the alert and fight back.
- (7) Don't waste your life by waiting for marriage. Some turn down ministry opportunities because they believe it will diminish their opportunity to meet their future spouse.
- (8) Don't ever think that marriage will solve all your problems and meet all your needs.
- (9) Marriage is never portrayed in Scripture as a divine promise. It is always portrayed as a divine gift.
- (10) Marriage is never portrayed as your goal in life. Glorifying God in all things is.

Examples of singles in Scripture: Jeremiah; Joseph; John the Baptist; Anna (Luke 2:36-38), Martha (Luke 10:38-42), Jesus; Paul. I'm sure we could cite numerous examples from our own day and time, such as C. S. Lewis and John Stott.

Conclusion

One single lady tells the story of being a bridesmaid in a friend's wedding. After she and the other bridesmaids had entered and were standing at the front, the bride began to make her way down the aisle. She looked at the groom and his beaming face said this: "I can't believe you are mine, that I get to spend the rest of my life with you. You are so amazing and beautiful and brilliant." She said at that precise moment she heard the Lord say to her: "That's how I feel about you. All the time."