

## "Married or Single - Which is Best?"

(marriage; singles; sexuality)

**I Corinthians 7:25-40**

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I am about to make a statement that I can't statistically or objectively prove but I think is none-the-less true.

Among single men and women over the age of 25 there is no other subject about which they think more deeply and feel more intensely than the subject of marriage. The whole culture conspires to make it a primary issue for singles.

I further think that among parents and married friends there is no other subject about which they think more often in relationship to their single children and friends than the subject of marriage.

Until they are much older, a single adult can expect that the subject about them of greatest interest to others is at what stage of pre-marriage are they - dating, engaged, any possibilities?!

The message in the American sub-culture called evangelical Christianity is clear:

The single life is odd if not in fact, suspect.

And both single adults and married adults feed that misperception by their preoccupation with marriage.

It's at least interesting that in the book we are studying, I Corinthians, some of the Christians in that Greek city of Corinth were preoccupied not with marriage but with being single.

But whether in their culture or ours, single men and women ended up being placed in a difficult social and spiritual situation.

In that Corinthian Christian culture if they were single but desired to be married they were looked down on.

In our Christian culture if they are single and don't desire to be married or just are not married they are looked down on or at least pitied.

Over 1/4 of all households in America (that means every apartment, condominium, townhome, house, etc.) are occupied by people living alone. (Leadership Network fax)

That's a lot of singles.

Well you say, that number is inflated by so many older people today who are widowed and don't plan to remarry or very young adults, even college age, who aren't even wanting to be married yet.

But listen, even among men who are between the ages of 35 and 65 over 25% of them are single.

And of men between the ages of 25 and 34 nearly 50% are single.  
(Jan/Feb "New Man" magazine article)

Clearly many adults in our country are single.

When God through the Apostle Paul addresses the issues of singleness he is not writing only to a few people.

Most of us believe it is right to place great emphasis in our churches on the issues of families.

It is right, but please remember that families with children under age 18 make up just less than 1/3 of the households in America.

And if we remember that singles make up over 1/4 of the households in American we will understand that we are talking about nearly as many singles as households with children.

Singleness is not an insignificant issue either statistically or emotionally.

I believe Paul is dealing with an issue that is very important to many of us and ought to be understood by all of us.

A question many Christian single adults would like answered is, "Should I get married or stay single?"

I'm afraid that I will prejudice your understanding of I Corinthians 7 if I let you believe that is the primary question Paul answers.

"Should I get married or stay single?" may be the primary question many would like God to answer but in this text I think that question is answered only indirectly after Paul answers a different question.

I think the more important question that gets answered in this passage is this, "Is my satisfaction in life and my effectiveness in Christain ministry determined by my marital status?"

So let's hold two questions in mind as we look at this passage:

The first and most important question is "Is my satisfaction in life and my effectiveness in Christian ministry determined by marital status?"

The second question for the single person is, "Does God want me to be married or remain single?"

I want you to look first with me at this text to see what it is not saying.

If any of us did a careless reading of this text we might get the idea that this chapter is primarily Paul's brief, Paul's argument for the spiritual superiority of the single life.

How might we get this impression?

Well first of all if we misread verse 1 by thinking this is Paul saying it is good if a person doesn't get married.

But we've already seen in previous weeks that the statement means (as your NIV marginal note indicates) that it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.

We've also seen that this is not Paul's viewpoint but some of the Corinthians. Paul in fact spends the next verses refuting such erroneous thinking.

Nonetheless if we read that verse carelessly we might get the idea that Paul is denigrating marriage. How else might we get the idea that this chapter is Paul's preference for singleness?

READ verses 7-8

Look at the last part of verse 27 (READ 27b)

Look at the last part of verse 38 (READ 38b)

Look at verse 40. Paul has written that the widow is free to marry but "in my judgment she is happier if she stays as she is" - single.

Carelessly reading the text then may give the impression that this entire chapter is primarily about how much better it is to be single and by implication how much more spiritually mature it is for singles to reject marriage in favor of being single.

Thus the singles who are the best Christians are the ones who don't marry.

Whether intended or not that has been somewhat the view of Roman Catholic people since the 4th Century.

