

## “The Single, The Married, & The Church”

*Series: Marriage – What’s the Point? – Part 6*

*1 Corinthians 7*

### Congregational Prayer:

**Introduction:** We come this morning to the end of our mini-series on marriage. I trust this series has in some way been used of the Lord in your life to encourage Christ-exalting marriage – whether you are married or not. And in light of all that we have learned about God’s grand design and plan for marriage I thought it appropriate and necessary to end our series with a consideration of singleness. Not everyone in our church family is married, and not everyone will be married, so how does singleness fit into God’s grand design and plan?

Before I begin to look at the text and speak its truth into our lives I must make clear that I do not pretend to understand or know the unique challenges and pains of singleness. I was once single and I remember those days – though with decreasing clarity as I get older. But the single man or woman in today’s culture faces difficult and unique challenges that I have not known as a single person. Add to that the fact that not all of you who are single in this room are single in the same way. So some of you are single by the very fact that you are too young to marry, either in age or in life stage. Some of you are single in your mid to late twenties. Some of you are older than that and have never been married, and the unique challenges of singleness have compiled with decreasing prospects of marriage. Some of you have been married and are now widowed and are therefore now single once again. There are unique challenges that each one of you face, and I want you to know that I don’t pretend to fully understand them or know them. I have compassion for you in the sense that where you hurt, I too hurt as your brother in Christ. Where you face challenges I long to pray with you and for you that the grace of God might see you through those challenges. I also realize that all that I say this morning will come through the lens of a man who has been happily married to a gift from the Lord for almost 14 years. So, as I try to do every Sunday, I simply want to hide behind the text of Scripture on this issue. I want to point you to the Spirit inspired words of Scripture that were written to a church about this issue of singleness and marriage and all of this from the context of the life of a single author. So, turn with me to 1 Corinthians 7, 1 Corinthians chapter 7. Unlike any other chapter in the Scriptures this chapter in 1 Corinthians will allow us to gain some understanding about the single, the married, and the church.

What I want to do this morning is to work our way through the text by considering 3 lies that we commonly believe and propagate about singleness and then from the text consider the 3 corresponding truths that set the record straight on singleness and how it relates to marriage.

### Context:

One thing is for sure as you approach 1 Corinthians 7 – the Church in Corinth was trying to find its way through the cultural morass of sexual immorality that surrounded them. So, in chapter 6 Paul exhorts them that they are joined to Christ and therefore they are not to join their bodies to a prostitute. He obviously has to bring this up because it is an issue they are facing as a church. So he ends that exhortation by pointing them to the truth in verse 20 that they have been bought with the high price of Christ's blood therefore they are to glorify God with their bodies. Now, in chapter 7 Paul is beginning to answer a series of questions or matters about which they had already written to him. So, he is responding to an issue they have asked him about, and in chapter 7 the issue is only known to us in the statement "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

It really is impossible to know all that was wrapped up in that statement, but from a reading of the rest of chapter 7 it seems that there were some in the church who thought it was more spiritual for them to refrain from the sexual relationship in marriage because somehow abstinence, even in marriage, was better. In other words, there were some who were saying that sexual intercourse, even with your spouse is something from which Christians are to abstain. But Paul clears the air with no confusion by making it known that sex within the marriage relationship should be free and frequent. Let's read verses 1-5.

The body of the wife is the husband's, and the body of the husband is the wife's and the expectation of the text is that they are to have sex regularly and when they don't have sex it is to be for a set time so as to give themselves to prayer. All of this is given with the underlying realization that sexual temptation is real and dangerous to a marriage and it is only amplified when sex is not happening between husband and wife.

And so, it is clear that Paul is disagreeing with the abstinence in marriage crowd and his argument is that God gave the wife's body to the husband and the husband's body to the wife and he created the sexual desire and they are to express and experience that sexual relationship freely and frequently and this is especially true in light of the sexual temptation that obviously abounded in Corinth because abstinence within marriage will only increase the pull to fulfill those desires in sexually immoral ways. In fact, to withhold the sexual relationship as a spouse is to defraud your spouse of the rights that God has given to them over your body.

