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1 Corinthians 7:25-40

13th Message

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# THE JOY OF BEING “SINGLE” MINDED

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

It is difficult being a single person in the church. We have placed sex and marriage on a high pedestal. To never make love, to never share the deepest personal intimacies with another person seems to some to be synonymous with being undesirable, maybe even perverted. This image has made many singles miserable, and as a result we often respond to them in one of two ways. We either ignore them, regarding them as second-class citizens, or else we pity them, thinking they are miserable and incomplete. We want to “rescue” them out of their plight, so we become matchmakers. Howard Hendricks tells the story of a mother in his congregation who tried to force his attention on her daughter by assuring him that it was God’s will for them to be married. She told him she was praying that God would open his eyes so he could see the light. Then, with great sincerity, Dr. Hendricks would say, “Ladies and gentlemen, have you ever thanked God for unanswered prayer?” Much poor humor prevails among singles, and a lot of it is just bravado.

The passage we will look at today from 1 Corinthians speaks to this issue of singleness. However, I trust that if you are married, you won’t tune out because the principles discussed will have relevance to your life. As married folk there are certainly things we can learn about how God views singleness. Just as many non-Christians idealize the ecstasy of sex, a lot of Christians idealize marriage. They want single people to experience the joy of a good marriage and, in their opinion, really begin living.

But this is a far cry from the New Testament’s view. The Bible never speaks of singleness as a second-class state. Ponder for a minute. In his humanity, Jesus Christ our Lord was never married. He never experienced physical intimacy with a woman, yet we would all agree that he was perfectly fulfilled.

Remember the Corinthians were rather confused about love, sex, and marriage. A group of extremists in Corinth reacted to sexual immorality by advocating sexual abstinence even within marriage. This put tremendous pressure on those who were married to dissolve their marriages, and on the engaged and widows not to marry at all. That is the issue that Paul is dealing with in this chapter. In verses 1-16 he addresses those who were married or were once married, and now in verses 25-40 he addresses those who have not been married. His counsel to both groups is, “Be content where you are.”

Last week, we learned an important insight about handling difficult circumstances: We must allow God to change us. This uncovers our tendency to believe the grass is always greener somewhere else. We tend to think that if we could just change our circumstances we would be better people. But Paul reminds us that circumstances have nothing to do with character. Those who are married think, “If only I was single, my life would be so much better.” They dream of being free. Singles, on the other hand, fantasize about the prince or princess who will someday come along. We think our adverse circumstances are hindering us from being all that we could be, but

from God’s perspective those very circumstances are actually helping become all we could be.

Some years ago, Norman Rockwell painted a magazine cover depicting a young woman sitting at a desk, looking at a rose bud in a vase and dreaming of a cottage, a husband, and children. The next two segments showed her marrying the young man and going off to the cottage. In the last segment she is washing dishes, her hair in disarray, children draped around her legs, her husband sitting in the next room reading the newspaper, and she is dreaming...of an office, a desk and a bud vase.

Paul is applying that general principle of remaining in the state in which they were called to the particular situation of women who were never married. That term “virgins” is probably narrower than simply an unmarried woman, and most likely is referring to an engaged woman. In light of the extremists who were advocating celibacy, their question to Paul was, “Should we cancel the wedding, and remain single?” Knowing Paul’s own preference for the single state, they were seeking a firm endorsement of his own preference. Thus Paul speaks to the issue of being single, and gives advice to those who are thinking of or planning on marriage.

I would like to point out four principles in this passage, and along with each one an exhortation that will help you apply that principle.

## I. Times of distress call for stability: Be content in your calling

Let’s read 1 Corinthians 7:25-28:

**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. (1 Cor 7:25-28 NASB)**

The Lord gave no particular command on this issue, but Paul says his opinion is one we can trust (which is the understatement of all time). Although it does not come with apostolic authority (he is careful about his choice of words, it is an opinion), his advice is: Be content where you are; maintain the status quo. The instruction he gives is based on what he calls “the present crisis.” It is difficult to determine exactly what he is referring to. Some people say he is referring to the return of the Lord, but that isn’t his usual terminology for that event. Rather than the imminency of the Lord’s return, I believe he is referring to the imminency of persecution.

