

BIBLICAL MANHOOD & WOMANHOOD

SINGLE AND FREE

1 Corinthians 7: 1-40

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE: Put 4 children in different positions: 1 sitting, 1 lying down, 1 standing, 1 standing on their head. Tell them that if they will close their eyes until I say to open them, they will get a piece of candy. Is there anything preventing each one from closing their eyes? It doesn't matter what position they are in they can each one close their eyes and so get the candy. Jesus has said that if we will tell God our sins and seek to not sin and trust in Jesus to save us from our sins that he will give us eternal life. This is the best thing that can ever happen to a person. All of you stand up here and turn around and look at the congregation. All the children in church raise your hands. Is there any reason that being a child can keep you from trusting in Jesus? All the parents raise your hands. Is there any reason that being a parent can keep you from repenting and believing? All the singly people raise their hands. All the men and boys. All the grandma's and grandpa's. We are all very different and yet none of our differences can keep us from the most important thing in life: believing in Jesus.

INTRODUCTION

In our series on manhood and womanhood I have been trying to stress that being a man/being a woman is not simply a matter of biology and physiology but rather it is about our personhood. Each one of us is always either a man or a woman. Maleness and femaleness are different and predispose us to live life and to relate to one another in different ways. However, many naturally think that these distinctions matter more if you are married than if you are single. This is a false assumption and is the main reason I want to talk about singleness. Ada Lum writes this about singleness, "At any age the single woman needs to respect herself as a sexual being whom God created. She is not less sexual for not being married. *Sex* has to do with biological drive for union with one of the opposite sex. *Sexuality* has to do with our whole personhood as a woman or a man. It has to do with the ways we express ourselves in relation to others." John Piper adds, "The point is that, married or single, your manhood or your womanhood matters. You dishonor yourself and your Maker if you disregard this profound dimension of your personhood."

Another reason I want to talk about singleness is because the church in the U.S. tends to emphasize marriage and families and thus, inadvertently, can become a very uncomfortable place for singles. Church culture tends to view marriage as superior to singleness. I had a good friend who was a gifted preacher with lots of pastoral experience among college students. He was bright, a gifted communicator and personable. He believed God wanted him to serve as the senior pastor in a church. He spent over 9 months sending out his resume, filling out applications, interviewing in churches. He was offered many positions as a single's pastor or college pastor but not one church was willing to hire him as their senior pastor. It was painfully obvious to him that the reason was because he was single. We would often joke that Jesus and Paul wouldn't be able get hired as a senior pastor in any American church because they both were single.

We are going to look at singleness this morning by looking at a chapter in the Bible that addresses some of the issues surrounding singleness. However, in examining 1 Cor. 7 we come face to face with a host of problems. Our first problem is that we are jumping into the middle of a letter with no knowledge of what has gone before or what follows. We are confronted with one of the primary reasons I prefer to work my way through books of the Bible from beginning to end rather than deal with texts in isolation from their context. A second problem we have in coming to this text is that Paul is dealing with a problem that is very particular to the church in the city of Corinth, Greece in A.D. 55. There is a particular historical setting that prompted this chapter. You can see this at v. 1 where he says, "Now for the matters you wrote about." What matters did they write about? In v. 26 he says, "Because of the present crisis I think it is good for you to remain as you are." What is the present crisis?

The third and perhaps most difficult problem we face as we read this passage is our own biases and interests. This chapter, as you heard as Dave read it, deals with issues that are of great interest to all of us. It talks about sex,

marriage, divorce, remarriage, courtship, engagement and other “practical” issues. It is addressed to married people, widows and widowers, Christians who are married to non-Christians, divorced people, single people, engaged couples and others. Our problem is that we have all sorts of questions that we are interested in regarding these subjects that may or may not have anything to do with what Paul is trying to say. Therefore, we must be very careful to seek to find out what Paul is trying to say before we ask him to answer the questions we are interested in. I want to talk about singleness today, and while this passage has a great deal to say about singleness, yet that is not the main point of the chapter.

The final problem we face in this chapter lies in the problem of translation. You can see the problem quite clearly in the very first verse of 1 Cor. 7. You’ll need to look at your Bible at this point. The NIV translates, “Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry.” Notice in the margin it translates the second half of the verse by putting quotation marks at the beginning and the end of the sentence, which reads, “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” The NAS translates it literally and thus ambiguously by saying, “Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman.” While the NAS has the exact translation, what does Paul mean by this enigmatic phrase?