Verse 6 then I think goes with the end of verse 5 where Paul has made a concession to the free and frequent experience of the sexual relationship within marriage by saying that there can be a time of abstinence but it can only be by mutual agreement for a specific time and the purpose is to be devotion to prayer. Then in verse 6 he says that this is a concession and not a command. In other words, the husband and wife are not here commanded to abstain for times for prayer, but they can if they both agree too.

Then in verse 7 he makes it known that he wishes all were as he was – single and without the care of a spouse. *Read verse 7.*

- **Lie #1 – Singleness is a sub-par class of Christian**

- And here we are presented with our first truth of singleness but before we observe the truth I think it is helpful to see the common lie that is often believed about singleness. Lie #1 is that singleness is a sub-par class of Christian. Now, none of us would ever say that, and we would never, at least I hope we would never, say something to a single guy or gal that would make them think this, but this is a pervasive attitude in the church in both the minds of married and in the minds of singles. This same attitude was prevalent in Paul's day. Marriage was the norm, and those who were not married were beggars, or prostitutes, or some other form of outcast in society. In fact, in most societies leading up to and including Western society people's identity and future and heritage has been found in their marriage and subsequent offspring from those marriages. So, a person's future identity that will last far beyond them in this world has always been linked to their family in the cultures of the world. And in part this is biblical, but like all other things our sin natures twist even this to serve self and make marriage and family idols that exalt our self-image.
- Not only have the single and even the single who is such because of widowhood often found it difficult to find their place in society, but they have also been the overwhelming minority. As little as fifty years ago in America the percentage of the adult population that was single was estimated to be at about 3%, this number is changing in just the last decade where now estimates are that about 50% of the adult population is now single. But I think it is safe to say that within the culture of the church, and most certainly within the context of our church, being single is still a minority life situation. Now listen, whenever you are a part of the minority, no matter what that minority is, you instantly feel like you are sub-par because you don't match up to the majority around you. Whether it is skin color or some handicap that makes you physically different than most or some mental handicap that sets you apart or your level of income that is different than most or your status of single in a world where most are married. Whatever the minority is, those who are a part of the minority instantly feel as though they are sub-par to those around them, as though they somehow don't match up. Now one of the cruel realities of sinful nature is that often those who are in the majority propagate and solidify those feelings of inferiority and this is called bigotry or prejudice.
- Because most of the adults who are a part of Newton Bible Church are married then we must understand that there will be a natural tendency for those who are not married in our midst to feel inferior or sub-par. In other words, just by the nature of the case, those who are not married among us will naturally feel like second class citizens among us because they are in the minority. So, the question

is – is this true? Is there something wrong with them because they are not married? Do they have the plague or are they scary people whom we should avoid? Are they indeed second-class Christians?

- **Truth #1 – Present singleness is a gift from God, just like present marriage – vs. 7**
  - The obvious and resounding answer from the text is no! The singles among us are not second class citizens or somehow strange or weird or to be avoided. Please do not miss this – God has gifted each one of us with whatever state we are currently in as it relates to marriage. Present singleness is a gift from God just like present marriage is. I said at the beginning that everything I say will be through the lens of a man married to my gift from the Lord for almost 14 years now. This is how I view Julie, and this is how the Bible presents her to me – she is a gift from the Lord to me. But what Paul says here makes clear that it is not just a spouse that is a gift from the Lord, but no spouse is also a gift from the Lord. I do not think that this text is talking about the lifelong gift of singleness where somehow the person is totally absent of any desire for marriage. Those people do exist and God has given them a unique makeup, but they are rare. Most singles I know who have been brave enough to be open with me about their thoughts on marriage have made it clear that they have a deep desire to be married, but for whatever reason God has not given them a spouse. The common mistake at that point is to make the jump that because God has not presently given me a spouse, then I am somehow missing out on God's provision for me. Somehow as a single I am missing out on God's gift of grace to me because I am not married.
  - But that is not what the text says here. To those of you who are single God has presently given you a “charismata” – a gift of his grace. In Paul's letters these “charismata's” are often given to an individual for the sake of edifying others. So the spiritual charismata, or gift, of service or prophecy or administration was given for the sake of edifying others in the body of Christ. Singleness is here described as that kind of gift. It is a gift of God's grace for the sake of edifying others. More than that, for your present singleness God meets you where you are and gives you the grace necessary for your unique challenge. So the fact that you have no spouse right now is a gift from the Lord, and He also gives grace for this moment to live within this life situation in a way that is glorifying to Him. So, for the widow of the recently passed husband, God gives grace for her days of lonely sorrow and grace to turn her eyes to helping and serving others. For the single guy in his early 30's longing for the companionship of a wife God gives grace to deal with the loneliness, overcome the temptation, and use his life for God's glory. You see, present singleness is a gift from God, not a class of sub-par Christianity.
  - ***Implications:***
    - Singles – you must receive this gift from the Lord.
      - Whether you are single by choice or not is not the issue, your singleness is ultimately a gift from the Lord. Whether or not that