Evidently, the Corinthians were experiencing a time of crisis. Nero had been emperor for a little over a year when the apostle wrote

this letter. Paul knew how evil this man was, and he could see the handwriting on the wall. In a few short years Nero would destroy Rome in a fire and blame it on the Christians. His degenerating sanity was already being demonstrated in his brutal treatment of a few Christians here and there. Paul could not know the details, but he could well imagine the destruction that Nero would cause. And he was right. In the next decade, a wave of persecution swept across the Roman Empire that almost devastated the church. The persecution was horrible. Nero slaughtered believers of all ages. One historian tells us:

They were punished with stripes and scourgings, drawings, tearings, stonings, plates of irons laid unto them burning hot, deep dungeons, racks, strangling in prisons, the teeth of wild beasts, gridirons, gibbets, and gallows, tossing upon the horns of bulls. Moreover, when they were thus killed, their bodies were laid in heaps, and dogs were left to keep them, that no man might come to bury them.

Paul himself had only recently been on the receiving end of persecution in Ephesus, from where he is writing this letter. It is out of his pastoral concern that he shares this advice to those who had written to him asking about the practical wisdom of entering a lifelong commitment of marriage. One man wrote, “The apostle writes to the Corinthians as he would to an army about to enter on a most unequal conflict in an enemy’s country, and for a protracted time.” Suffering alone is difficult enough, but watching a mate or child suffer can be unbearable. Think about the present situation in the Persian Gulf, and how much more difficult that is for those with families there.

When Hurricane Hugo hit on the East Coast last year, the official word to people living in that area was, “Stay where you are.” The winds were over 100 miles an hour, and it was difficult if not impossible to move. Remain where you are. That is what Paul is saying. When the seas are raging, it is no time to change ships. In his mind this was no time for marriage.

“But,” says Paul, “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.”

During hard times, the pressure to maintain a family and keep everyone together is even more difficult and demanding. Remember Jesus’ words uttered in reference to the destruction of Jerusalem: “How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers!” Times of distress call for stability. Be content in your calling.

There is a second principle here in this passage:

## II. Times of distress call for flexibility: Be focused on the proper priorities

Look at verses 29-31:

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. (7:29-31)

Paul says, literally, “the crisis has been contracted.” The shortness of time that Paul speaks of in v. 29 is explained in v. 31: “the form of this world is passing away.” We are not long for this world, and this

world is not going to last very long. Jesus has come and has inaugurated a new age. For the amount of time that is left, be conditioned by non-worldly priorities.

Michael Green sees the meaning of the phrase, “the time has been shortened,” as being literally, “furled like a sail.” Explaining this, he says: “God’s time has been furled. The Lord has come in the mid-point of time, in the cross and the resurrection, and we live between that furled time and the second coming. We do not know how much wind is going to be opening that sail, but we do know that we are in furled-sail time.”

Paul’s concern here is not with the amount of time that is left, but with the radical new perspective the “foreshortened future” gives one with regard to the present age. We do not belong to this age. Those who have a definite future and can see it with clarity, live in the present with altered values as to what matters and what doesn’t.

Paul is reminding us to make sure we are not only making a living, but making a life. He is not urging us to neglect our responsibilities but to keep things in their proper focus. Do not let maintaining a home be the major purpose of your existence. Do not give all your time and energy to enjoying this present life. There are higher demands and higher challenges to life than that. Marriage, as wonderful as it is, is only for this life. Therefore, it is not necessarily the only calling, or even the highest choice one can make.

Paul’s statement, “the form of this world is passing away,” reminds us of John’s words:

**Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life are not from the Father but from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts, but the one who does the will of God abides forever. (John 2:15-17)**

Paul is reminding us to examine what we are living for. There is more to life than a pleasant home and a good retirement plan.

I think the implication Paul makes is that it is easier to maintain this perspective as a single man or woman. In view of the shortness of our lifespan, and the brief period of time that we have to extend the kingdom of God, it is important that we not become too entangled with this world.

## III. A single life has fewer distractions: Use your freedom as an opportunity for service

Look at verses 32-35:

**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 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 this I say 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. (7:32-35)**

Paul explains that being married takes a lot of time, and much of it is given over to fairly mundane tasks. Marriage is not the panacea for all of your problems. In fact, you will simply exchange one set of problems for another. In addition to the adjustments of two person-

alities with their differing lifestyles and moods choosing to become one, there are the practical stresses and strains of maintaining a home and family. There are appliances to fix, lawns to mow, and shopping and cooking to do. Raising children brings another set of stresses in life—training and disciplining, schooling, shopping for clothes, fixing bikes, carpooling kids all over town, etc. Add to that the pressure of finances. Despite what some may say, two people cannot live as cheaply as one. Kathy and I have just moved, and the financial decisions have been an unbelievable distraction to me.

