



Central Peninsula Church

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1 Corinthians 7:25-40
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Single and Single-Minded

SERIES: *Sex, Marriage & Singleness from God's Point of View*

A recent census reported that about 86 million single people live in the US. As people get married later, as the divorce rate climbs, and as more and more couples choose to live together instead of getting married, the number of single individuals is increasing fast. In 1970, 36% of American adults were single; today the figure is closer to 44%. Married couples with kids, which used to be the norm, now make up only about 25% of our population.

When you think about it, even for those who marry singleness makes up a large portion of life, either at the front or the back end of life. Suppose you were married at 26, that your spouse died when you were 70, and you lived to be 82. You would have been married for 44 years, but you would have been single for 38 years. Are those single years less important than your married years?

Here in our church about 60% of you are single. Ye singleness is a subject we don't talk about enough. The church often doesn't know how to address the issue. Most pastors, myself included, are married and so we often feel like we lack the credibility to talk about it.

Most Christians would say that we were created to be married. To be married is to be normal. What's implied in that assumption, of course, is that singles are incomplete or abnormal. Maybe we haven't come right out and said that, but we've implied it.

I understand where that assumption comes from. In Genesis it says that it's not good for man to be alone. We say, "That means everybody ought to be married." Does it? Couldn't it mean that all human beings need deep, caring relationships and can't live in isolation? Does it really teach that everybody is called to be married? Need I mention that Jesus was a single adult, and so were his best friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus? John the Baptist was single. And how about Paul? We don't know whether Paul was ever married or not. If he was, either he'd been divorced or his wife had died, because when he wrote his letters in the New Testament he was single.

This morning we're looking at what Paul said to the single people in the church at Corinth. He addresses three different groups of singles and to each of them he says pretty much the same thing: it's best not to marry but it's okay if you do.

I. It's best not to marry but it's okay if you do.

A. To the unmarried: First, he addresses those he

calls "virgins." He's most likely talking to young people who are of marriageable age, but have never been married. Here is what he says to them. "**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 marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you**" (1 Corinthians 7:25-28).

Paul qualifies his advice by saying that this isn't a command from the Lord but his own opinion or judgment. That doesn't mean we can take it or leave it; he's trustworthy. Not only that, this is God's word. We need to take it seriously, as we do all Scripture.

Paul's advice is clear: he says it's best to remain as you are. If you're not married, it's best to stay single. If you are married, you should stay married. Now someone could hear that and conclude, "Well then, if I don't remain as I am and I do get married I'll be in sin." So Paul is quick to add that if you do marry, you've not sinned. Remember, earlier in the chapter he even told single people that it's better to get married than to burn with passion. In other words, if you can't control your sexual passions, it's better to get married than stay single and have sex. Marriage isn't a sin, but sex apart from marriage is.

So if you're an unmarried person and you can stay single, go for it. But if you really want to get married, then you need to know that's okay. You still may have to wait and trust the Lord for that to happen, but it's okay to want that and move in that direction.

B. To the engaged: The second group that Paul addresses are those who are engaged. Look at what he says to them down in vv.36-38. "**But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin daughter, if she is past her youth, 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 both he who gives his own virgin daughter in marriage does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better.**"

Depending on what translation you have, the verses are interpreted differently. I'm using the NIV because I think this is the best way to understand these verses. The NIV takes this to be referring to an engaged couple and what the engaged man ought to do in relation to his fiancé. But the NASB translates these verses like this: "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." So the NASB takes this to be referring to whether or not a father should give his virgin daughter away in marriage. But I think it makes the most sense to see this as referring to an engaged couple. People got engaged quite young back then, and often it was years before they were married.

In these situations, his advice is clear. Or again, he expresses his opinion that it's better not to get married. He even gives the engaged man an out: if he feels in his own mind it's right not to marry; or if he's not under compulsion, which probably means there was no prior marriage contract which obligated him to marry her; or if he's in control of his own will, which may mean that he was not a slave and not being required by his master to marry. If these things are the case, he didn't have to go through with the marriage.

But once again he's quick to point out that there may be many good reasons for an engaged man to go ahead with the marriage. If he's acting improperly towards her (i.e., if he's not controlling his passions); if she is getting along in years, which may be a reference to childbearing years; or if he feels for some reason that he ought to marry her and that it's the right thing to do, then they should get married. And he makes it very clear—he's not sinning; he's doing what is right.