Here’s how I want to approach this chapter. I am first going to give you the setting and context of the chapter. In doing this I will settle what v. 1 is talking about because what you decide about v. 1 will color how you read the rest of the chapter. Then I am going to identify the major themes of the chapter. What is the primary thing that Paul is concerned with? Finally I will make some applications to the issue of singleness.

First, let me give you the setting of this letter. Paul planted the church in Corinth. He spent almost two years preaching the gospel there and establishing this church. He has been gone from the church for some time. Previous to writing this letter he had received news that things were not going well in Corinth. There was a growing movement to reject Paul and his gospel in favor of a more “spiritual” form of Christianity. He had received news about these changes and written a letter previous to this one. They in turn had written him back. About the same time he received their letter he was visited by some trusted friends from Corinth who gave him more details as to what was going on. From the letter and from their report Paul could see that there was some real trouble in Corinth. A large portion of the church was turning away from him and his gospel. So he wrote this first letter to the Corinthians to confront and correct the numerous errors in theology and practice that had arisen in his absence. Throughout the letter he is responding to the problems he knows about and the letter they wrote.

He refers to their letter at several points in his letter. The NIV helps to note the places at which he is quoting their letter by using quotation marks. Note their use in 6:12 & 13. The debate in 7:1 is whether the statement, “It is good for a man not to touch a woman” is Paul’s own statement or is he quoting their position? The NIV treats it as if it is Paul’s statement and then goes on in the rest of the chapter to translate in a way that makes Paul strongly prefer celibate singleness to marriage. In fact, if we read this chapter as the NIV has it, it would be hard to see Paul as viewing marriage as anything more than a way to keep people from having illicit sex. As the NIV stands it would seem that God prefers celibate singleness and tolerates marriage. It is through a misreading of this chapter that the monastic way of life came into being and forbidding priests to marry became required.

However, it seems to me that it is far better to translate this phrase as the NIV margin has it, with quotation marks, “It is good for a man to not have sexual relations with a woman.” Thus Paul is quoting a position held by the Corinthians. Without going into all the details of why they held this position they in essence were saying that if you were going to be a really good Christian then you would not engage in sexual relations. Truly spiritual Christians have no need for this earthly, bodily pleasure and so do not practice it. This was not a suggestion. It was a law. This meant that they were teaching married couples to not have sex. Some of the people in the congregation were getting divorced because they couldn’t stop themselves from having sex as married couples. Some, who were married to non-Christian spouses, were divorcing their spouses because if sexual intercourse defiled you, then sexual intercourse with non-Christian spouses was doubly defiling. Engaged couples were in a quandary as to what they ought to do. Engagements were being broken off because celibate singleness was so superior to marriage.

Ideas have consequences and this idea was having profound and chaotic consequences in the social life of these people. Paul has to answer their position. But what makes it tough for him is what he says in vv. 7, 25-26 & several other places. “I wish that all men were as I am.” “Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy. Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are.” From Paul’s point of view, in light of the present crisis, celibate singleness has some advantages over marriage. His problem is that he agrees with their position in certain cases and for certain reasons. But he violently disagrees with the reasons they prefer celibacy and the way they apply it. (Note: celibacy is more than just refraining from sexual intercourse. It means to live life in such a way that you never intentionally stimulate sexual desire in yourself or in another person.)

How does he deal with their theology and the chaos it is bringing to people’s lives? Is there any overarching principle that he applies throughout the chapter? I wonder if you noticed when Dave was reading three places in this chapter where Paul seems to lose his train of thought? Just follow along with me through the chapter. In vv. 2-6 Paul is addressing married people and telling them to have sex. Then, in v. 7, he inserts this strange idea that he wishes everyone would be like him, that is single and celibate, but he realizes God gives different gifts. In vv. 8-9 he addresses widowers and widows. In vv. 10-11 he addresses Christian couples who are thinking about divorce. In vv. 12-16 he addresses Christians married to non-Christians. But then notice in vv. 17-24 he talks about circumcised and uncircumcised people and then slaves and freedmen. Then he goes back to talking about virgins in vv. 25-28 & 32-38, but in between he talks about those who mourn, are happy, buy things and use things. In vv. 7, 17-24 and 29-31 he is setting out the principles that are leading him to say what he says about their problem.