The really good Catholic girls became nuns and the truly sincere Catholic boys studied for the priesthood.

And one of the signs of their spiritual sincerity was their willingness to be unmarried for life.

The 16th Century Protestant reformation, from which we are descended, totally rejected the Catholic thinking on this subject and increasingly emphasized the place of marriage.

In fact Evangelical Christianity has rejected it to the point of having a prejudice against singles.

If Paul's primary emphasis here is a spiritual call to singleness isn't it interesting how most Catholics and all Protestants have thoroughly ignored it for 2000 years?

But please note this passage is not primarily an argument for remaining single.

What it is primarily advocating we shall see in a minute.

With all of that said, don't let my remarks thus far mislead you.

Paul does state a preference for remaining single but the entire passage will argue against elevating singleness to a spiritually superior status.

Paul had a problem of sorts.

Some of the Corinthians had taught that remaining single was not only better but spiritually necessary.

And singleness was so spiritually important that if you were married you should divorce so as to become single.

Paul wants to thoroughly refute such thinking and teaching but he has to do it while maintaining a personal preference, at least in their case, for remaining single.

And so Paul will write that "Yes, under certain circumstances remaining single may be the better option open to Christians but in no way does that choice make them spiritually superior."

And Paul will support that position by pointing out the answer to the most important question of this text:

"Is my satisfaction in life and my effectiveness in Christian ministry determined by my marital status?"

Let's go to the text itself and see what Paul is teaching:

Look with me at verses 25-28

Who is Paul primarily addressing in this section?

Marrieds or singles?

When Paul uses the word "virgin" he is not first of all indicating someone who has not had sexual relations but he is speaking of those who are single - and most specifically those who had never married.

Importantly, I think that most of what is recorded here regarding the never married applies equally to the divorced except of course that the divorced must also take into account what Paul has already written in the earlier part of the chapter. I spoke to that three weeks ago and don't have time to repeat it again now.

But I want to emphasize that many divorced people also should consider what Paul says here about getting married or remaining single.

There is a kind of tension set up in this section, a tension which we shall see repeated in almost every section of this passage.

Do you see what it is?

On the one hand is Paul's stated personal preference that singles remain single and he states his reasons for that.

But on the other hand is Paul's clear teaching that if a single chooses to marry he or she has not sinned.

Well Paul, which is it? Is it God's will for singles to marry or remain single?

As you will see in the next section, and I have already noted, that is not the primary question - though it is a legitimate secondary question.

Let's go back, for a minute, to Paul's stated personal preference that singles stay single.

First of all note that in v 27 he doesn't want the Corinthians to misunderstand - as before in the chapter so here he says if you are married don't divorce - contrary to the teaching of some in the Corinthian church.

But why does he suggest that singleness might be a better option for some singles?

At the beginning of verse 26 we read: "Because of the present crisis".

Look at the end of verse 28: "But those who marry will face many troubles in this life and I want to spare you this."

What does he mean?

Before I answer that, let me remind you that the Lord ordained marriage in creation.

He commanded Joseph to marry Mary.

He called married men into the intimate circle of first disciples.

He commends the ministry of married men and women.

God is not opposed to marriage and Paul would not be either.

In fact in other situations Paul speaks of the great benefits of marriage, and to Timothy he commanded that younger widows get married.

So what does he mean when he writes about "the present crisis" and the "troubles" married people will face?

I don't think we can know and speculation is fruitless.

But what we can say for certain is that in spite of Paul's positive attitude toward marriage written in this chapter and elsewhere, he does also teach there are situations in which remaining single is the better option.

But on the other hand, Paul quickly points out, even in those situations where remaining single may have been the better option, choosing marriage was not a spiritually inferior choice.

Contrary to what some of the Corinthian's were teaching:  
You didn't lose points with God by choosing to be married.  
You didn't wreck your spiritual life by making that choice.

"Wait a minute" you say, "I remember what we read from verses 32-35."

"Didn't those verses teach that being single is spiritually superior?"

"Don't those verses connote that a married person's devotion to the Lord is inferior because it is divided?"