This is not an indictment of marriage; it is simply a fact. Married men and women ought to spend the time needed to serve their families. In fact, it is tragic to see married leaders in the church neglecting the needs of their families and living as if they were single. Serving one another is what makes a marriage work. Paul is not demeaning these mundane tasks in marriage, but simply stating the obvious: those who are married have less time to devote to evangelism and discipleship. Had he been married, Paul could never have done what he did. As a single man he could travel extensively. He had no obligations back home. He could plant churches; he could fling his life away with abandon; it didn't matter.

If you are single, let me exhort you to view your singleness as an opportunity for service, not selfishness. You have a degree of freedom that no married person has. Do not use that freedom merely to serve your flesh. We are all tempted toward self-indulgence, but it is even more tempting for those who are single. There are fewer demands on your time and money. That is not always the case, especially if you are a single parent, but it is generally true, especially for those who have never been married. The temptation is to spend all your time and money on yourself: a better stereo system, the latest ski equipment, sail boats, hang gliders, a better car. These things are not sinful in themselves, but the temptation is to spend a great deal of time and money indulging yourself. Use your freedom to serve others. The gift of being single is a gift of freedom of service.

If you are blessed with the gift of being single, use your time redemptively. Take some of that discretionary time for Bible study and prayer. John Stott, the great English preacher, has greatly influenced the church with his speaking and writing gifts. Much of his single life has been used to deepen and enrich his knowledge of God. He takes a month off each year just to read and pray. I am told he spends 4-6 hours a day in Bible study and prayer. Those who are married, and especially those who have children, would find it almost impossible to do that. Use some of your free time to get to know God. Take a Discovery Seminar or get involved in a Bible study to help you grow.

Secondly, let me exhort you to use your freedom for service. Don't sit around and feel sorry for yourself. You have a high and holy calling. Maybe you have dreamed of being a mother, but God has not seen fit to grant you that desire. Start teaching a Sunday School class or a Backyard Bible Club. Begin to love children and invest your life in them. I think of Henrietta Mears, who served for many years on the staff of Hollywood Presbyterian Church. She chose not to be married, but to devote her energies to teaching the Scriptures. She taught the college class at that church for many years and scores, if not hundreds of men are in the ministry as a result of her service. Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade, and Richard Halverson, now Chaplain of the U.S. Senate, are products of her ministry. Dave Roper testified that she had an enormous effect on his life. Then there is Wetherall Johnson. Although she never married and she nev-

er gave physical birth to any children, she has produced thousands of spiritual children through the ministry of Bible Study Fellowship.

The way to find yourself is to lose yourself in service to Christ.

There is a final principle in this chapter:

#### IV. The gift of singleness is not necessarily permanent: You need not have the fear of finality

Let's read verses 36-40:

**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 decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin daughter, he will do well. So then he who gives his own virgin daughter in marriage does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better. 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. (7:36-40)**

Paul addresses these same singles and reminds them that God's call for them may change.

If you have an NIV translation, you will notice that it reads differently from the NASB, from which I read. It translates verse 36, "If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to." The Greek text simply reads, "His virgin." Thus one can interpret that phrase to refer to a young woman's father (since marriages were arranged in the first century), or it can refer to the fiancé of the young woman. I think in this instance the NIV interpreters are right. Paul is answering the practical question that has stimulated his teaching. These words are addressed to a young man who is engaged and wants to marry. Apparently the extremists at Corinth were urging such couples to wait as long as possible, and longer, to get married. But Paul assures him that it is perfectly OK to marry.

Here we see that the gift of being single does not mean that you have no desire for love, sex, or marriage. It does not mean that you are a loner who has no urge to merge. It simply means that if those elements are not present in your life, you can still abound, you can "do all things through Christ who strengthens you." You need not have the "fear of finality." God's calling for you may change. If you are now married, you have the gift of marriage. If you are now single, you have the gift of being single.

It is sad to see some singles living as though they are in limbo, waiting for that major miracle called marriage so they can begin to live. Those who live like that usually are disappointed if and when that day arrives because they have not developed the very character needed to make marriage enjoyable, thus they remain lonely and frustrated.

Don't waste the calling which God has given you. This passage wonderfully sets forth the high and holy calling of singleness. Indeed this whole passage is a reminder to us of the importance of keeping our priorities in focus. We do not belong to this world, nor do we live for this passing age. We are citizens of another Kingdom. That is the joy of being "single" minded.