I want to look at 4 principles that guide Paul in his response to the Corinthians. Then I want to see if we can’t make some sense out of what he is saying about celibate singleness.

I. God not only makes people Christians but places them in the circumstances in which they must live like Christians (vv. 17, 20, & 24)

It’s hard to miss Paul’s emphasis here, in vv. 17-24, on God’s sovereignty over all of your life. The phrase “God has called” in vv. 17, 20 & 24, refers to God’s act of creating faith in his people. This is the same phrase Paul used earlier in 1 Cor 1: 22-24. Notice that in those verses Jews cannot accept the idea of a crucified Messiah and Greeks can’t imagine that a man dying on the cross could gain them eternal life. But, there are some Jews and some Greeks whom “God has called” who find the crucified Jesus to be the power and wisdom of God. How is it that if all Jews find Jesus to be a stumbling block and all Greeks find the gospel foolish that some Jews and some Greeks find him irresistible? The simple answer is that God calls them.

This call that Paul is referring to is not simply the declaration of the gospel with an invitation to believe in Christ. Rather it is the work of the Holy Spirit creating what this general call requires. Christians in an earlier day named this call, “God’s effectual call”. As our catechism defines it, “Effectual calling is the work of God’s Spirit, Who convinces us that we are sinful and miserable, Who enlightens our minds in the knowledge of Christ and Who renews our will. He thus persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ who is freely offered to us in the gospel.” It is the work of God creating in us what he requires of us. The best illustration I know of this call is in John’s gospel where he records the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Remember the story? Lazarus has been dead for 4 days and Jesus comes to his tomb. He has the stone rolled away and then he gives a command to Lazarus. What good does it do to give a dead man a command? For you and I commanding a dead man makes no difference. But when Jesus commands Lazarus, “Lazarus, Come out!”, Lazarus obeys the command and comes out in his grave clothes. How did that happen? How did a dead man obey a command? God’s command creates what he commands by the work of his Holy Spirit. This is how everyone who is a Christian became a Christian. We were spiritually dead, then God commanded us to repent of our sins and believe in Christ and then he gave us new hearts that repented and believed.

In v. 17, Paul says that the God who commanded you to repent and believe and enabled you to obey that command also put you in a set of circumstances where you are to live out that call. It is no accident that you are Jewish or

Gentile, slave or free, male or female, married or single. It is no accident that you are widowed or married to a non-Christian or living in the family you are living in. It is not an accident that you have the job you have, live in the house you live in. These circumstances are the place the Lord assigned to you and the circumstances he wants you to live out your Christian life in. As we're going to see in a minute Paul is not forbidding changing the circumstances of your life. We're not fatalists. Rather, he is assuring each of us that the God who loved us and gave his son for us and sent his Holy Spirit to us, is in control of the details of our lives and we ought not to chafe under them thinking there is a better life to be had through other circumstances. Which leads to the next principle.

II. Living as a Christian is all that matters because being a Christian is the best thing that can ever happen to you (vv. 19, 22-23, 35)

Notice the end of v. 19. The circumstances of your life is not what matters, what matters is obeying God's commands in the circumstances you are currently in. This is so contrary to how we think. We are constantly saying things like, "If only my husband would understand me better, then I would be a happier Christian. If only I lived in a different house or a different neighborhood, then I could really obey Christ. If only I had different parents then life would be good." "If I had a different job then I could be a better Christian." Paul slams the door on this kind of thinking. Look at vv. 20-23. "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you." Is he crazy? How can you not let being a slave trouble you? He says that being a slave cannot stop you from enjoying your salvation in Christ. Living as a slave cannot interfere with your enjoying the only freedom that truly matters, being free from sin and the condemnation of sin. Christ gave his life for your sins and set you free so if you're a slave, don't worry about it. Live out the freedom Christ gave you. Then he says in v. 22, if you're free, don't depend on your freedom to make you happy. Enjoy the happiness of being Christ's slave above all else. For the Christian the external circumstances of life have nothing to do with making you a Christian or of your being able to enjoy Christ. Being a Christian and enjoying Christ are all that truly matter in this world.