singleness will be for another 8 months or another 8 years or another 80 years that is not for you to determine. What is yours to determine is whether or not you will receive this gift from the Lord today. Not only the gift of singleness itself, but will you daily walk in the grace necessary to follow Christ as a single adult in this world? Will you receive the grace made available to you through Christ so that in your singleness you can be used of the Lord for His glory and for the good of others?

- Marrieds – You must receive the singles as those gifted by the Lord.
  - Along with this, there is a requirement to be derived for those of us who are married. We must understand that by the nature of being in the minority, it is tough to be a single in our congregation. We cannot completely change that, but we can help to alleviate it. We must be conscious of this struggle and we must seek to make clear to the single men and women in our body that their singleness is not a barrier to our investment in their lives, and our desire for their investment in ours. I must tell you that some of the richest fellowship I have received in this body has been from our young single guys as I have sought to build bridges into their lives and be used of the Lord in any way possible to encourage them to follow Christ. I have been routinely encouraged, challenged, and exhorted as I see these young men striving after Christ. If you don't have a close relationship with a single man or woman, depending on your gender, you are missing out on one of God's unique blessings to the Church. It is incumbent upon those of us who are married to seek ways to bridge the natural gap between us and those who are single among us.
  
- **Lie #2 – Marriage is for the weak – vs. 8-9**
  - A lie that is piggyback to the first one is the lie that marriage is for the weak. So some singles have read this passage in 1 Corinthians and been convinced that those who marry do so because they cannot control their sexual desires. So verses 8 and 9 say this: *Read verses 8-9*. These verses make it sound like marriage is a concession to those who cannot control their sexual desire. And so these verses have been the subject of a lot of abuse that comes out in advice to young adults like – well, if you can't control yourself then you should seek marriage, but if you can control your sexual desire then the more spiritual route is singleness. This makes marriage out to be a concession for the weak.
  
- **Truth #2 – Marriage is the God designed relationship for the fulfillment of sexual desire – vs. 8-9**

- But the truth is that marriage is the God designed relationship for the fulfillment of sexual desire. These desires are good and created by God and the fulfillment of those desires in marriage is good and right. In fact, this is exactly what Paul has argued for in verses 2-5. He has made clear that the married couple should be having free and frequent sex because marriage is the God designed relationship for the fulfillment of those desires. What Paul is giving us here in verses 8-9 is not a concession to the weak, but the God-given fulfillment of sexual desire.
- Paul would love to have everyone be like he is, but he knows that not everyone can be like he is and he knows that this is good and right. And so, for the single person who is especially struggling with immoral fulfillments of these God-given sexual desires, Paul says, that single person should especially pursue marriage. This is not to say that marriage is the panacea for immorality, but it is to say that marriage is the God designed relationship where sexual desire finds its God ordained fulfillment. And so part of the single man or single woman's struggle with sexual temptation is linked to the very fact that they are single because they do not have the relationship of marriage in which God has designed for these sexual desires to find their fulfillment. Some single people do not struggle with these desires as much as others. Some have found grace upon grace to help them in the midst of their most intense struggles. And then there are other singles who fight hard and fight to win, and seem to consistently be losing. Don't misunderstand me – God's grace is sufficient for the battle and the believer never has to sin, but for some they are especially weak in their ability to resist sexual temptation and Paul's advice for them is to pursue marriage.
- I saw this first hand with a man I disciplined for several years. In the course of our relationship he confided in me the intense and difficult struggles of sexual impurity. We mourned together over these battles, and his losses. We fought together, we strategized against sin, and we searched the Scriptures together to seek maturity in Christ which we knew was the answer to the struggle. And yet, the struggle always found a foothold in his life, and the common theme was his desire to be married. He never excused his sinfulness by pointing to his singleness, but he would often lament to me – Matt, I just want to be married. My advice to him flowed from this passage – then by all means, seek a wife. But for many years God withheld that wife from him, until just within the past few years God has blessed him with a spouse. His temptation to immoral fulfillments of those sexual desires has not faded into oblivion, but one of the major factors of the struggle has been graciously changed through the wife that the Lord has given.
- *Implications:*
  - Singles struggling with sexual immorality should pursue marriage
    - By this I point you to the text to make clear to you that a major factor in your struggle against immoral fulfillments of these desires

