



THE GIFT OF SINGLENES

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

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1 Corinthians 7:7-40
Eighth Message
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Society today has a large population of singles—people who have never been married, the divorced, and those who have lost their spouses. Singleness is quite common in the world of our day. People are marrying later and living longer. And yet, marriage is considered the more exalted state. Singles can easily begin to feel like second class citizens, that there is something wrong with them, that they are incomplete and missing out on something.

This hasn't always been the case. In the history of the church, at times the state of marriage was frowned on. Believers were taught that being single and living alone was a superior state of spiritual progress. Back then, married people were regarded as second-class citizens.

It is important for Christians to understand singleness. When you think about it, singleness makes up a large portion of life. Supposing you were married at 25, that your spouse died when you were 65, and you lived to be 80. You would have been married for 40 years, but you would have been single for just as long. Would that mean that your years of being single were less important than your married years? The fact is, many will spend a significant portion of their lives unmarried, either at the front or the back end of life.

To learn more about the state of being single, it is best to get our understanding from the truth of God's word and not some television show or best selling book. Turn with me to chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians. In this section of his letter, the apostle Paul addresses several concerns about marriage raised by the Corinthian church. Evidently some in the church who practiced asceticism taught that marriage was a sin. They held that Christians should remain single. In his response, Paul assures the Corinthians that marriage is not a sin, and in the process gives some helpful insights into singleness. Let's begin reading in verses 6-8.

But this I say by way of concession, not of command, Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. (1 Cor. 7:6-8, NASB)

Paul states that he has no command from the Lord, but is expressing his pastoral advice as an apostle. (He repeats this thought two more times in the chapter.) What he is saying is that neither singleness nor marriage is an issue of moral concern. Divorce and immorality yes, but not singleness and marriage.

Paul considers both states, singleness and marriage, to be a gift. Twice he says that if it were up to him, his desire for the Corinthian church would be that they were all as he was, i.e. unmarried. Paul may have been married once, but he certainly was not married at this time. Can you imagine the apostle Paul standing up in front of our church today, urging everyone who was single to remain in that state? His presence would have a dramatic effect on how we view singleness.

We can draw a couple of conclusions from these verses. First, being single should not be considered a diminished state of existence. It doesn't mean you are a failure or that you are cursed. Paul calls singleness a gift. A single person has the same value as any other member of the body.

A second conclusion we can draw is that if we are single, we are not missing out on anything. At times, singles feel excluded from a large part of life. But obviously, Paul did not feel that way. He didn't act as though he lacked joy or standing simply because he wasn't married.

If we look to marriage to fully satisfy us, to make us happy, bring us joy and give us a sense of value, then it is not a gift and we will be sadly disappointed. Marriage is fulfilling, but so is singleness, because, whether we are single or married, we are fulfilled in the Lord and we derive our sense of worth from him.

Now there are some distinct advantages to being single. For example, when you are single, you can bypass the long lift lines on the ski slopes; you have a much better chance of getting on the golf course; and, if you are taking a plane trip and the flight is full, you are much more likely to take advantage of that free ticket offer! Paul doesn't mention these advantages, but he does list a couple of his own, beginning in verse 25.

Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy. I think then that this is good in view of the present distress, that it is good for a man to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you should marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin should marry, she has not sinned. Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you. (7:25-28)

Here it is likely that Paul is addressing young be-

trothed women who along with their fiances were trying to decide whether to go ahead with their wedding plans in light of the ascetic teaching that marriage was sinful. Paul tells them that marriage is not a sin. But he also points out certain advantages to remaining single.

I. ADVANTAGES OF SINGLENESS

A. When you are single, it is easier to deal with calamity and distress.

The words “present distress,” in v. 26, and the word “trouble” (or “affliction in the flesh”), in v. 28, probably refer to the same event. Commentators differ over what Paul was referring to. Some say he was speaking of the coming of the Lord and the accompanying tribulation prior to that event, described in Matt. 24 and Mark 13. Others think he was referring to a coming persecution or military siege.

It seems, however, that the Corinthians were presently experiencing some sort of hardship. There is firm archaeological and literary evidence indicating that there were food shortages in the city during this period. As a result, there was panic buying, social unrest, and uncertainty about the future. In such times it would certainly be better to be single and not have the responsibility to provide food for a family.

Every generation faces some sort of crisis or calamity, whether it is war, depression, famine, earthquakes or floods. Perhaps the current economic turmoil and uncertainty we are experiencing is such a crisis. In such times there are clear advantages to being single. You can be more flexible, you can adapt more easily to uncertainty, you can pick up and move if you are forced to. If you lose your job, you can go to the hardware store or the gas station and get work. If the stock market crashes, you have less need for those paper profits.

