

Marriage & Singleness: A Series in 1 Corinthians 7
“The Single Life: Bad Curse or Good Gift?” (1 Corinthians 7:7-9)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on 5/19/2013

Introduction

- ❖ “Why aren’t you married?” That’s a dreaded question for single people. They know it’s coming at weddings or family reunions. The questioner is likely sincere and interested in their life. Nonetheless, single people hate being asked that. Same goes for, “You’re still single?” “Don’t you *want* to get married?” “Did you ever consider being a missionary?”
 - ▶ In the conversations I’ve had with Christian singles, particularly those beyond their college years, they tell me they often feel like they have to explain themselves. They have to give a justification for why they’re not married yet.

- ❖ Granted, it depends on what context there in. Among secular friends in the workplace or campus, single people have plenty of company. They don’t stand out.
 - ▶ But when you step into the context of an American evangelical church like ours, where “family values” are cherished, where much of our teaching is geared towards strengthening marriages and families, it’s no surprise if single people feel excluded.
 - The unspoken message they receive is that if you’re unmarried then you should be on the way to get married. Like the rest of us.

- ❖ **The church often communicates, perhaps indadvertedly, that the single life is a life lived in waiting for the blessings of marriage and family.** Singleness is just a stage you go through before you move on to marriage.
 - ▶ Think about how we often call our ‘Singles Ministry’ the ‘Young Adults Ministry’. (I’m guilty here.) But do you see what that communicates? It suggests that you’re not a full-fledged adult qualified to participate in adult ministries until you’re married. That’s the message we’re sending.

- ❖ Christian singles have the difficult task living in two cultures that send two radically different messages. In secular culture, they’re bombarded with messages downplaying biblical marriage and family and elevating the single life to a revered status. Men especially have a tendency to exalt the perpetual bachelor. The ‘Most Interesting Man in the World’ is not the guy driving a minivan taking his daughter and her friends to soccer practice.
 - ▶ Yet when you step into church culture, you receive the opposite message. Biblical marriage and family are elevated and the single life is relegated to a life on hold, waiting to move on to the next stage.

- ❖ **We have to realize that many of our spiritual brothers and sisters who are unmarried experience their singleness more like a curse than a blessing.** The blessing is marriage. It’s a family of four. That’s considered God’s blessing. Single is a label they want to throw off. Not a badge they want to wear with honor.
 - ▶ This is why our series through 1 Corinthians 7 is so important because it offers a needed corrective for us all. Far from a curse, Scripture affirms the single life to be a gracious, good gift from God.

- ❖ All of us, married and single, need to hear this and apply it in our lives and the life of the church. I'm not suggesting we, in any way, downplay or diminish marriage and family. **But I am suggesting we elevate singleness to the same status of being a gift to individuals and a blessing to the church because that's what Paul is doing in our passage.**
 - ▶ I'm going to argue later that Paul grew up in a Jewish culture that was highly marriage-centric, which viewed singleness as an anomaly and literally a curse. *So how did he end up with such a positive view of singleness without denigrating marriage?* This morning I want to show you from Scripture how the single life went from a curse to a gift and then consider its implications.