This is the opposite of what Paul's opponents were saying. They were teaching that whether you were married or not, having sex or not determined whether you were experiencing the Christian life as God intended. Paul here says, no, obeying God's commands is not restricted by or enhanced by your social, religious, sexual or economic status. Then notice how he repeats this in v. 35. All that he says here is so that we will be able to live in undivided devotion to the Lord. Do you see how single-minded Paul is? He's not saying that your social status and the circumstances of your life don't matter at all, he is simply saying that they have nothing to do with whether or not you can know and love and obey God. This is what life is about and so don't get so bent out of shape as to your marital status or your economic status or whatever.

Are you consumed with living the Christian life in the circumstances you are in or are you consumed with altering the circumstances? Do you spend your time asking yourself, "how does God want me to love him and others in these circumstances?" Or do you spend time asking, "how I can escape my present circumstances?"

III. Don't change your circumstances or status because you think you'll be a better Christian (vv. 1, 7, 17-24, vv. 27-28)

First I want to make sure you see that Paul is not teaching some form of fatalism. He is not saying we can never change our status or circumstances. In verses 8-9 he tells widowers and widows that they should remain single like him but if they cannot control themselves they should marry. In v. 15 if an unbelieving spouse leaves, the believing spouse should not seek to stop him or her. The believing spouse should allow himself or herself to become a divorced person. In v. 21, right after he tells the slave that being a slave shouldn't trouble him he tells him that if he is legally able to become free, he should do so. In vv. 28, 36 and 39 he tells various kinds of unmarried people that it is fine if they get married. Again, Paul is not a fatalist. However, he is very clear that your motive for changing your circumstances is what matters.

The particular false motive that he is opposing throughout this is that a person should be celibate (whether married or not) because celibacy puts one in a higher spiritual category. If you are celibate, then you are closer to God, experience more of his life and are living on a higher spiritual plane than others. The corollary to this claim is that

to engage in sexual behavior, even though married is sinful. He contradicts this in a couple of ways. In v. 7 he shows that his celibate singleness and the sexual activity of married people are both equally gifts from God. In vv. 17-24 he shows this to be a false motive in that obedience to God is not dependent upon social, economic or sexual status. In v. 28 & 37 he is contradicting the false teachers claim that to get married and enjoy God's gift of sexual relations is sinful. He clearly states that getting married is not a sin.

There are many people who continue to think in the same false ways that the Corinthians did. Some still believe that singleness is a spiritually superior way to live. Others would say that married life is spiritually superior. I've met people who would say that not using birth control is spiritually superior and that using it is sinful. Some believe that home schooling is superior and all other kinds of schooling are sinful. Others say that public schooling is superior and isolating your children in private or home schools is wrong. Some are convinced that being a missionary or pastor automatically makes you closer to God. Some parents think scheduling your baby makes you godlier while others that demand feeding does so. The ways in which Christians try to make their own particular lifestyle choices "God's choices" are endless. Paul would say that the lifestyle choices you make don't matter, what matters is obedience to God in the particular lifestyle choices you have made.

IV. God gives everything necessary for living as a Christian, no matter the circumstances (vv. 7-9)

In v. 7 Paul recognizes that the reason he is able to enjoy being single and celibate is because God is giving him this as a gift. He is able to remain sexually pure, while single because of the grace of God not because he has some sort of superior personality or willpower. He also recognizes that the reason married people are able to faithfully love God and live married is because God graciously gives them the gift of marriage. He is not jealous of married people and he does not view himself as superior to them. He knows that God places each person in the particular circumstances of their life by grace. By grace he gives to each person what is necessary to live as a faithful Christian in those circumstances.

When we are jealous of others or proud of ourselves we are despising God. We are treating God as if he does not love us and/or that he is not powerful enough to give us what we need to live faithfully in the circumstances we are in. Jealousy and pride are chief evidences that we are not living by faith. We are not living as though our circumstances have come from the hand of a loving God. We are acting as though he has not given us what we need in order to live for him in the circumstances he has given us.