Let's look at those verses, that section of this passage:

Remember earlier I said that sometimes we bring a prejudice to this entire chapter - assuming that Paul is here writing in defense of the spiritual superiority of singleness.

If we don't bring that prejudice to these verses (32-35) we might see a different emphasis altogether.

Look at the beginning of verse 32: "I would like you to be free of concern".

What does he mean?

That we should not be concerned about the Lord? That can't be what he means.

That we should not be concerned about a husband or a wife? That might make a little more sense but what was the Corinthian's concern?

What did they apparently write to Paul about?

Verse 1 "Now for the matters you wrote about."

Verse 25: Now about virgins, the unmarried.

The were anxious about whether singles should stay single like some of the Corinthians were teaching or could they get married?

You can imagine the havoc this was wrecking in the church.

Paul would like them to be free of that concern.

Who is "them"?

Just the singles? Of course not - everyone.

He doesn't want them to be anxious about whether they are married or single - because that's not the primary issue.

Then in the rest of vv 32-34 he simply sets forth the obvious but perfectly legitimate difference between being married and being single.

The single person can give undivided attention to the things of the Lord.

The married person necessarily and rightly must give some attention to the things of their spouse.

Now look how he ends that section: READ v 35

"I am saying this" What is "this"?

Everything he has said on this subject up to this point.

And what does he want "this" to accomplish?

He says, "I am saying this for your own good.

"I want to help you."

Next he specifically says, "not to restrict you."

Literally that would read, "not to put a noose around your neck."

What is he saying?

Yes there is a difference between being married and being single.

I don't want you to think, like some of the Corinthians do, that you are spiritually inferior or superior depending on whether you are single or married.

Whether you are single or married I want you to live in undivided devotion to the Lord.

I don't want you to be anxious about whether you are single or married - that is not the most important issue.

Now we still haven't looked at what the most important issue is but notice what Paul is saying along the way about being single.

Contrary to what many singles and many married people believe, Paul, by God's authority, is saying that singleness is not only a legitimate choice in life but in terms of devotion to the Lord and usefulness in ministry singleness is every bit as effective and fulfilling as any married person could be.

I remember when Rich Blum, now one of our pastors, was being considered for hiring.

A few objected to hiring him because he was single.

That's wrong!

A pastor friend of mine has been told that he was not hired for several church staff positions because he was single.

That's wrong!

Singleness is not a disease.

Some in our Christian subculture tend to think of marriage as the norm in such a way that singles are second-class citizens.

For such people this text is merely Paul's opinion, and is seldom listened to at all.

That too, misses Paul's point. Some are still called to singleness.

They need to be able to live in the Christian community both without suspicions and with full acceptance and affirmation."

Today if two women live together or two men do so there is the subtle or not so subtle thought that something is wrong or at least that they are odd.

"Unclaimed blessings" some are called.

Paul makes it clear that such ideas are just plain wrong.

And furthermore such unfounded and prejudicial suspicions are a sin.

Throughout the remainder of the chapter Paul applies his thesis that either marrying or remaining single is not the central issue.

In verses 36-38 he discusses those who are engaged.

Contrary to some in Corinth, Paul says that while he still thinks remaining single is a better option under certain circumstances, getting married or remaining single are both very godly options.

And in verses 39-40 Paul again states his personal preference for singleness under certain circumstances but again makes it clear that either marriage or remaining single are perfectly acceptable options for God's people - assuming of course as he says in verse 39 that the one you marry belongs to the Lord.

So if getting married or remaining single is not the central issue in this passage, what is?

Let's go back to verses 29-31, which we skipped over earlier: READ

When Paul writes that "the time is short", what does he mean?

Does he mean Jesus is coming very soon so there is no point in getting married?

Does he mean we have so little time that we can't afford to get involved in things like marriage and buying and selling - we must always be doing the work of evangelism etc.?

Not only does he say "the time is short" but notice the last part of verse 31 where he writes, "For this world in its present form is passing away."

Paul's concern is not with the amount of time that remains until Jesus comes but with the perspective we have on life until he does come.

When a person knows about eternity,  
 when a person knows that God has ordered history so that it will come to an end,  
 when a person knows that Jesus is coming again -  
 such a person has a very different outlook on what is important in life than the person who doesn't know those things.

