

Marriage & Singleness: A Series in 1 Corinthians 7
“Marriage and Singleness with Heaven in View” (1 Corinthians 7:25-40)

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on 6/9/2013

Introduction

- ❖ Today, there are more singles in the U.S. than at any other time in our nation’s history.¹ And with the way statistical trends are going, the number of single adults in America is rapidly approaching the number of married, which is a huge cultural shift happening in our lifetime.
- ❖ What is more significant is the number of adults who are choosing to remain unmarried. **In a 2006 Pew survey on dating in America, researchers found that 55 percent of unmarried adults had zero interest in a committed relationship.**² That was seven years ago, so I wouldn’t be surprised if the percentage has grown.
 - ▶ Now that includes those in their 50s, 60s, or higher, and the older you are the more likely you are to be content with not being married. But even when that figure was broken down by age, between those 18-29 (within the traditional range for first marriages) they found that 38 percent still had no interest in a committed relationship.
 - **Practically 4 out of 10 single adults in their 20s are not actively seeking a marriage partner.** They are perfectly content with living the single life.
- ❖ Now having read Paul’s words in our passage, you would think he’d welcome that figure. Didn’t he say back in v8 that it is good for the unmarried to remain single as he is? And in today’s passage he says those who are free from a wife should not seek a wife (7:27), and “*he who refrains from marriage will do even better*” than he who marries (7:38). So it sounds like Paul would applaud our societal trend away from marriage.
- ❖ But to be honest, I think he would call it tragic. I’ll give you two reasons. **First, it’s not like the 55 percent who aren’t looking for a committed relationship are actually committed to a life of faithful celibacy – which is what Paul is advocating.** When he says its good to remain single as he is, he means single and celibate – refraining not just from marriage but from any sexual relationship or activity.
 - ▶ That’s not characteristic of the lives of unmarried adults today. The vast majority are very much interested in sex and in relationships, just not in commitment. So the kind of secular singleness prevalent today is different in kind to the scriptural singleness being advocated by Paul.
- ❖ These two kinds of singleness are also driven by different visions of life. Secular singleness is often driven by either a fear of commitment or a self-serving desire for independence. **But the scriptural singleness laid out here is predicated on a different vision for life – one that is bigger, longer, and far more selfless.** My goal this to help you see that difference, and to especially help those of you – whom God has appointed to be unmarried in this season of life – to maximize your singleness for the glory of Christ.

¹ 44.1 percent of the American adult population is unmarried. See online: http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/facts_for_features_special_editions/cb12-ff18.html

² See online: <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2006/Romance-in-America/Report.aspx>

- ❖ To get there, I'll need to show that Paul really is promoting singleness. I know a lot of you are wondering if he's really saying that singleness is better than marriage. Because it sounds contrary to what we normally hear in church. We're always exhorting young people to resist the trend towards perpetual singleness. To commit to one person and get married. But then we read a passage like this, and now we're confused.
 - ▶ Ironically, Paul wrote this to free us from anxiety (v32), and yet his words have become a source of greater anxiety. Those married, or engaged, or who strongly desire marriage are left feeling guilty that they can't live up to this biblical ideal. What we need is clarification as to what Paul is actually teaching here.

Answer #1: Not a Fixed Rule, Just Pastoral Advice

- ❖ So let me pose our question: *Is this passage saying that remaining unmarried is better than marrying?* I have four different ways of answering that from the text. Our first answer is: **Yes, but don't read it as a fixed rule. Read it instead as pastoral advice driven by pastoral concerns.** Paul does prefer the celibate, single life and wishes it for others, but he goes to great lengths to not absolutize his preference.
 - ▶ In fact we've noted in our study of chapter 7, that some in the Corinthian church were absolutizing celibacy as the truly spiritual path. So that married believers were refusing their conjugal rights and considering divorce. And apparently betrothed couples were wondering if they should call off their engagements.
 - Now it'll shock many of us to hear Paul say that he basically agrees that they should reconsider marriage, but it's important to see that his rationale is completely different from the Corinthians.
- ❖ Last week we considered the theological principle that undergirds all that he teaches in this chapter. We summarized it like this: *Each one should remain in the calling in which he/she was called by God to Christ (7:20)*. Paul reiterates it in v26. *"I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is."*
 - ▶ If you were married when you became a Christian, then stay married. If you were single, then stay single. Look at what he says in v27, *"Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife."*
- ❖ Now we stressed last week that this too is *not* an absolute principle. **He is not saying a person who is converted to Christ while single is locked into that station in life – for life.** Just look at what he says next in v28, *"But if you do marry, you have not sinned."* You're not violating a law of God. There is no fixed rule saying Christian singles must remain single.
- ❖ Even the way Paul began in v25 suggests that he's not giving a fixed rule. *"Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord [by that he means he's not aware of any teaching from the Lord Jesus on this subject], but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy."*

