

1 Cor 7 - Singleness

Introduction:

Hard passage – three reasons:

1. Long and complicated – hard to break up
2. Hard to know exactly what is being talked about – situations that don't exist now
3. Dealing with very personal and emotional issues – singleness, marriage, divorce etc.

Sermon may bring up some hard issues for you. If so please come and talk to me, Stu or John after the service.

I am going to focus on the overall logic of the passage, and the main application which is about singleness. Next week Stu is going to preach on the same passage, but focus on what it has to say about marriage.

Pray

Singleness is better than marriage

V1 Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to marry."

In this passage Paul turns from the problems in the Corinthian church to some issues they have written to him about. Either he is quoting their letter to him, or he is answering their question. Either way he agrees with the statement.

2 But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.

Better translation is:

2 But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband.

Marriage is the only place where sex is to happen.

Because there is so much sexual immorality in Corinth and esp. in the church, Paul wants them all to get married and have lots of sex in their marriage.

Back to the issues in Ch 5&6.

Despite all this, he will still say that remaining single is better than getting married.

6 I say this as a concession, not as a command. (Get married)

7 I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.

Paul is single and he is wishing that the Corinthians were all single as well. Could be that Paul is talking about a Gift of singleness – ability to remain single without burning in passion. Or the state of singleness and marriage are both gifts from God. But either way the application is the same – singleness is better than marriage.

8 Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do.

Third time he has said it. Again, he doesn't say why until v29-35.

Stop for a moment: who here has heard this idea before that singleness is better than marriage? Not widely taught in our churches, not a popular thing to say. This passage may be a challenge to our way of thinking. Just think about the language we use – single = unmarried. Never say married = unsingle. We think that there is something wrong with people who don't get married.

A really bad reason to remain single.

Before Paul explains why he thinks it's better to remain single than to get married, he has to refute the Corinthians wrong ideas on this issue.

Some in the Corinthian church were caught up in the sexual immorality of their society, but others were reacting against this and were going too far the other way. They were thinking that if sexual sin was such a problem, then the way to be godly was to stop having sex altogether.

So they wrote to Paul asking him if he agreed that it was right not to touch a woman, but they meant in all circumstances, whether you were single or married.

They thought that they could become godlier by refraining from sex altogether – by remaining single, or having a sexless marriage, and even getting divorced so that they didn't have to have sex anymore, esp. if they were married to a non-Christian.

Paul has to correct this wrong way of thinking before he explains why he thinks that being single is better than being married.

And his answer is: Being single doesn't make you any godlier, because your situation isn't the thing that makes you godly. Therefore he will call them to:

Stay in the situation you were when you became a Christian.

V10 -11 - No divorce.

V12-13 - No divorce when one spouse is not a Christian

17 Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches.

Changing your circumstances doesn't make you godlier. It doesn't solve your problems – you just exchange one set of problems for another. The Corinthians thought that if they became single, all their issues around sexual immorality would go away.

But Paul says that this is not the case.

E.G. Monks in a monastery.

Single

Separate from the world

Think this makes them more godly

E.G. Priests some churches

But Paul says this is not the case – your situation doesn't make you any more or less godly.

But he does say that it is better to remain single than to get married.

A really good reason to remain single.

26 Because of the **present crisis**, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are.

27 Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife.

What's the present crisis? Explained by v29-31 – last days. Back to v17-24 – don't try and change your present circumstances.

29 What I mean, brothers, is that **the time is short**. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none;

30 those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep;

31 those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. **For this world in its present form is passing away.**

Paul is talking about a period of time known as the "Last Days". This is the time between Jesus' first and second coming. The New Testament makes it clear that this is a limited period of time – it won't go on forever. And there is a sense of urgency to share the gospel with people, because we don't know how long we have until Jesus returns and it is too late for people to become Christians. So because this world in its present form is passing away, the time is short, it is a crisis, and we need to be focussed on telling people about Jesus and helping them become Christians and grow as Christians, rather than focussing on the things of this world – husbands and wives, mourning or being happy, the physical things we buy and use etc.

E.G. Living on the Titanic. Knew it was going to hit the iceberg and sink soon, how would you spend your last days?

28 But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. **But those who marry will face many troubles in this life**, and I want to spare you this.

It's not a sin to get married, but in view of the time we live in, it might be wiser not to.

What are the troubles married people face?

32 I would like you to be **free from concern**. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord.

33 But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—

34 and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband.

35 I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, **but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.**

Married people have divided interests – focus on both God and spouse. Single people can focus solely on serving God – undivided devotion to the Lord.

