

Sermon 37: Singleness

OUTLINE

Misdirected singleness
Deliberate singleness

INTRODUCTION

We have said many things about marriage, but I am aware that not everyone who hears these messages is married or will get married. So I think it is appropriate that we also address the matter of singleness. Now in announcing that this is the topic of the sermon I am sure that all the singles out there will be squirming because they think that this is a sermon directed at them, but it is a sermon for all. Just as we can all benefit by listening to a sermon addressing those who are married, we can all benefit by listening to a sermon on singleness. We will take a detour from Ephesians 5 and share some thoughts from 1 Cor. 7.

Singleness in the ancient world had a stigma attached to it. Many cultures made an idol of marriage and sought wives for breeding an heir. Marriage was an institution used by many not for people to find a life partner who you became one flesh with but was something used to ally families, and ensure heirs. Many men married to produce an heir but also conducted extra marital affairs. Singleness in this culture was frowned upon and was a stain. Even in Jewish culture, if a young man was not married and fulfilling the command to go forth and multiply, he was thought to be violating one of the 613 laws of the Torah. This all changed with the teaching of Christ and Paul. Christ in Matt. 19 after condemning no fault divorces speaks about the possibility of a single life, 'for the sake of the kingdom of heaven' v12. This was a radical innovation for the Jewish mind who was preoccupied with marriage and multiplying. It was inconceivable that one would not marry because then they would disobey the command to multiply. This command was felt to be so important that later Rabbis allowed for divorce after 10 years of childlessness in order to marry a more fertile person. This fixation upon marriage and offspring is not found in the NT teachings. With the move from the Mosaic economy and life as a national theocracy to a church of all nations fulfilling the Great Commission, priorities shifted witness by generational purity and faithfulness to include witness by planting churches. Also because we live in the last days, Paul encourages people to consider the single life in order to live undistracted for the Lord, 1 Cor. 7:25-39.

Deliberate singleness for the sake of the kingdom is as alien today as it was in the first century. Today we live in an age where sexuality defines a person and to live a life free from sexual entanglement is seen to be a sign of psychological problems. Any notion of singleness is seen as being marginalised and rejected. There is a movie called the forty year old virgin, and guess what it is a comedy. Many single people do not feel the dignity of singleness but see it as humiliating and a measurement of their worth. The lives worth living and the happy endings of Hollywood are a polar opposite to the life of Paul who served in singleness being imprisoned, pouring out his life for others and finally being killed with a beheading.

Most people today have to be single at some point in their lives. We no longer live in the age of arranged teenage marriages. Many people are single while studying, leave home not to marry but to work, some are divorced, others are widowed. There are those who are permanently single and those who are temporarily single, there are those who are single with the gift to be so and there are those who want to be married who have to find

contentment in God's providence. Today we won't be able to say everything we want to about being single but here are some of the things we are going to do. I want to look at some of the wrong reasons why people are being single; also I want us to consider the high calling of being deliberately single.

Misdirected singleness

There are those who are single who may be thinking that they have already come to terms with their singleness and are quite happy to continue as they are. There are many who are single though for the wrong reasons. It may seem cruel for me to talk about all the wrong reasons for being single but I have a great concern. If you are embracing singleness for the wrong reason and you experience a deep tragedy that exacerbates your situation, if you are not single by conviction, for the right reasons you could find yourself in all sorts of sin. So then let me explore some of the wrong thinking that people follow into singleness.

Let begin by looking at Paul's teaching on singleness in 1 Cor. 7, this is the largest portion on this topic in the bible. We must begin by putting to bed the notion that marriage is inferior to singleness because of a view of marriage as dirty and weak. In Corinth there were two extreme views towards marriage and sex. On the one hand you had those who were liberal, and they disregarded law and marriage and were indulging in sexual immorality and violating the bond of marriage. But there was also the opposite extreme. There were some who were married who were leaving their marriages to pursue religion, they felt that to be a good Christian one must separate from one's marriage partner and live a life of sexual abstinence. In the portion before us, Paul is going to chart out a middle course that guards against both these extremes and shows that there is a place for holy singleness, and for holy marriage, and that both are good.