How the Single Life Went from Curse to Gift

- ❖ In this first section, I want to ask two questions: 1) What was the Apostle Paul's view of the single life, especially in relation to marriage? 2) What happened to radically alter Paul's view of marriage and singleness? (assuming his views did change)
- ❖ ***First, what was Paul's view of the single life?*** Before we look at what he says in vv7-9, let's recall the context. In v1 Paul addresses a certain issue the Corinthians raised in a prior letter. He quotes what was likely a slogan among them that asserted, "*It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.*" Apparently some in the church had elevated sexual abstinence to such a degree that it was seen as a spiritual good. In renouncing sex, they thought it brought you closer to God.
 - ▶ Even married Christians were abstaining from sex in their marriages, which concerned Paul. He argues in vv1-6 that instead of drawing you closer to God, it makes the couple more susceptible to Satan and his attacks. So each man should have sexual relations with his own wife and each woman her own husband (v2).
- ❖ But at the same time, Paul is not outright rejecting what the Corinthians were saying. Yes, he lays out a huge corrective, but notice how in v7 he *does* affirm the single life. He is living a celibate life devoid of marriage and sex, and he wishes others did too.
 - ▶ Let's read vv7-8. "*I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am.*"
- ❖ The term 'unmarried' is a catch-all that could refer to the never married, the divorced or the widowed. The point is that their current status is unmarried. And Paul says it is good for them to remain that way – just like him. Later on in v38 he will say that if you're engaged when you become a Christian, you have a choice. If you go on and get married you do well, but "*he who refrains from marriage will do even better*".
 - ▶ ***So what is Paul's view of the single life in relation to marriage? His view is that it's not only good but it's even preferable.*** Now we have to be careful not to misunderstand Paul. Just as there is a tendency to make Christian singles feel like second-class citizens, we don't want to swing to other way and make married Christians feel second-class and marginalized.

- Now that might seem ridiculous to you, as if that could never happen. But remember, there was a time in Church history when monasticism was considered the Christian ideal. Those who sought a deeper spiritual life became monks and nuns while the rest of us just settled for marriage.
- ❖ Let's not make the same mistake. Paul is not *commanding* a monastic existence. In fact, he makes a point of couching it in terms of a personal wish (v7). That's very unlike him. In his letters, Paul is not one to shy away from making imperatives. But here he wants to avoid the appearance of commanding the single life.
 - ▶ Yet he does say it's preferable based on his personal experience. He prefers his own state of singleness, and later he'll give reasons which we'll cover in another sermon. But basically it's *not* because marriage makes you less spiritual, but because it comes with certain duties to spouse and children that makes it harder to devote your full attention to the things of the Lord (vv32-34). That's why he prefers the single life.
 - ❖ Perhaps some of you are still not comfortable with Paul making a value judgement between marriage and singleness. But you can't deny that's what he's doing. He's using language of good and better. But the value judgment is not between which is the higher spiritual good. Instead Paul's focus in vv7-8 is on what is good for each believer in accordance with his or her spiritual gifting.
 - ▶ Look back at v7, "*But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.*" He's calling the single life a gift from God. That's the same word he uses in chapter 12 to discuss what we commonly call spiritual gifts. A better more literal description would be to call them grace-gifts (*charisma*).
 - **Paul's point is that whether or not you choose his path of singleness really depends on how God has graciously gifted you.** If he's blessed *you* with this gift, then it is good if *you* remain single. For *you* it is better than marriage.
 - ❖ I understand, for some, it's still strange to hear Paul describe your singleness as a gift. To you it feels like a cross to bear, a thorn in your side. So to hear someone speak of it as a blessing sounds crazy, even frustrating. But you're not alone.
 - ▶ You could argue that his contemporaries would have felt the same, perhaps more so. Remember, Paul was raised with a strict Jewish upbringing in a highly marriage-centric culture where no one intentionally chose the single life. So for him to say he prefers it over marriage was mind blowing in his day.
 - ❖ This leads to our second question: ***What happened to radically alter Paul's view of marriage and singleness?*** Let me show you how radically different his view of singleness had become compared to Jewish teachers of his day. Listen to a couple quotes from some famous rabbis.