Paul’s preference for Christians is that they remain single so that they might be spared the difficulties, the hardship and the pain brought on by various crises.

B. When you are single, it is easier to stay free from the cares of the world.

The apostle goes on to refer to another advantage of singleness, in v. 29.

But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on both those who have wives should be as though they had none; and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess; and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away. But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things

of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. And I say this for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is seemly, and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord. (7:29-35)

We are all faced with the temptation to amass our personal kingdom, building in this world a life that we think will be permanent. Paul says that marriage will increase this tendency. Married people are concerned about the things of the world. Husbands worry about pleasing their wives, and wives about pleasing their husbands. The word “concern” conveys the idea of care in a positive sense, but it also is used to describe anxiety and worry. Concern is the natural reaction of man to poverty, hunger, and other troubles which befall him in life.

Paul says that the time is short; the world is passing away. Nothing about this world is permanent. A time is coming when marriage, possessions, and circumstances will have no meaning, when the things that seem so important today will be counted as trivial. Christians are not to live in this world as if it were permanent. We are to live as if what is, is not, so that we can be devoted to the Lord. All of us struggle in doing this, whether we are single or married. But when you are married, it is harder to maintain the right priorities. Married people are more likely to be anxious about their future or their family. Paul encourages singleness so that we can free from the entanglements of the world.

Consider how much responsibility goes with being married and having a family. As a young person, I never wanted to accumulate more than would fit in my car so that I could move at the drop of a hat. All I needed was a football, a basketball, and a few clothes. Before I got married, I never knew I needed furniture. Then I got married and I learned that every so often you have to change your furniture. I thought a couch lasted a lifetime, but I found out that wasn’t true. I was deceived.

Consider how much time, energy, and money it takes to maintain a home and a family. Something is constantly breaking around the house and it invariably takes multiple trips to the hardware store to find the right part. That can easily chew up a whole day, especially if you are as handy at fixing things as I am. Cars are my worst headache. In an effort to keep things simple, my wife and I had only one car until the kids came along. Then when they grew up, the first thing they wanted was a car. I’ve lost track of how many cars I have. Have you ever had your child call you from college to say that their car’s engine just blew up? Talk about anxiety.

At last, when two of my kids went away to college, I thought things would settle down. But now I have begun to think about what is still ahead—trying to manage finances to help them get through school, and per-

haps pay for a wedding or two. Then there will be grandchildren and the concerns I will have for them! I get tired just thinking about it. These are all the things that cause married people concern, worry and anxiety.

Now don't get me wrong. I have a wonderful wife and children. I wouldn't trade them for anything. My wife gives me all the freedom I need. If I want to go to the Yucatan, that's never a problem. I can watch football on TV any time, night or day, and she never says a word. But Paul says that when you are married, there will be a lot of things to distract you and take your time. There are advantages to being single. For example, if I were single, I could be out most nights discipling, teaching, and meeting with people. I could read and study more. There would be more time for quiet and solitude. The older I get, the more I crave time alone with the Lord. Singles have a wonderful opportunity to learn and value solitude, time to reflect on the deep things of God.

Just because you are single doesn't mean you will be occupied doing these things, however. You will be tempted to accumulate the possessions of the world, to fill your time with things that are not eternal. But you will have more opportunity to be undivided in your pursuits and have a simpler life.

Think of some of the more notable single people who have contributed greatly to service of the Lord. John Stott through his preaching and writing ministry has given the church a wonderful repository of truth. I read everything I can find from the pen of this great Christian. And what would we do without the writings of C. S. Lewis, who didn't marry until he was in his sixties? Think about Corrie Ten Boom's wonderful ministry. I think of our own Carleen Brooks, who never ceases laboring among us here in this church. She loves people, and she loves serving the Lord. Karin Stahl, from 20 Something, has begun a faith ministry among four hundred school children in Guatemala that has tremendous implications for the church there. All these are examples of single people who have used their gift of singleness to honor and serve the Lord.

Paul lists two advantages to being single: it is less painful to survive in times of crisis, and it is easier to remain free from the cares of the world.

However, there are pressures that come with being single. Just because you are single doesn't mean that life will be all fun and games. Paul goes on to list some of these.

II. PRESSURES OF SINGLENESS

A. Sexual pressures

But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin daughter, if she should be of full age, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry. But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decid-

ed that in his own heart, to keep his own virgin daughter, will do better. (7:36-38)

These verses are a bit confusing and hard to decipher. Some commentators think that what Paul has in mind here is a father-daughter relationship. But the word "daughter" doesn't actually occur in the Greek text. I think it is likely that the person who is called a virgin is the same one whom Paul mentions in the previous verses. The best explanation of this is that Paul is again addressing young men and women who are engaged to be married. If they marry they do not sin; if they do not marry they will do well.