This Chapter begins by Paul answering questions that had been addressed to him. These young Christians had asked questions about the things that confused them and Paul the mature believer is able to give the answers. Paul begins his answer by agreeing with something that was mentioned in the question, 'It is good for a man not to marry.' It is apparent that those who sent the question already had some sort of view that said that it is better not to marry. This view was very widespread because of Greek philosophy. The body was viewed as a prison, and the human drives as evil, so a life of abstinence and self denial was a common occurrence. Men and women who became religious and embraced these Greek influenced thoughts, would leave their marriages and give themselves to seclusion or some other form of self denial. It appears that there is some of this Greek thinking in Corinth. Paul gives a qualified agreement to their thinking.

Firstly, he says it is good. Does this mean that marriage is then bad? No! We disagree with Jerome who wrote, 'If it is good not to marry, then it is bad to marry.' (Ganz, p103). In the first place Paul did not say it is better to remain single because the human sex drive is evil, no he said it because he believed that singleness enables one to give oneself to the Lord's work better, (v 32-35). Paul adds that marriage is good because it helps curb our temptation to sexual immorality, v2, 'But because of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband;' v9, 'But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.' I want to make a few comments on this. Firstly, we must be careful to present this reason as a first reason for getting married. In the Garden before sin entered into the world God did not make marriage so that Adam would avoid sexual sin. This is a secondary benefit after the fall. Secondly, marriage will alleviate but not fully remove the temptation to sexual immorality. It is the work of the Spirit as you apply yourself and rely upon the means of

grace to sanctify your immoral drives. Your wife or husband is not the cure for sexual sin. This means that all of those pressures that can be put on a wife, all of those false arguments that talk about her fulfilling all your fantasies so that you don't burn are false and cannot be brought in here.

Secondly, he acknowledges that Celibacy is a gift, and not the responsibility of every Christian. In verse 7 he says, "I wish that all men were as I am. But each has his own gift from God...." The Corinthians were thinking that it is every Christians duty to abstain and abandon marriage, but Paul denies this by telling them that celibacy is a gift. Every Christian does not have this gift nor does every minister. In 1 Tim 3:2 we see that the elders in a Church, the pastors, must be the husband of one wife. So we have to criticize those views that believe that ministers must be celibate. The RCs and some of the CoE, are wrong in insisting that ministers must be celibate. In 1 Tim 4:3 Paul calls it the doctrine of demons the teaching of forbidding marriage. Those who pursue singleness because they see the gift of sexual intimacy in marriage as dirty are wrong.

Some embrace singleness out of a sense of unworthiness. They have lived a sinful life before they became a Christian and feel they do not deserve marriage. They embrace the painful life of singleness as a type of penance offered to pay for their own sins. This is a denial of the gospel, Jesus has paid for all of your sins, you cannot add anything to His payment. It is true that none deserve marriage but God gives it as a gift by grace, and it is bestowed upon the wicked and the good.

Some are putting on a brave face of preferring singleness when in fact they are hurting and hiding inadequacy and insecurity behind virtue. Seeing who you are as they way God made you, as fearfully and wonderfully made, is a necessary antidote to this reaction.

Some are hurting because of a bad experience from a previous relationship and now want to avoid pain. Some pain runs very deep, but we can also make it worse by lingering, stewing, retaliating all our losses, and dwelling on the past. Forgiveness can go a long way towards healing the pain and helping you move forward.

Some people are misogynists and hate women; or misandrists and hate men. Any real anger towards the opposite sex is a critique of God's good creation. These feelings usually spring from anger and bad experiences. The true enemy is sin not a whole gender.

Some people are single because they are too laid back and have not made the effort to pursue God's will for their lives in regard to marriage and family. This may be due to a lack of consideration or a sinful indifference. Marriage is God's will for most people, do you know that it is not? If not are you doing something about it? Some don't have God's priorities and are committed to careers, or experiences, or a house; this is not thinking with God's priorities as central.