If we are not careful, it is easy to misunderstand this passage. Paul is not saying that singleness is spiritual and marriage unspiritual. Nor is he saying that singleness is easy but marriage is hard. No, the contrast is between complex and simple. Married life is more complicated; singleness is more straightforward.

E.G. Life as a married person.

All of a sudden, you can't just do what you want when you want – you have to take the needs and desires of your spouse into account. Rightly so. And you need to spend time with them and look after them etc. All good things and God calls you to do them, but they take time and energy and focus – time, energy and focus that you could otherwise spend on God and sharing the gospel.

E.G. When Heather and I were first married and on mission together – I agreed to go and do something without checking with Heather first. And she was rightly upset with me for not thinking about her etc. I was still learning that I couldn't just do what I wanted anymore, even in ministry.

So having a spouse divides your attention, and then you have kids. Life is so much more complicated with kids than without.

- Early on – no sleep
- Bit later – getting out of the house takes an hour and you need a bigger car for all the things you have to take with you
- Later still – don't have to take as much, but you become a taxi service, taking them to all their sport and social functions.

Wonderful, happy times, but much more complicated than being single. See the point Paul is making? Being single gives you so much more time and head space to be devoted to God and his mission.

E.G. Trip to India next year to teach PTC – if I was single, I would have already signed up. But I need to think it through very carefully because it's not just me that is affected by my decision. And it is right that I think it through carefully because that is part of me loving and taking care of my family, which God calls me to do.

Paul is not saying that it is wrong to get married, as the rest of the passage will go on to say. What he is saying is that being single is much less complicated than being married, and therefore leaves you freer to devote yourself to God and his mission, esp. since we are living in the last days.

So in summary: Singleness is better than marriage because you can be undivided in your devotion to the Lord, especially since it is the last days.

Now there may be some of you who have some problems with this teaching. That's OK. It's not something that Christians talk about much. Let me try to answer some of the most common objections to this idea that singleness is better than marriage.

Common Objections

1 Singleness Is Too Hard

Marriage is just as hard, only different hardships

2 Singleness means you won't lead a fulfilling life

Where do we get our fulfilment from? From our earthly relationships or from our relationship with God? If we say we need to be married and have children in order to be fulfilled, we are putting these relationships in the place that our relationship with God should be.

We also need to remember that Jesus was single his entire life on earth. Jesus willingly became fully human for us. He willingly became a male. He was a sexual human being, as we all are. But he lived a celibate lifestyle. He never married. He never even entered a romantic relationship. He never had sex.

But there's more than even that. He is the example of the perfect man. He is the humanity all of us are called to be but which none of us are. He is the most complete and fully human person who ever lived. So his not being married is not incidental. It shows us that none of these things—marriage, romantic fulfilment, sexual experience—is intrinsic to being a full human being. The moment we say otherwise, the moment we claim a life of celibacy to be dehumanizing, we are implying that Jesus himself is only subhuman.

3 Singleness Means No Intimacy

Our society has collapsed sex and intimacy – it assumes that we can't have intimacy if we don't have sex.

But bible talks about the intimacy we can have with friends and family members.

E.G. Consider these words of grief expressed by David after the death of his close friend Jonathan:

I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
 very pleasant have you been to me;
 your love to me was extraordinary,
 surpassing the love of women. (2 Sam. 1:26)

When we hear that, we assume that they were gay. But there is no indication of that in any of the accounts of David or Jonathan. It is possible to have close friendships, intimate relationships where there is no thought of sex. We need to work on this at church and offer it to our single friends at church.

4 Singleness Means No Family

Church is to become your spiritual family – Jesus' teaching

He answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:33–35)

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 10:28–30)

Our church here should be one big family. We should live and relate as brothers and sisters in the same age group as us, parents in the age group older than us, and children in the age group younger than us. And if we are married, we shouldn't just focus on our nuclear family.

E.G. Our temptation is to get married, buy a house, have two or three children, one or two schnauzers, and then say we are done. To pull up the drawbridge and focus inwards not outwards. We need to open up our families to the singles here at church.

How to make the decision to remain single or get married

If you are single, how do you make the decision about whether to get married or not.

Firstly, don't assume that you must get married. Actually, do the opposite – assume that you are going to remain single, as this is better.

Secondly, follow the wisdom of the passage – if you are finding it hard to control yourself as single person, if you are burning with passion, then perhaps you should get married. Or you could pray that God would help you to control your passions and not give into sexual temptation.

Lastly, for those parents who have teenage or young adult children like I do, what are you praying for your children and what are you talking to them about? Do you pray for them and encourage them to find a Christian man or woman and get married, or do you pray for them and encourage them to remain single, as it is better, even if it means that you won't have grandchildren?

Let's pray.