What is clear is that these betrothed couples might face sexual temptation. In order not to marry, Paul says that they must have authority over their sexual desires and not be under any compulsion from family or relatives to marry. If they are convinced in their minds that they should remain single, then that is the appropriate thing to do.

Sexual pressure is a clear temptation for single people. That is why Paul says "it is better to marry than to burn" (7:9). However, I would have to say that one should not marry just for sex. Those who do will have struggles in marriage. I would also say that at some point in your life, whether you are single or married, you will have to deal with your sexual desires. Marriage does not eliminate this problem. Fantasy and lust may still have authority over your life. The way we deal with these desires is to grow deeper in our intimacy with the Lord and find our life in him. And if you learn this as a single person, you will be much better prepared for marriage or singleness. You will be free to give love to your spouse rather than seeking to have your sexual desires satisfied. But you will also be prepared to be devoted to the Lord and to serve him if you decide to remain single.

B. Companionship

A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God. (7:39-40)

Another pressure singles face is the desire for companionship. Here Paul addresses widows. A widow is bound to her husband as long as he lives, but if he dies, she is free to remarry. For a widow, the temptation is to marry anyone who comes along, because she desires companionship. Paul says she needs to be careful to marry a Christian.

Single people can struggle with the pressures of loneliness. For a widow or a widower, this can be particularly painful. After many years of companionship, it is difficult to find oneself suddenly alone.

Again, I would have to say that you can still experience loneliness after you are married, so it would be wrong to marry just to alleviate this problem. Someone

who is older has a wealth of wisdom to impart to others, simply because he or she has lived longer. If an older single person can deal with the pressures, then he or she can be a tremendous gift to the community to help teach the next generation the things of the Lord.

According to Paul, marriage is fine, but so is singleness. We should never look down on someone who is single and think them odd. On the other hand, we should never elevate marriage to something it is not.

III. REFLECTIONS

I want to conclude now with three reflections on this text.

A. Whether we are single or married, we need to learn contentment.

To be single is not a sin; to be married is not a sin. If you are single, don't be in a rush to find someone to marry. If you are married, don't seek ways to get out of the marriage, imagining there is someone else out there who will suit you better. Each state is a gift from God. Each has its own set of advantages and disadvantages. God wants us to learn how to be content, whether we are single or married. Do not be deceived by thinking that the next season of life will be better than the present one.

Marriage is not the ultimate goal in life. It is much better to remain single than to marry the wrong person. So, don't put your life on hold until you get married. Involve yourself in the community and begin to serve the Lord. If and when he wants you to marry, he will bring that about in his time. And when he does, it will be a gift, not an antidote to frustrations and disappointments. For most people, that comes about when we stop trying to make it happen.

B. Whether we are single, or married, our goal should not be to please ourselves, but the Lord.

If we stay single to please ourselves, that is wrong. If we get married to please ourselves, that is wrong, too. Whenever we are motivated by selfish desires, whenever we try to find life in the world we will be pursuing the wrong goals.

In verses 29-31, Paul writes in a very poetic way that we are not to be absorbed or engrossed in this world. Time is short; the world is passing away. And the older you get, the faster time goes. And so we marry, we weep, we rejoice, we buy, we live in the world, but always with the view that it is soon coming to an end. We are marked by eternity and are no longer under the dominating power of the things that dictate the existence of others and determine the quality of their lives.

Now Paul is not saying we should abandon our spouses or our jobs. He is encouraging us to be faithful, diligent, sober, and watchful, knowing that it is foolish to place our hopes in a world that is only temporary. And in particular, he says that marriage is part of a world that is already on the way out. So we are to set our sights on the things that are eternal.

C. Whether we are single or married, we should seek a balanced community.

Christians tend to gather in groups—singles, young marrieds, marrieds with young children, marrieds with older children, widows, widowers. Much of that is natural and good, but we will miss out if we don't have some balance in this area. It is good to have relationships with both younger and older people. To the married, I would say that you will experience much joy if you welcome single people into your circle. If you are single, you can learn much from married people.

My wife and I have been very blessed through working with single people for almost 20 years. The young people who have come through the doors of our home have added much to our lives. This ministry has had a tremendous impact on my children. They measure life by the character of some of these single people. And they have gone on to measure marriage by what they have witnessed in the lives of those who have gotten married. So my advice to you is, don't miss out.

It is my prayer that our community will experience this kind of balance and connectedness. I know that many of these things which the apostle is encouraging us to do as Christians are much easier said than done. But by God's grace and power, we can overcome until that which he has promised will come to pass.

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