Another form of singleness comes from those who are too fretful and have fallen into analysis paralysis. This is usually combined with a supernatural version of seeking God's will where you follow impressions. They are always waiting for a voice and do nothing. I recommend the way of seeking God's will where you use your common sense and try and make the most God honouring decision you can. Look for a potential partner who is a Christian, who is attractive to you, who you are able to communicate with and share spiritual things with. Ask yourself whether you could see yourself serving the Lord with this person and make the most God-glorifying decision you can. It is not your job to know the future or the secret counsel of God; it is your job to do your best with what He has given

you. Do your best to honour God without prying into His eternal counsels and demand that He reveal His secret thoughts to you and trust that He will lead you in His providence.

Another form of singleness springs from being too picky. Now there is a pickiness that arises from refusing to give in on your Christian principles and this is correct. But there is a pickiness where we are shaped by the world's values and have ideals that are not realistic or godly. There is a type of perfectionism that we go around with, a blindness to all the faults we have and seek to find someone who is perfect. Christians should know better than all that we ourselves are not perfect and should not be applying rigid standards of perfection to others. You should not be seeking someone who is already perfect in character but someone who is committed to growing, you should not look for someone with magazine cover looks but someone you find attractive. I am not saying that we should deliberately go for people we are not attracted to, but do you have false ideas that need renewing that are wrongfully limiting your options? When I married I only have one thing on my list, I was looking for a woman who was clay, someone who would be willing to do whatever God wanted. I knew my life was going to be given in ministry and would be full of many challenges, I could have approached marriage looking for someone who could speak in public, lead small groups, do administration, and have a whole check list that not even superwoman could complete, but this is unrealistic. What every Christian should be looking for is someone who is committed to grow in God, and who you are attracted to. You do not need to have the most attractive person in the room, but someone who is attractive to you. It does not have to be everything about them, but enough about them to hold your attention.

Not all singleness is chosen, there are those who would love to marry, but are providentially hindered. Today there is a label for this, involuntary celibates. Those who find themselves in this difficult situation are faced with a number of peculiar temptations and can run the risk of what is called marriage idolatry. An idol is that thing that you think you cannot live without, that thing that causes you to put God second for, that thing you are willing to sin for; and if you find your idol ever tarnished you get angry at God and anyone else who harms it. Marriage idolatry is the lie that you are not a whole person unless you are married. It is the lie that the married person is more valuable than the single person. There may be a works mentality thrown into the mix which says, 'I am a good person' or 'I have done a lot of good things,' and expects God to reward them with marriage. You know you have marriage idolatry when you stop serving God because He is not giving you what you want, when your obedience to God is conditional, based on you getting the marriage you always dreamed of. Our service to God should never be determined by anything else, He is supreme and always deserves our unconditional obedience and worship. A marriage dependent service is marriage idolatry.

I can imagine someone saying to me, 'Nick, if it is God's will for me to get married and have kids, then why doesn't He just give me a spouse?' It is a common problem for us as Christians to fall into the trap of making God's revealed and general will contradict His hidden will and providence. For example, it is God's general will that we work and support ourselves, yet God allows that some are born with disabilities and they cannot work. It is God's general will that we be patient and not angry people, but then His providence allows us to undergo some wrong by another person that constantly tempts us to unforgiveness and anger. In the same way God has a general will for humanity that they get married and have children, unless they have the gift of celibacy; yet many face a providential set of circumstances where there is no suitable spouse available. Because of our inward desires we are often willing to accuse God of wrong at the slightest sign of what we perceive to be an inconsistency. Friends, we must live by faith and not by sight; we must trust in God's

good character even when we do not see the perfect wisdom behind every decision. It may be beyond our ability to conceive how our singleness is furthering God's will in our lives; but let me ask you, can God err? Are you smarter than Him? Is there no good that can come from your singleness as painful as it is that will glorify God and work for your good? I understand how the pain of a single life can cause us to ask accusing questions, but even these painful thoughts must submit themselves in faith to God. He is good and wise and perfectly ordering our lives for His own good purposes, even when it hurts. This is walking by faith and not by sight.