is the fact that you don't have the natural relationship of marriage which God has designed as the relationship where those desires are rightly fulfilled.

- Because pornography is such an epidemic in our day I must speak to our men and women who are single about this for a moment. It is not okay to delay marriage in any way because in pornography you have found some anonymous fulfillment of your sexual desires that has taken away the felt need for marriage. I do not have knowledge that this is true of any of you, and so my conscience is clear in simply saying this as a universal fact. The pornography that plagues not only the men of America, but also the women, cannot be the crutch that allows you to delay marriage. Your struggle with pornography, if you have one, should not be something that delays your pursuit of a spouse, but rather it should accelerate it. And by accelerate it I don't necessarily mean time frame, but urgency. In other words, I am not saying – oh, you are struggling with pornography – then just get married, that will help. Statistics say that marriage doesn't necessarily relieve the struggle. What I am saying is that one of the reasons you struggle with immoral fulfillments of your sexual desires is because you are not yet in the relationship that God has designed for the right fulfillment of those desires. So, don't sit idly by while pornography ruins your life, but rather wage war against it and fight with all the grace God gives you to be free from pornography and pure in heart and thought and deed so that you can present yourself as a God-glorifying man or woman to a future spouse. Let your struggle with immoral fulfillments of sexual desire feed your longing to wage war against sin in your heart and seek a spouse who is doing the same in their own life so that together the two of you can exalt Christ in your marriage.
- Singles finding grace to be content and controlled should not disdain other singles seeking marriage.
  - If God has blessed you to be taught by His grace to operate in contentment and your struggle with sexual desire is not as intense as others, be careful to not disdain others who may be seeking marriage. Engage them and seek to help them wage war, but do not disdain them, for marriage is not a concession for the weak, but rather marriage is the God designed relationship for the fulfillment of those very sexual desires with which they struggle. So at a deep level of the struggle they are not simply struggling

with immoral behavior, but they are struggling with not being married. Don't disdain them for this.

- **Lie #3 – A Life Change would grant me greater eternal significance – vs. 17-38**
  - The third lie that is commonly believed and spread about singleness is that a life change would grant the single greater eternal significance. This thought corresponds to the first lie that singles are sub-par Christians, but here in the latter part of chapter 7 Paul gives more reasoning as to why there is not greater eternal significance to be found through a simple change in circumstances.
  - Remember that he is writing to a group of seemingly unsettled Christians who are willing to try just about anything if they can be convinced that it will be more in line with following Christ. And so, in verses 10-16 Paul addresses the married folks in the congregation and affirms to them again that they are not to be seeking a life change. If they are married they are to stay married. If they are married to an unbelieving spouse because they themselves came to faith in Christ after they were married, they are not to leave their spouse because God might use their testimony in the home to bring the unbelieving spouse to faith. In other words, Paul is saying again to them – don't seek a life change. This then plays into the message found in verses 17-38. Before I read it I must tell you that these are tough verses in a tough letter. There are textual complications and various interpretations in which we could spend hours. Rather than get bogged down in that I am going to give you the conclusions of my study and if you vehemently disagree with my conclusions we can talk after the service – as long as you buy lunch =) *Read verses 17-38.*
  - You see the natural inclination of the sinful heart is to think that if I only had this or if my life was only like that then I would be able to do more and have more impact and have more significance. If only I were this or that then I would be more respected in the body of Christ and would be able to do more with eternal significance. But Paul says in verses 17-24 that this is a lie that we tend to believe that has no basis in God-ordained fact. We are not made eternally significant by our current situation – whether that be how much money we possess or what job we hold or what physical family we belong to. These things do not determine our identity and our eternal significance. So, the key to increasing your eternal impact is not to change your situation per se, but to change your outlook.
  - This is most certainly true for those who are single among us. Our world tells you that real life begins when you find that love of your life and you are completed by your perfect match. Just think for a moment about the message of all of the Disney princess movies – and yes I have watched them all . . . – their underlying message is that the lives of the main characters begin when they start to become aware of some significant other and their life increases in significance as love blossoms and then their significance is at its ultimate height when they finally wed and then their story is completely dropped - gone – over – because the