- ❖ One teacher said, “*Any man who has no wife lives without joy, without blessing, and without goodness.*”¹ Rabbi Joshua is quoted, “*Do not say, “I shall not get married,” but get married and produce sons and daughters and so increase procreation in the world.*”² Rabbinic Judaism saw marriage as the norm and procreation within marriage as a divine command. Every Israelite man and woman sought marriage and singleness was universally spurned.
- ❖ I found Barry Danylak's book *Redeeming Singleness* helpful in understanding why. Starting in Genesis, he sweeps through Scripture to show how, **in the Old Testament, God intended for his covenant people to multiply by the mechanism of procreation.** His focus was mainly on building an ethnic people. That’s why getting married and having lots of children mattered since it ensured the propagation and preservation of God's covenant people.
 - ▶ This is evident when you consider the central drama of Genesis, where God makes a covenant to bless Abraham and his line. He says they’ll become a great nation through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:2-3). And to no surprise, provision of offspring is featured prominently in the covenant promises (Gen. 12:7; 15:5)
- ❖ By the book of Deuteronomy, it's also featured prominently in the Law. **Having children becomes a mark of covenantal blessing and indicator of your covenant faithfulness.** In chapter 7, Moses says if you keep the commands and do them, then the Lord, “*will love you, bless you, and multiply you. He will also bless the fruit of your womb.*” (7:13)
 - ▶ And in the blessings and curses section of the Law in chapter 28, we read, “*if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God . . . Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb. . . . But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD . . . Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb.*” (28:1, 4, 16, 18)
- ❖ **So for an Israelite to be without spouse and children was to be under the heavy hand of God's judgment.** Being single and without offspring was literally a curse. It was a sign of judgment and implied you were unfaithful to the covenant. Now understand, for an Israelite, to be without offspring was a fate worse than death since it meant your name would be blotted out forever.
 - ▶ Because it was such a horrible fate, the Law had a provision where if a married man died childless, his brother was obligated to marry his widow and bear offspring in the dead brother's name. **Deuteronomy 25:6**, “*And the first son she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.*”
 - Just think of the book of Ruth. Boaz heroically takes on this duty of a kinsman redeemer and marries Ruth to preserve the name of Elimelech, Naomi's deceased husband, and Mahlon, their deceased son. His concern was that “*the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers.*” (Ruth 4:10)

¹ *Babylonian Talmud, Yebamot.*, 62b.

² *Abot of Rabbi Nathan*, 3:4.6.B.

- ❖ In light of all this, Danylak observes that, "*we have no known examples of those within Israel who voluntarily chose to remain single. To have done so would have been to voluntarily embrace God's judgment.*"³ The only example of intentional singleness would be the prophet Jeremiah, but that wasn't voluntary. He was commanded by God not to take a wife or have children, so that he could function as a living sign of judgment against Israel. His singleness signaled a curse.
 - ▶ **Bottom line, in the Old Testament, every Israelite desired and sought marriage and children.** The single life was not something to call good or to be preferred.

- ❖ *So what happened to radically alter Paul's view of marriage and singleness?* Perhaps the better question is who happened. The answer is Jesus. Jesus came and changed everything. He came teaching that no one can enter the kingdom unless he is born again of the Spirit, implying that a physical lineage traced back to Abraham is insufficient (Jn. 3:5)
 - ▶ And then Paul, from a post-resurrection point of view, makes a similar point in **Galatians 3:7**, "*Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham . . . those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.*" (3:7, 9)

- ❖ Paul goes on to explain that God's promise to bless the world through Abraham and his offspring was not ultimately to be fulfilled through ethnic Israel but through one particular Israelite. Not by Abraham's corporate offspring but by a single offspring.
 - ▶ **Galatians 3:16**, "*Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ.*"
 - So Jesus is not only the promised offspring who fulfilled God's covenant with Abraham, but he's also the sole heir of the covenant promises. "*Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring [singular].*"

- ❖ Jesus is the sole heir because he's the only one worthy of the promised inheritance. He's the only son of Abraham who faithfully kept the covenant, who never incurred a covenant curse. Yet as Savior and mediator of a better covenant, he bore our curse by taking up his cross. He died a sin-atonement death in our place for our redemption.
 - ▶ **Galatians 3:13-14**, "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" – so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles [the nations], so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.*"

- ❖ So Jesus is the sole heir of the covenant promises, yet he graciously shares his blessing to the nations by bearing and removing our curse. Paul concludes in 3:29, "*If you are Christ's [lit. of Christ] then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.*"

³ Barry Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*, 81.