Deliberate singleness

In 1 Cor. 7:25-39 Paul returns to the issues of marriage and not getting married and addresses in particular the virgins, the engaged couples and the widows. His instruction to all three is the same, he encourages them not to marry, but affirms that it is not sin if they do, in fact it doesn't merely tell them it isn't sin, but that it is even right (v38).

Paul does not hate marriage, nor does he hate sex, he sees both as given by God. However, he does let us into his reasoning for discouraging marriage amongst the Corinthians. He puts forward three reasons for not marrying. The first reason is found in verse 26, "Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are." What is the present crisis that Paul could counsel that the Corinthians be willing to consider foregoing the God given gift of marriage? There are two possibilities. Firstly, at the time of writing there was a severe famine that had struck the Roman world. Or Paul could be talking of the growing tide of persecution. Nero was in power, and was beginning to show his insanity by persecuting Christians. There was a persecution being carried out against the Jews at that time, and Christianity was still seen as a sub division of Judaism.

The second reason why he encourages people not to marry is because this world and everything in it is passing away. Look at verses 29-31. The important thing to note about these verses is that Paul is not necessarily singling out marriage for special treatment when he talks about living a sacrificial life. In these verses he gives us a token list trying to indicate that every part of our lives should be affected by the fact that we are going to leave this dying world behind one day. He tells married people that they should not become self-absorbed with their marriages, but live in light of the end. He tells those who have suffered loss, not to fall into deep depressions but to experience their grief in light of the end. Those who are happy are to constantly remember that this joy that we are experiencing is fleeting and second best, because this is all going to pass away. Our possessions should be seen in light of their expiry date. In summary he says, 'those who use the things of this world as not engrossed in them'. Any investment you make in this life is in one sense lost. If you pursue a hobby, one day it will be gone. If you have an obsession with a certain sport, one day it will go. Even marriage does not survive the end. Paul wants us to put our investment in stocks that will survive the final crash.

The important thing about these verses is that the call to consider a single life in order to consecrate yourself completely to usefulness is not restricted to the issue of marrying or not. It applies to every single thing we invest time, energy, money, etc. We should take from these words not merely a rethink on whether we should marry or not, but a rethink on all of our lives. On the one hand the idea that we should search our hearts to see if we should marry or not shouldn't be alien to the Christian. It fits perfectly well with the idea that we are God's and that every second of our lives should be given to seeking his will and glory. That all time is precious and should only be given to those things that are useful. That the Christian should not be looking for reasons to indulge but reasons to sacrifice. Not allowing

the good to push out the best. Our world has programmed us with it's songs and movies to take for granted that every person should marry and have kids. It just shows how far from the Biblical way of thinking the world is. The question is, are we thinking like the world, or thinking Biblically. Being deliberately single for the sake of the kingdom is the call here. Those who are single let me put it to you this way. You may be single for a season, you may be single for a long time, what are you going to do with your singleness? Paul sees it as an opportunity not a burden, do you?

And the final reason that Paul gives is distraction. Marriage needs time, energy, and sacrifice to do it right. All of these things God commands if you choose marriage. In verses 32-35 he points out that marriage has it's responsibilities that do pull one away from being able to give yourself completely to the Lord. With the daily duties of looking to ones partners needs, attending to a home for family living, looking after children in the different stages of their lives. Planning family holidays, retirement, activities which nurture the husband and wife relationship. All of this takes time. But a person who is single can fill up their spare time serving in the Church, going to meetings, using their surplus money to help others, serving in the community, giving time to people. A single life that has work and then when the person comes home they prepare a meal and watch TV for the rest of the night until bed time, and then go to Church once a week. This is not the single life that Paul is talking about.

So then, Paul wants radicals but not reactionaries. People who are willing to pay the cost to be disciples sacrificing legitimate pursuits, but he does not want a legalistic forced sacrificing of things that are not important. This lifestyle is not only for the singles but for all. Are you being intentional in your last days living?