- ▶ Now at the end of the chapter he reminds them that he has the Spirit of God (v40), so his judgment is still divinely inspired. And here he says the Lord's mercy has made him trustworthy. So you can trust what he has to say.
- ❖ But the point is that this is not a fixed, universal rule. **Instead, Paul is carefully considering the unique circumstances in Corinth, and based on that, he offers his pastoral advice driven by pastoral concern for their well-being.**
 - ▶ This is clear when you consider v26 again. Notice how his advice about remaining as you are – is offered “*in view of the present distress*”. There is something going on in their context that leads Paul to offer this advice.
- ❖ Now this ‘something going on’ is unnamed, but it's some sort of crisis. Some think it refers to ongoing persecution. Others suggest a famine that created economic distress. But regardless, it's because Paul is sensitive to what's going on in their lives, that he feels led to recommend celibacy. This is coming from a pastoral heart.
 - ▶ We see that in v28. “*But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned.* Paul is realistic. He knows not everyone will (or can) take his advice. So he makes it clear that it's not a sin to go against it. But then he quickly qualifies his qualifier and returns to his original sentiment. “*Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.*”
- ❖ At first glance, that sounds like what secular singles would say these days. “Marriage is so troublesome! You can't do what you want whenever you want anymore. You always have to consider another person's feelings. That's why I'm not getting married.”
 - ▶ That's not where Paul is coming from. Don't miss that his statement about marriage and worldly troubles is given “*in view of the present distress*”. So whatever trouble he has in mind is trouble specifically triggered by whatever the present distress is.
- ❖ We wish he'd share more of the context. But the point is that Paul the pastor loves his sheep, and he wants to spare them from anguish. That's why he says to stay single. It's not because it's more virtuous. **It's because he wants to spare them the pain and heartache that will be amplified in marriage by the present distress they're in.**
- ❖ For a modern example, just consider the cultural climate when America entered the last World War. Hundreds of thousands of young men were about to be shipped off to war, and many wanted to elope with their best girl, hoping to secure that relationship, to have someone waiting for them back home.
 - ▶ In view of a present distress like war, where death and bereavement are ever-present troubles, I can imagine pastors advising Christian singles to remain as they are. Pastoral wisdom would discourage such impulsive, shotgun marriages.

- ❖ Or let's bring it down to a more personal scale. If either one or both partners in a relationship has a crushing level of debt (school, credit card, etc.) and if their job situations are unstable at best, then the pastorally-sensitive advice is for them to remain single and not get married (right now). In view of their present financial distress, a marriage will certainly amplify their troubles, and you'd want to spare them of that.

Answer #2: Short-View of Marriage, Long-View of Life

- ❖ So that's what this passage is saying, but it's not a fixed rule, just pastorally-sensitive advice. Now there is another way to answer: **Yes (the passage is saying it's better), but read it with a short-view of marriage and a long-view of life.**
 - ▶ Listen to what he says in v29. He just said he wants to spare those who are thinking about marriage from any worldly troubles. Then he goes on to explain what he means. *"This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none."*
- ❖ So besides factoring in the pressures of their present distress, Paul is also taking into consideration the fact that *"the appointed time has grown very short."* What does he mean by that? Well it's clear he has the end of this world (in its present form) in mind. He says just that in v31. *"For the present form of this world is passing away."*
 - ▶ **Some say Paul was convinced that Christ's return and the world's end was not only imminent but immediate.** He thought it would take place in their lifetime. So since it all could end tomorrow, you should stay single. Spare yourself the trouble.
- ❖ But this reading of Paul fails to consider the significance of the word he uses for *time*. There are two words in the Greek that mean time, *chronos* and *kairos*, but they imply different things. *Chronos* refers to minutes and seconds, to the measurement and duration of time. But *kairos* is used to describe a decisive moment in time, an epoch or age in history.
 - ▶ Now if Paul was saying in v29 that the *chronos* has grown very short, then his focus would be on the duration of time left before the end of the world, and his advice to stay single would be based on the (faulty) assumption that the end was immediate.
- ❖ But Paul uses *kairos* here, and that's why the ESV translates it as *"the appointed time"*. And when you consider how he uses *kairos* in other letters, the appointed time he has in mind is this present age we're living in between Christ's first and second coming (cf. Rom. 8:18; 1 Cor. 4:5; 1 Thess. 5:1).
- ❖ I agree he still has the end of the world in mind. But Paul's eschatology was shaped by his Christology. The Christ event (incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension) was momentous in history. It marked the end of one age and the beginning of another. And now from a NT perspective, we are living in the last days, the end of the ages (Acts 2:17; 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2) **Paul believed the end-times have already broken into their present.** That's why later in chapter 10:11 he can say that the *"end of the ages"* has come.