C. To the widow: The third group he addressed were single for a different reason; they were widows. There were many widows in the ancient world. Here is what he says to them. "**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**" (vv.39–40).

First, he makes it clear that when a woman's husband dies she is not bound to the marriage any longer; she is free to remarry. But it's very important that the man she marries belongs to the Lord. So she is not free to just marry anyone; she has to marry a believer. Of course that is a rule of thumb for all single people getting married. But, once again, as he's said all along, his opinion is that it's best for her not to marry again. He even believes that this comes

from the Spirit of God!

So, essentially, Paul says the same thing to all three groups: it's best not to marry but it's okay if you do. So at least we can say that being single should not be considered a diminished state of existence. It doesn't mean you're a failure or that you're cursed. A single person has the same value as any other member of the body.

But we're still left with the question of why does Paul hold the opinion that singleness is preferable, especially given the fact that God created marriage in the first place? The reason is that it's easier for single people to single-mindedly serve the Lord. The most important thing about you is not your marital status, but who you're serving.

II. It's easier for single people to single-mindedly serve the Lord.

In v.26 Paul spoke of some "present crisis." Scholars differ over what he was referring to. Some think there was some crisis going on in Corinth like a famine or impending war. Others think he was speaking of the tribulation that would precede the Second Coming of the Lord. Jesus had even predicted the fall of Jerusalem within the lifetime of that generation, which would take place quite soon in 70 A.D. To me that makes the most sense in view of what he says in vv.29-35. "**But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on 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. 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. This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.**"

Paul is saying that in light of the fact that the time is short, it's best not to be engrossed in the things of this world. That's hard enough to do when you're single, but it's even harder to do when you're married. A married person can easily get wrapped up in the things of this world, but this world is passing away. Our focus should be on what lasts and on pleasing the Lord. A married person is concerned about the needs of their spouse; about pleasing their spouse, and the reality is that sometimes that can distract you from pleasing the Lord. If you're single you can be more single minded.

Marriage is a gift, but consider the realities of being married and having a family. When I went to college, I took

all my possessions with me and they could fit in an old green army duffle bag. While in college, I could pretty much move all my stuff home in the summer in back of my 1970 VW bus. But then I got married. The first time we moved from San Luis Obispo to Palo Alto we rented a little U-Haul trailer that we hitched onto our only car. A couple of years later we moved from Palo Alto to Pleasanton and we rented out a small moving van. Four years later we moved to Colorado and the van got bigger. Two years later we moved back here and someone had to do it for us because it was too much for sane people to do themselves. If we tried to move now, we would need an entire fleet of vans! I always thought you bought a sofa when you got married and kept that sofa until you died. But it doesn't work that way. When we first moved to Foster City we still had one car and it was great. I rode my bike around; I drove the church van. Who needs two cars? Well, now with kids and all we have three cars and we'll probably have to get a fourth before too long.

Consider how much time, energy, and money it takes to maintain a home. Something is constantly breaking around the house and it always takes multiple trips to the hardware store to find the right part. I have a sprinkler system that's 50 years old. It's the old rainbird kind. I don't get it—it pumps out about a hundred gallons of water a minute but none of it hits my lawn. The streets are clean but my lawn looks like the Mojave desert! Fixing a sprinkler can easily chew up a whole day, especially if you're me!

I thought we were smart to have our kids five years apart because I could pay for college one at a time. When my first graduated from college, I was ready for the second. But then my first decided to get married, and paying for a wedding is like paying for a fifth year at college! These are all the things that cause married people worry and anxiety. Meanwhile, I'm trying to pastor a church. It's harder to single-mindedly serve the Lord with so much going on.

Now don't get me wrong. I wouldn't trade my family for anything. My wife and kids give me more freedom and joy than I deserve. If I want to go to Cambodia, that's not a problem. If I have to be out several nights a week for meetings, that's okay. Personally, I think I'm a lot more effective being married for a lot of reasons. But Paul says that when you're married, there will be a lot of things to distract you and eat up your time. If I were single, I wouldn't have three cars to maintain. I could be out every night meeting with people. I could read and study more. I could give more money away to spread the gospel and feed the poor.