details of life after those moments of amazing romance don't matter anymore – those are just the boring details of everyday life.

- You see, it is easy to fall into the trap of finding our identity in our current life situation, and let's be honest – we would all want to change our identity if this were actually true. If our identity was truly wrapped up in our life situation then we would all want to lose a few pounds and have a different job and make more money and have a nicer house and on and on and on the list could go. But what Paul is saying here is that your identity is not found in your life situation. Were you a slave when the grace of God called you out of darkness into light? Then there is no need to cease being a slave as though somehow being a freedman will make a more eternally significant follower of Christ. No, you can remain as you are – in whatever life situation the grace of God found you (obviously barring the outright immoral and sinful) and you can live an eternally significant life in whatever state you are currently in – even if that is singleness.
- **Truth #3 – There is opportunity for eternally significant living in whatever state you are in – vs. 17-24**
  - So, singles, your eternal significance is not found in your singleness, nor will it someday be found in your marriage. Your eternal significance is found singularly in your connection to Jesus Christ through faith in His finished work on your behalf, and then of the life that you now live in light of that redemption, regardless of single or married, rich or poor, slave or free, circumcised or uncircumcised.
  - To make this point all the more clear let me draw in some corollary truths. If your eternal significance somehow could only be realized when you were married, then why is it that we are not going to be married in eternity? That's right – we will all be single in the eternal life to come. None of us will be united in marriage, but rather, as a member of the Bride of Christ, the Church, we will be united to Him forever. You see marriage in this life is the penultimate reality. In eternity it gives way to the ultimate reality of marriage between Christ and His Bride – the Church. So, how then could we possibly think that only those who are married in this life will be those who lead eternally significant lives if we will not even be married in eternity? Since human marriage in the temporal gives way to the ultimate marriage in eternity it would seem that human marriage in this life is not the only route to eternally significant lives.
  - In fact, we know this to be true by looking back at the vast cloud of witnesses who have gone before us and have had significant impact on their world for God's glory. Many of them have been single, or have had increased effectiveness in their single state. So think of the impact of Elisabeth Elliott and Gracia Burnham – women whose husbands were killed on the Mission Field who saw God increase their reach and their effect because of their singleness. Or think of missionaries like David Brainerd whose single marital status was matched by his singular

commitment to evangelize the Native American Indian. Or think of men in Scripture like the Apostle Paul and John the Baptist, or a brother and two sisters like Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. And then think ultimately of Jesus himself. His very life raises the eternal significance of the single adult. Jesus never married, never had sexual intercourse, and never knew the companionship of a spouse. And yet, he was not somehow inhuman or sub-par in his life experience. No, rather, he was the ultimate man who was tempted in all points like we are so that he could be our ultimate High Priest. There are obvious ways in which we need to grow to be more and more Christ-like in our human condition – things like patience, kindness, compassion, self-control, resisting temptation – but marriage is not one of them. If the ultimate goal of God is to conform us to the image of Christ, then we must understand that being married is not part of that image. I am not saying that marriage is unessential – for you know from the first part of our series that this is not true. I am saying that in order to be conformed to Christ – to be like Christ – does not require us to be married. God can uniquely use marriage or singleness and the differing challenges they present to shape and mold and conform us to the image of Christ. And he does indeed choose one or the other for all of us. Your path to conformity to Christ might have looked like marriage right after high school, or no marriage at all, or marriage at 28 or 30 or 45. Whatever path the Lord has given, this is the path he has deemed the best for your conformity to Jesus. This does not reduce our responsibility in the matter because God does not dictate our decisions, but He is still sovereign and so what he has allowed has somehow fit into His sovereign will. And so, your marital status today is God's ordained path to conformity to Christ today.