- ▶ This is a huge paradigm shift! In this verse Paul is saying that “*the true offspring of Abraham are no longer defined physically through their ethnic identity but spiritually through their union with Christ through faith.*”⁴ No matter your ethnicity, if you belong in union with Christ, if you’re “of Christ”, if your identity is in him, then you are co-heirs with him!
 - Jesus is the rightful heir of all the covenant promises, and the good news is he graciously shares his inheritance with brothers and sisters who have been adopted into a spiritual (vs. ethnic) family by grace through faith.

- ❖ Think of the implications for marriage and family. Now that God’s blessing to the nations has come through the one True Offspring of Abraham and his sin-atoning death, Danylak says, “*Spiritual regeneration rather than procreation is the means by which God is now building his holy nation. Neither marriage nor children is a fundamental marker of being blessed of God in the new covenant, as all spiritual blessings come through Christ (Eph. 1:3).*”⁵
 - ▶ **So for anyone in the church today to suggest that to be a truly blessed Christian requires anything more than union with Christ – like say, getting married or having lots of kids – is to “deny the fundamental sufficiency of Christ as the sole vehicle of covenantal blessing.”**⁶

- ❖ If you’re a Christian and single, Paul wants you to know your singleness is not a curse. Any curse you had has been lifted by Christ. This is why Paul is free to treat the single life as a gracious gift from God. Marriage and children are no longer fundamental to experiencing God’s blessing, to live a fully blessed life. Truly all you need is Christ!

How This Changes the Way We View the Single Life

- ❖ So how does this change the way Christians ought to view the single life? If it is a gift and not a curse, then what? Let me conclude with four implications.

- ❖ **1) We should view the single life not as virtue attained by self-mastery but as a gift received by divine-appointment.** In other words, a celibate life of singleness is not something you should be striving to obtain as if it were a virtuous goal. It’s not a virtue. It’s a gift. And like with any other spiritual gift, you can’t just decide to have it. It’s something bestowed to you by God, not something you attain.
 - ▶ In v9, you see Paul’s concern for those who didn’t have the gift but wanted to live as if they did. Those who need marriage yet try to do without it. He says, for them, it’s better to marry “*than to burn with passion*”.
 - If a single person is burning with passion and struggling to control his or her desire for marriage and sexual intimacy, then it’s a good sign they don’t have the gift. This leads to our second point.

⁴ Ibid., 126.

⁵ Ibid., 138.

⁶ Ibid., 139.

- ❖ **2) If it's a gift then the single life is not for everyone, but if it is for you then you should receive it.** Just think about Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts in chapter 12. There he says there are "*varieties of gifts*" (12:4), and within a local church God sovereignly apportions them as he wills (12:11). So not everyone receives the same ones.
 - ▶ I think it's safe to assume that most Christian singles in our church do hope to marry some day. They don't think they've received this spiritual gift. Remember, we're not just talking about being in the state of singleness. We're talking about the ability to live out a life of intentional singleness without the need to pursue marriage and sex.

- ❖ Now some of you may be wondering, if having even an inkling of a desire for marriage or sex, means you don't have the gift? ***To have the gift of celibacy, does that mean you have absolutely no interest in marriage or sex?*** Are you what they call "asexual"?
 - ▶ No, I don't think it means the thought of marriage and sex has never crossed your mind, that you have zero interest. Just because you have a spiritual gift doesn't mean you always wield it consistently. I think I have the gift of teaching, but I'm still known to preach a few stinkers now and then. It doesn't require perfect consistency.
 - I think if you have the gift of celibacy, it just means God has endowed you with a supernatural degree of self-control over your sexual impulses (7:9) and has led you to a state of faithful contentment regarding your singleness (7:37).