Do we realize how short this life is in comparison to eternity?

If all of recorded human history (come 4000 years) was compressed into 24 hours do you know how long your life would be in comparison? 27 minutes.

Now we know that eternity is never ending but suppose eternity was only 1000 times longer than recorded human history.

And further suppose that all of that time was compressed into 24 hours.

Do you know how long your life would be in comparison?

1&1/2 seconds

"Born, Thousand one, thousand - dead"

Compared to eternity, Time is very short.

Knowing what we know about eternity and the God of eternity we are reminded to live this short life very differently.

God wants us to have a radical new perspective on life.

And so with five clauses Paul says I don't want your life to be controlled by these things.

I don't want you to think that marriage makes or breaks your life.

I don't want you to let even deep sadness make you give up on life.

I don't want the pleasures of life to drive what you do.

And certainly I don't want the things you can buy or the things this world has to offer to become your reason for living.

Now obviously Paul is not saying we shouldn't get married or we shouldn't be sad or happy - that would contradict what he has already said.

What he is saying is that he wants us to view life from a kingdom perspective - how will my actions affect the kingdom of God.

With eternity in view, and knowing who we are in Christ, and understanding the mission he has given us while we live, we will stop judging our satisfaction in life by whether we are sad or happy, whether we have much or little, or even whether we are married or single -

instead we will judge all those things, and specifically we will judge whether to get married or remain single by whether the kingdom of God is served.

That's a whole different perspective.

We are not less a person, nor are we disadvantaged in our spiritual growth or effectiveness by being either married or single.

Neither singles nor marrieds are to live as if at a bus stop in the middle of the night hoping against reality that a bus will come and carry them out of their perceived predicament.

The teaching of the Bible is that if you are single you are not in a predicament, you are not in a less advantageous place, God is not punishing you or being unfair to you.

Let me now state what I think the central point of the passage is:

Don't let marital status determine your satisfaction in life and your effectiveness in ministry.

The key to this entire chapter as we saw four weeks ago is in verses 17-24:

There we saw that wherever we are as God's child, in whatever situation we find ourselves, that situation is sanctified by the call of God on our lives.

Using the extreme example of someone who is a slave, Paul says that whatever circumstances we are in are made holy and whole even if it is not what we wanted.

The circumstances don't need to change before we can be all God has called us to be.

What is Paul's teaching on singleness?

Contrary to what some of the Corinthians were teaching, there is no special spiritual virtue in being single but neither is there any special spiritual virtue in being married.

That's not the issue.

While there may be certain circumstances under which it would be to your advantage to remain single - the real issue is to be content, satisfied and useful for God's kingdom wherever you are.

But someone says, "But I don't want to be single, I want to be married!"

A single friend of mine told me recently that nearly everyday he wishes he was married.

I know that I don't speak with any experience in this matter of singleness but the Apostle Paul does - he was single.

I believe Paul would respond, "It's perfectly o.k. to desire to be married.

But it is not o.k. to put the life, God has given you, on hold until that desire is fulfilled.

If you can't rightly change your circumstances then the place where you are, the marital status you have, is where God wants you - and that is not because he is evil or he is punishing you but because he loves you and is rightfully using you in that place for his kingdom.

The question remains for singles, "How can I know whether God wants me to be married or single?"

I am not being flippant when I say:

"Are you single today? Then today God wants you to be single.

And primarily he wants you to use your singleness with the perspective of eternity - not waiting but working for the kingdom.

But if a year from today, you have met a Christian who loves the Lord and you, and you love her or him, and other considerations, namely kingdom considerations are right - marry.

It will be evident that is God's will for you then.

I'm certain most of you have heard that knowing God's will for our lives is not most of all a matter of location and vocation -

of knowing where to live and what job to have.

But knowing God's will is most of all obedience to what we already know where we already are.

This passage makes it plain that, likewise, God's will is not primarily a matter of being married or single but of advancing the Kingdom of God.

Don't let marital status determine your satisfaction in life and your effectiveness in ministry. Issues much greater than marital status determine your satisfaction and purpose in life.