- Now in these verses Paul makes a special case for singleness and for its eternal significance. He dances through the issue with Spirit led precision, but in essence he is seeking to extol singleness to those who are already single, and marriage to those who are married and who desire to get married. Essentially what he says in verses 25-38 to the single man and woman is that before you decide to get married you should strongly consider the benefits of singleness for the sake of eternal investment. The fact is, Paul says, that married people have more temporal concerns that naturally divide devotion to the Lord. This does not mean that married people are less spiritual or sub-par Christians, it simply means that they cannot take the risks and carry the responsibilities and fulfill the ministry tasks that single men and women can.
  - Indirectly from the text let me say that you should not despise one another for that. So, if you are single, understand that those who are married simply have more temporal concerns than you do, so don't look down your nose if they don't have as much time as you do for Bible study or prayer or ministry to others. Also, those of you are married, do not despise the single who can serve in ways that you can't. Do not seek to

undermine their ministry or puff yourself up in the eyes of others so as to make yourself look as important as the single who can be more fully devoted to the Lord. Rather, rejoice that they are indeed pursuing Christ in their singleness and seek to encourage them to do so.

- And this singles, is what Paul is seeking to do in this text. He is seeking to point you to the great opportunity that your singleness provides especially in light of the passing away nature of the world and our short time on it. You see, what concerns you defines you and so if you are concerned in your singleness with the prospect of marriage and all you think about and work towards is the day you will be married, then you most likely are making an idol out of marriage that will persist into your marriage and the problems this idolatry creates will simply take on new forms. So, right now this idolatry of marriage in the heart of the single can often take the shape of simply coping with singleness or surviving until Mr. or Mrs. Right comes along. Or it looks like serial dating, or giving yourself entirely to your career so that you don't have to consider your singleness, or giving up and allowing self to take over in ways that singleness uniquely allows. You see, what you care about and what concerns you ends up defining you. So, if you idolize marriage in these ways, your life will be defined by the fact that you are not yet married. And if you idolize marriage in your singleness, most likely you will idolize it when you are married, and this is will prove to be a shaky foundation for marriage because you will look to your spouse to provide for you things that only God can provide for you. So, if you are discontent with your singleness and think that somehow marriage will prove to be the answer to your discontentment, most likely when you get married you will carry that discontentment with you and be discontent with some aspect of married life. You see, contentment is not found in a state of being but in a state of maturity. It is not your life situation that needs to change in order for you to finally be content. If there is one thing I have learned over the past three years it is that life is made up of waiting. If you are not waiting for one thing you will be waiting for the next thing. And if you let your waiting dominate what concerns you, then this waiting with a discontent heart will be what defines and shapes you, and in this, according to this passage, your singleness will have been wasted.
- What Paul is arguing for here is for devotion to Christ to be your main concern so that it can define your life. And he says, that if this does define you then you will find greater eternal significance than if you make marriage your main concern so that your lack of marriage defines your life. So, in light of the present trouble of this world and our short time on it Paul extols the idea that some of you who are single should remain that way because singleness allows for a unique devotion to the Lord that marriage does not allow. Jesus himself, in his teaching about marriage and divorce in Matthew 19 says that some have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven. This is a good and right thing in

Jesus' view. He understands that not many can do this, but the implication is that there will be some who can remain single for their whole life and if they do their lives should be marked by unique devotion to the Lord because their singleness uniquely allows for this.

- This does not mean that all singles will be missionaries or conference speakers, but it does mean that all of you who are single should consider the present distress of the world which is passing away and realize that marriage is but one path to following Christ. You must realize that marriage is good and God-ordained and wonderfully sweet – but it only lasts for this life. Marriage has eternal significance as it points to Christ, but being single allows for unique devotion to Christ that God can use for His glory and the edification of others.
- *Implications:*
  - In whatever state you are presently in, be concerned with devotion to the Lord.

**Conclusion:** And so, the question for you as a single man or woman is – am I surviving my singleness or am I thriving in the reception of God's gift of grace to me? God has designed for you to thrive for His glory and for the edification of the body of Christ. May God help you to do so, and may God help us as a church family to fully receive you and the edification that your singleness can uniquely provide. Let's pray.