- ❖ One of my goals is to challenge some of you Christian singles to seriously consider if God has given you this good and gracious gift. In Matthew 19, Jesus' disciples heard him teach against divorce and on the permanence of marriage, and they say if that's the case then perhaps it's better not to marry. Jesus concedes and points to the eunuch, who was symbolic in Scripture of those unmarried and without offspring. He says, "*there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.*" (19:12)
 - ▶ His point is that regardless of why you're currently single, whether it's a fate that has been thrust on you or a result of your own choices, the question is if you realize you're able (if you've been *enabled* by a gift of grace) to live out the single life for the sake of the kingdom, if you're able to receive this, then receive it. Don't spurn this gift. Embrace it and use it for the kingdom and the good of your church.

- ❖ This leads to our next point. **3) The single life is not a lifestyle choice to serve your personal preference but a grace-gift to serve your local church.** If we turn back to Paul's teaching on gifts in chapter 12, he makes it clear that the whole reason why God gives these gifts to individual Christians is not to enhance just their own lives. No, he says, "*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*" (12:7)
 - ▶ So if the single life is a spiritual gift, those to whom it has been given ought to use it for building up of the body of Christ. Serving the Lord with the good of the church in mind was God's purpose in giving this gift to some. Paul addresses this later in v35, which we'll cover in a few weeks.

- ❖ **Considering all that, I want to speak directly to single men in our congregation.**
 Brothers, if extended singleness is something you desire because the thought of marriage and family feels constraining – if it threatens your independence and mobility – then your celibacy cannot be rightly called a spiritual gift from God. It’s just your personal preference. And to be honest, it’s selfish and not good for you or the church.
 - ▶ Let me be clear, I’m speaking to those Christian men who have every intention to marry someday – just not now. And so they deliberately choose the single life and date with no intention of marriage or just avoid dating altogether.

- ❖ Yes, there are factors to consider when discerning whether you’re ready to date or to propose. I don’t want to diminish the importance of the discernment process, but I want to call you to action, to pursue intentional relationships with godly women.
 - ▶ There are sisters in our congregation who likewise desire marriage, and yet they want a godly man to pursue them and to intentionally lead them towards marriage, if the Lord wills. But many have been disappointed.

- ❖ As one Christian leader put it, *“The extension of a "boy culture" into the 20s and 30s, along with a sense of uncertainty about the true nature of male leadership, has led many young men to focus on career, friends, sports, and any number of other satisfactions when they should be preparing themselves for marriage and taking responsibility to grow up, be the man, and show God's glory as husband and father.”*⁷
 - ▶ Brothers, our culture encourages you to extend adolescence. But Scripture says, if you don’t think you have the gift of celibacy, it is better to marry (and to prepare for marriage) than to burn with passion.

- ❖ Paul has more to say about the single life in chapter 7, and so will I when we get there. But let me end with a final point. **4) The single life is not a private existence but a public sermon that preaches the gospel.** A couple weeks ago we talked about how marriage is more than just a union between a man and a woman for the sake of companionship. We said that marriage is a sermon meant to preach the gospel.
 - ▶ But we often make it sound like only married couples can testify to gospel realities. Yet Christian singles can as well, just in a different way. Marriage preaches and displays the faithful, covenantal, and sacrificial love of God for his people.

- ❖ But Christian singleness is a present-day testimony to the future realities of our salvation. Namely, it preaches to all, especially the married, that Christ is our all in all. Not spouse, not children. *“Christian singleness is a testimony to the supreme sufficiency of Christ for all things, testifying that through Christ life is fully blessed even without marriage and children.”*⁸ Single brothers and sisters, may that be the purpose and prayer behind your singleness.

⁷ Albert Mohler, *Reflecting on 'The Mystery of Marriage'*, see online at: <http://www.boundless.org/relationships/2010/reflecting-on-the-mystery-of-marriage>

⁸ *Redeeming Singleness*, 215.