- ❖ So he's not counting down the days and focused on how much time we have left. **His focus is on how Jesus has completely *transformed* the time we have left regardless of how short or long.** So just because Jesus never returned in the Corinthians' lifetime, doesn't mean we can just ignore Paul's advice as built upon a mistaken premise.
 - ▶ It was never based on taking a short-view of life where the end could come at any moment. Rather, as one commentator puts it, Paul means the appointed time has been shortened, in the sense, that "*the event of Christ has now compressed the time in such a way that the future has been brought forward so as to be clearly visible.*"³

- ❖ **For those who see through eyes of faith, the future has been foreshortened, so that now we can see the end of all things with greater clarity and urgency.** It's like we're standing on a mountaintop where distances are foreshortened, where objects appear closer and more real than they were before.
 - ▶ And from that vantage point, we can reevaluate our values and priorities. That kind of vision for life can radically alter what you think really matters in the here and now.

- ❖ Look at v29, Paul says, "*From now on*" and he gives four examples of how things change. **First, it will affect the way you approach marriage.** "*From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none.*" Now that doesn't mean you neglect your marital duties (cf. vv1-5). It just means marriage is not everything because it's not eternal. It ends at death (v39), and there is no marriage in the resurrection (Mt. 22:30). When you say "till death do us part", do you realize you're vowing to part? Just not until death. But still, we're promising to eventually part.
 - ▶ A Christian couple should know their marriage is supposed to be a picture of the relationship between Christ and the Church. It's temporary by nature. Eventually you set it aside. Just as a picture is no longer needed when you finally meet face-to-face.

- ❖ **Second, a clear view of the future changes how you mourn and rejoice.** Keep reading in v30, "*and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing*". Paul's not saying you literally should not weep (cf. 2 Cor. 2:4) or rejoice (cf. 1 Cor. 16:17).
 - ▶ His point is that we Christians should know that our tears and laughter are never the last word. The sadness of singleness or that of a difficult marriage is not final. And neither is the joy and happiness of the single or married life. There is a Greater Wedding awaiting all of God's people. That's where every tear will be gone and all joy will be full.

- ❖ **Third, a clear view of the end alters the way you view your stuff and the accumulation of more stuff.** Look at the end of v30, "*and those who buy as though they had no goods*". Paul's not pushing for a complete withdrawal from ordinary life. He's just saying don't be consumed by your consumption.

³ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT), 339.

- ▶ If I truly believe the present form of this world is passing away along with my house, my books, my gadgets, then I won't be devastated to lose them. If they're taken away, I tell myself I never really owned them in the first place.
- ❖ **Fourth, a clear view of the end impact how you deal with the world.** Look at v31, "*and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.*" Again Paul's not recommending we cloister ourselves and say "good riddance" to the world (cf. 1 Cor. 5:9-10). No, we are to be in the world but not of it.
 - ▶ So we get married or stay single. We find this job or that one. We buy a house or just lease. These are things we deal with everyday. We're going to engage the world, but as Christians we're not going to get wrapped up in it. Because we know "*the present form of this world is passing away*". We have a really long-view of life and a short-view of all earthly things and institutions, marriage included.
- ❖ **From that perspective, being single and remaining single is not the end of the world. And finding Mr. or Mrs. Right and falling in love is not the end all be all.** That's why Paul could say that remaining unmarried is better.

Answer #3: Serving the Lord without Distraction

- ❖ There's a third answer to our question: **Yes (the passage is saying it's better), but the intent is to help disciples find whichever course of life best enables them to serve the Lord without distraction.** Again this is coming from a pastoral angle, looking out for what's best for each individual believer.
 - ▶ Let's start reading again at vv32-34, "*I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband.*"
- ❖ So Paul's earlier advice was tied to his eschatology, but based on his comments here it looks like he would still give the same advice even if the end of the world was a long way off. Because his main concern here is to encourage single-minded devotion to the Lord.
 - ▶ He starts in v32 saying he wants us "*to be free from anxieties*". The word literally means to be divided or fragmented. He goes on to say that the married man or woman is anxious (fragmented) about worldly things. "*His interests are divided.*" (v34) A Christian husband is fragmented between pleasing his wife and pleasing the Lord.
- ❖ Now we have to be careful not to draw too great of a dichotomy between pleasing your spouse and pleasing God. Paul's not implying that anxiety over pleasing your spouse is inherently bad. **He's not calling marriage a ball and chain. He's just acknowledging that marriage comes with certain demands that cannot be neglected.** And when a husband or wife meets those obligations, they do please the Lord.