Now it's important to add here that just because you're single doesn't mean you'll be occupied doing these things. As a single person, you'll be tempted like anybody else to accumulate the possessions of the world, to fill your time with things that are not eternal. But at least you'll have more opportunity to be undivided in your pursuits and have a simpler life. Maybe that's what Paul means when he says

to widows down in v.40 that they will be "happier" if they stay single.

III. Guidelines for singles today.

So what does all this mean if you're a single adult today? Let me give you a few guidelines based on what we've learned from God's word.

First of all, view your single state as a gift and a calling. Look again at v.7. **"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."** A gift is something that God has given us out of his grace. In v.17 he says this is a "calling." The fact that this is a calling reminds us that our marital status is not primarily about us and our choices, it's about God. It's about the One doing the calling.

I've heard pastors address the question: How do you know if I have that calling and gift from God? The answer I normally hear is that if being single isn't hard for you, if you kind of like it, then you probably have that gift and calling. There is some wisdom in that. The calling we have often fits with what we do well and what we enjoy. I'm not called to be a musician because I have zero ability there and it would be impossible for me to enjoy. BUT, many of us are called to things that are not easy for us. I'm called to be a teacher and a preacher, but I've often found that to be agonizing work. And ask most married people whether "gifting" equals "ease"—they may feel they've been called to be married, but few married couples will tell you marriage is easy.

I like what Lauren Winner suggests in her book *Real Sex: the naked truth about chastity*. She suggests that we shouldn't fixate on the lifelong call to singleness. Some people might be called to that, but most people are called to singleness just for a spell, if even a very long spell. If you're single right now, you're called right now to be single. You're called to live the single life as robustly and as gospel conformingly as you possibly can. The problem comes when the assumption comes that this is somehow a lifelong calling—panicked singles fear they might have that gift forever! But think about other callings. My calling as a pastor isn't for life. The day will come when I'll no longer be pastor of a church. Right now that's my calling, but not forever. You might be called and gifted to be a stay-at-home mother of small children right now, but that won't be your lifelong calling. It makes sense to view your singleness that way as well. That means embracing your situation by faith as what God has for you now, but realize that could also change.

So if you have that gift now, live with quality. Don't wait to really live. Don't live in a kind of holding pattern. Get out of neutral. Put your heart into good high-quality, single minded living for Christ. You have

time and energy that otherwise you wouldn't have. Take that and put it into positive, constructive, long-term ministry. Some day God will ask you, "What did you do with that time I gave you?"

B.The second thing I would say is that you need to cultivate deep, caring relationships. Consider the relationship between four single adults: Mary, Martha, Lazarus, and Jesus. Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were siblings who lived together and their home was a frequent and comfortable resting place where Jesus could kick off his sandals, put his feet up, and relax. It was his home away from home while on the road. When Jesus learned that Lazarus was sick, some folks came to him and said, "the one you love is sick." There are two main words for love in the Greek New Testament. One is *phileo*, and it means a deep, caring friendship. That's the word used here. Later in the story, a different word is used. It says Jesus not only loved Lazarus; Jesus loved Martha and Mary. The word there is *agape*. That's a stronger, deeper, more intimate word, a word that involves a commitment. Jesus wasn't only a caring friend of Lazarus, but he unselfishly devoted himself to the welfare of Martha and Mary. When Lazarus died, you find Jesus and the women who love each other with *agape* weeping together by his graveside. Imagine these people, arms around each other, praying together, weeping profusely, wiping each other's tears in the firm embrace that *agape* implies. Four Christian singles bound together in *agape*. They had the kind of deep sharing and caring in their relationship that matches—and maybe exceeds—what a lot of married people have.

If you're single, cultivate relationships with people who will pray for you, who will correct you when you get off track; who will become a buffer to you when the rough edges of life rub you raw; who will support you when you carry on large responsibilities; who will listen to your doubts, to your fears, to your questions, to your concerns; and who will celebrate with you when there is joy. It's not good for anyone to be alone. Open up to other caring relationships.

C.The third thing I would say is to stay pure. The relationship of Jesus to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus involved *phileo* and it involved *agape*. But there is another kind of love in the Greek language and that is *eros*, sexual love. Their love didn't involve *eros*. They were "chaste." Part of your calling as a single person is a calling to chastity. Chastity is a commitment to having sex only in the context of marriage.