V. The gift of celibate singleness, in view of the troubles of this life, has unique possibilities for loving and serving God (vv. 7-9 & 25-28, 32-35, 38, 40)

Paul has gone to great lengths in this chapter to affirm marriage. Marriage is not sinful. It is not spiritually inferior to celibacy. It is a gift, just like celibate singleness. However, we cannot avoid that, as far as he is concerned, celibate singleness has some features that make it more advantageous in the present situation. We need to give a few minutes thought to what he is driving at.

First, I want to be sure we understand what it means to be a single that is celibate. Let me destroy a common misconception that is based on a misreading of vv. 8-9. In v. 9 Paul tells single people "if they are not exercising self-control they should marry for it is better to marry than to burn." How should a single person decide that he does not have the gift of celibate singleness? If a single person cannot stop themselves from engaging in sexual immorality they should get married. The only legitimate place to fulfill your sexual desires is within monogamous marriage. Paul says that marriage is better than living single and burning. What does he mean by the word, "burn"? He is referring to the suffering and pain that a person who is not restraining their sexual desires will bring into their lives. In many places in the Scriptures God warns of the destructive forces that are unleashed when a person lives in unrestrained lust. Listen to these verses from Proverbs, "For the lips of the adulterous drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave. She gives no thought to the way of life..." The burning Paul is referring to is the suffering that comes to the lives of the sexually unrestrained now and of the final suffering that will come in hell if there is not a successful battle waged against this lust. One of the major weapons God has

given in the war against lust and sexual immorality is monogamous marriage. What Paul is not saying is that the way you know you should be married is because you have a strong sexual desire or experience sexual temptation. Those who have the gift of celibate singleness experience sexual desire and temptation. It is not the absence of these things but the ability to happily resist. Finally, if you are not controlling your sexual appetites it is not because God has not given you the gift, it is because of your own sin. God will give all you need to resist if you will seek him. We'll be talking more about this next week.

So why does Paul wish that all people were as he is, single and celibate? It is not because it is morally or spiritually superior. It is not because God is in any way commanding it. Why then? In v. 26 he says it is because of the "present crisis". In v. 28 he says, "those who marry will face many troubles in this life and I want to spare you this." Then in 29-35 he goes into an extended explanation of what he means by this. If you'll permit me to simply summarize what seems to me to be the main point that Paul is making. As Christians, this world is not our home. We are soon going to be living for an eternity of time in an entirely new world that Christ has won for us by his death and resurrection. Therefore, while we live in this world we must be careful that we do not live as though this world is our home. We are to view life in this world like we do our campsite when we go camping. When you go camping for a weekend you don't build a house and move all your furniture into it. You sleep in a tent and make do with what is available. The campsite is not your permanent home and so while you make it as functional as possible there are a lot of things you don't do because you know this is temporary. We all know that it is easier to camp as a single person than as a married person with a family.

The single person has this advantage over the married person. The single person does not face the same pressures to make a home in this world that marriage and family places on the married person. Both married and single people are tempted to be attached to this world and both are commanded to use the world in a way that does not make full use of it. But the single person does not face the same emotional pressures to make a home in this world. Paul prefers celibate singleness for those who are able to embrace it so that they can be more focused on God and on the life to come. Married people are not exempt from this command; Paul simply says they are going to have a harder time obeying the command. That is why if you can live as a celibate single, then do it, but if you decide to marry, you have not sinned. This is not to say that singleness is without its problems but that in this limited way it has advantages over the married state.

If you are single, are you using the gift of singleness for the purpose of pursuing God? Or are you using it like our culture does, as an excuse to not grow up and take responsibility for your life? A month or so ago Jared, my oldest son called me up in great distress. He was working 80 hour weeks, living alone and all his friends were out of town. He felt very lonely. While he was expressing his frustration with being alone, I found myself feeling a little jealous of him. I told him that he should stop lamenting his condition and use it for good purposes, like giving more time to reading and praying and serving others. I told him I would give anything to have the time he had to read and pray and serve others. My life feels at times so hectic and out of control. I am as responsible as he is to live in dependence upon Christ and to not make my home in this world. However, being married and having a family puts pressures on me that Jared does not have as a single man. I do not resent this. I am very happy for the life God has given me and am going to seek to trust him and obey him in this setting.

MOMENT OF SILENCE

BENEDICTION

May you find the joy of trusting and loving God in all the circumstances God has placed you in this week. Amen.