- ❖ Paul is not saying only single people can really please the Lord. But the reality is that married people are divided, while a single person like Paul can give undivided attention to serving the Lord without worrying about immediate family and providing for their needs.
- ❖ Paul goes on v35 to explain that his intent is for their good, their benefit. *“I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.”* The word for *restraint* is literally a leash or lasso used to lead a horse around. Paul is giving this advice because he cares about their good. **He’s not trying guilt them or force them into a single life.** He doesn’t want to lasso them and restrain their Christian freedom to marry if they so choose.
- ❖ **He just wants to help believers discern what course of life is most beneficial for you to serve the Lord without distraction.** Remember we said in the past that the celibate, single life is a spiritual gift of God given to some in the church (cf. vv7-9).
 - ▶ But if you don’t have it, then you’ll be consistently distracted from the Lord by your unfulfilled sexual impulses (which are good as long as they’re fulfilled in marriage). For you, this advice to remain unmarried will feel like a lasso around your neck. It would be most beneficial for you to pursue marriage.
 - But if you have received this gift, then receive it with faith, and take every advantage of the undivided, undistracted attention that you can give to the things of the Lord.

Answer #4: Practically Advantageous

- ❖ Now lastly, our final answer to the question, *“Is this passage saying that remaining unmarried is better than marrying?”* is this: **Yes, but it promotes singleness for its practical advantages and not for its (supposed) moral superiority.** I see that as a good summary of Paul’s point in vv36-40. Here he addresses betrothed couples in the church, specifically the man since he would be the one to initiate.
- ❖ In v36, he imagines a man might be thinking he’s not *“behaving properly”* towards his fiancée. Now there’s no need to read in any immoral connotations. It could just mean “acting against social custom”, in this case, ending an engagement.
 - ▶ If he thinks that would be improper and if *“his passions are strong”* – that is, he wishes to marry and have great sex with his wife – then Paul is realistic and is not discouraging it. The man clearly doesn’t have the gift of singleness, and Paul doesn’t want to lasso him into the corral of celibacy. They should get married. *“It is no sin.”*
- ❖ But then Paul goes on in v37 and says the man could end the betrothal if four things are in place. **First**, he has to be convinced in his own heart (*“firmly established”*) that this is God’s unique calling for him. **Second**, he needs to be *“under no necessity”*, that is, for sexual relations. **Third**, he needs to have control of any sexual desires he may have. **Fourth**, he’s determined this for himself (*“in his heart”*). He can’t be a slave of other people’s opinions. This must be his decision. And in so choosing Paul says, *“he will do well.”*

- ❖ But then read his summation in v38, “*So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.*” So both the one who choose to marry and the one who choose not to marry, do well. But Paul’s not going to hold back from saying that the one who refrains will do even better.
 - ▶ But again the point I’ve been trying to drive home is that, by “*better*”, **Paul does not mean the celibate, single life is morally superior. For Paul, the advantages of the single life are purely practical.**
 - Both do well. Both please the Lord. But the single person has practical advantages when it comes to giving single-minded devotion to the Lord and service to his people in the church and in the world.

- ❖ **Let me end by acknowledging that the vast majority of unmarried Christians here in our congregation don’t want that status for life.** You don’t think you have the gift of singleness. You want to be married someday, and if that happens you will do well.
 - ▶ But based on what we’ve seen – how singleness can spare you from particular troubles, and free you from certain anxieties, and enable you to follow the Lord with undivided devotion – then you could easily argue that these practical advantages are available (and should be leveraged) by any believer in a state of singleness.

- ❖ **Regardless if you think you have the gift, you should treat your singleness as a gift for as long as you have it.** God means for some Christians to have it for a lifetime, but for others it’s only for a season.
 - ▶ If you’re in that season, then ask yourself, “How can my singleness be leveraged for the kingdom of God?” ***In what ways can I consecrate my singleness to the Lord and offer it as a gift to the church?*** Perhaps it’s blessing the local church by discipling younger believers and raising up spiritual children of the faith. Or perhaps it’s blessing the global church by being sent on short-term or long-term missions.
 - How can your singleness bear much fruit for Jesus? Give yourself to that.