It's best to see chastity in the context of Jesus' call to all of us to take up our cross daily and follow him. All of us in this community we call church are called to the daily discipline of denying ourselves, picking up

our cross and following Jesus. But for each of us that may look different, depending on who we are and the circumstances we've been called to live under. All of these require us to deny ourselves in some way. Chastity is one of those ways, but it's not the only way. Married people have to take up their cross, too, in different ways. Together, as a community, we need to help one another carry our crosses.

Lauren Winner writes, "Like most spiritual disciplines, chastity is better practiced in community than alone. It's not enough for individual Christians to be chaste; the church must be a community that works towards chastity, a community whose structures and rhythms make chastity seem more plausible and attainable." Much like Alcoholics Anonymous we should create a place where "radical change of behavior makes sense because it...sustains relationships that are organized around the vision of changed lives. The church, too, needs to be a community where chaste behavior makes sense, where people commit to a shared vision of lives transformed by the gospel..."

D.Fourth, I would say be cautious and yet open about marriage. If you're disappointed, unhappy, and frustrated with your present state, you'll be vulnerable to an unwise and unhappy marriage. Marriage was never intended to be a cure-all. No marriage is better than a bad marriage. And don't even get into a position where you're considering whether or not to marry an unbeliever.

So be cautious about marrying, but I believe should also be open and be willing to risk and change. God often sends us out on risky ventures of faith where we're completely out of our comfort zones. Two of my heroes in this regard are Ruth and Boaz. If you read their love story in the Old Testament you'll see what I mean. One thing I've learned from their story is that God uses human initiative to accomplish his will. Ruth took the initiative and found Boaz down at the threshing floor. Boaz, who knew she was a woman of excellence was willing to step up to the plate and move out of his comfort zone and marry her. If you're single, and you long to be married, don't sit back and do nothing and pass it off as faith. I especially encourage men to get over their passivity, step up and pursue godly women, treating them with care and respect.

Let me just say one last thing and this is directed more at the whole church than just singles. The church needs to learn how to *value the single person*. Perhaps you were surprised when I said that about 60 percent of the folks at CPC are single. We must learn not to think of the church as a bunch of families, but as one family—the church family.

We need to develop more sensitivity towards single people. We need to examine some of the previous assumptions and stereotypes that lead us to make hurtful comments: "Have you met anybody yet?" Parents make them; relatives make them; fellow church members make them. Check yourself in saying and doing things you might find offensive if you were in their shoes.

We need to integrate singles into the full fellowship of the church. Yes, there is a place for specialized ministries for singles just as there is for married couples. But these should never be a substitute for integration into the full life of the church's fellowship. If you're single, get into other ministries. Pray with people. Serve with people. Study with people. Don't isolate yourself. For those of you who are not singles, do whatever you can to make sure that there are open doors in your group and in your family. My own family has had the joy and privilege over the years to call several single adults our best friends. They've forged a unique and special relationship with our kids that I am so grateful for.

CONCLUSION

Let me introduce you to one of my heroes. His name is John Stott. Perhaps you've heard of him. Many would say he is the leading Christian thinker, statesman, writer and bible teacher of the 20th century. In 2005, *Time* magazine called him "One of the 100 most influential people on the planet today." I'm proud and humbled to say that I know John Stott and just a few years ago he preached from this very pulpit. He's now 86 years old. He recently delivered his final public address. What many people don't know about John Stott is that he has never married, though according to his biography he came close to it on two occasions. If you were to ask how he was able to accomplish so much he would say that with the responsibility of a family he could never have written, traveled and ministered in the way he has. The church of Jesus Christ needs more men and women like John R.W. Stott!

He epitomizes something Andrew Farmer says in book, *The Rich Single Life*. I leave you with this challenge. "Undivided devotion to the Lord is the essence of biblical identity for the single adult. It is rooted in the sovereignty of a God who places people in appropriate situations for the best possible reasons. It is steeped in the love of a God who uses even the most difficult of situations for the greatest possible benefit. It is sustained by the wisdom of a God whose timing is perfect and whose guidance is sure... If you are a Christian, don't despise the state to which you have been called. Live in the gift of your singleness for as long as you have the gift. And whether or not God ever ordains the prospect of marriage for your life, bring faith for the present and hope for the future, because there is much to be done. Who better to set a hand to the task than you?"

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