

The Wisdom of Singleness in a Married World

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

Introduction

Decline of Marriage: Contemplated a different title because less than 50% of American adults are married (Divorce is down 😊 Because marriage is down 😞). The divorce *rate* isn't down (simply the total number of divorces is down). RH membership sits right at 50/50 married/unmarried.

- Marriage is no longer the norm. More kids are born to unmarried parents than married parents.
- There is an argument to be made that calling people to singleness is no longer the problem. But...
 - (1) Everyone experiences singleness. No one is born married. Unless you have particularly acute timing or the Lord comes back, half of our married folks will be single again.
 - (2) Being begrudgingly single is not the same as following God into the call of singleness. You can idolize marriage without being married.
 - (3) Rebelling against marriage is not the same as embracing God's call to singleness. You can be in the state of singleness without being in the state of obedience to God's call.
 - (4) The church, regardless of the outcomes, can sometimes elevate marriage and family to appear as a better form of following God (Varsity vs. JV).
 - Unfortunately, even the church can fall into the sin of doing the "right" thing for the "wrong" reason. So you have some people who **idolize** marriage and others who **rebel** from it.
 - In the church, singleness is not a problem to be endured or solved but a gift to be embraced. That shouldn't be.

Summary: 1 Corinthians 7 is both expansive and far-reaching with lots of challenging particulars (why we preached it over 3 weeks) but also covers a unified problem in the Corinthian church. Paul gives consistent advice.

- Paul is answering a question about celibacy and marriage that the Corinthians were confused about.
 - He reminds them that marriage is a good gift and sex is a part of that good gift (2 weeks ago).
 - He then explains the principle behind this, that God has gifted some for singleness and called some for marriage, and whatever assignment God has give you is good. You should be content in that place (1 week ago).
 - And you certainly can't accuse your pastors of skipping the hard stuff when we preach on "sex, circumcision, and slavery" (a more provocative title, if you ask me).

Singleness: This week will conclude chapter 7. Paul's advice is intertwined with the rest of the chapter, but the focus switches **explicitly on those who are single** (married folks don't get a pass: (1) you might be single again, (2) the principle of stewarding your calling is transferable, (3) and you have brothers and sisters in Christ who are single, to which you minister, encourage, serve, and hold accountable). **While this is a particular encouragement to our single folks, it's a reminder to us all.**

- Singleness doesn't have to be settling. It has dignity and value.

What would it look like to recognize, accept, and leverage my calling for the mission of God?

- Week 1 = Recognize
- Week 2 = Accept
- Week 3 = Leverage

²⁵ Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. ²⁶ I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. ²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. ²⁹ 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, ³⁰ and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, ³¹ and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. ³² I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. ³³ But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. ³⁷ But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. ³⁸ So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better. ³⁹ A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. ⁴⁰ Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

That makes perfect sense; I guess we can go home?!

1. Reminder to Remain (vv. 25-28)

²⁵ Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. ²⁶ I think that in view of the present distress it is

good for a person to remain as he is. ²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.

Virgins: ²⁵ Now concerning the betrothed (παρθένων) Literally, “virgins” (but most words have usages, not meanings). The meaning is actually determined by the context, intent, etc. In this case, the words most likely refers to “women engaged to be married.” E.g., “bound.”

- Virgins? Engaged to be married? Should they stay single or get married

Just Paul’s Opinion?: I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy.

- Some hear Paul and think he’s just giving his “opinion.” But this is inspired Scripture. This is “the Word of the Lord.” When he says “I, not the Lord” or “no command from the Lord” he is not demeaning his advice as less than but saying that such a situation has not been dealt with or commanded previously.
 - This is a new era (unsaved folks are getting converted; 1st gen problems).
- **Don’t pit Paul against Jesus;** Jesus himself who has authorized his apostleship. The first apostles and Christians recognized this.
- Paul’s wisdom is from the Spirit of God.

Consistent Advice: ²⁶ I think that in view of the present distress (ἀνάγκην) it is good for a person to remain as he is.

- He has been calling the Corinthians to remain as they are from the beginning. And now we see some of the wisdom behind this.
- Paul is making decisions in light of the present distress.
- Paul recognizes that we are living in the last days, that the urgent matters at hand are the kingdom of God and not personal preference or opinion.
 - Of all the reasons to be single, few do it *intentionally* with a clear-headed view of God’s providence in the world.
- The word, distress, can also mean necessity or crisis. It implies what is “urgent.”
 - Paul is consistent in his advice: ²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Paul clearly prefers singleness for many, but he is not telling you to abandon your responsibilities. He is not demeaning marriage (e.g., Eph 5). **He is asking you to evaluate your priorities in light of the urgency of the gospel.**

Thin Ice: Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.

- **Husbands, that is not the time to say “amen”** (wives are looking around).
- You can tell Paul is single (at least at this point in life). I don’t think you could talk about marriage the way he talks about marriage and expect a “happy wife, happy life situation.”
 - “Bound” is basically Paul’s way of saying “ball-and-chain.”

- We've seen this before (marry or burn; I couldn't stop myself). Paul is making a point, I wouldn't recommend going around saying "marriage is trouble" (marriage is wonderful, God-glorifying, sanctifying, gospel-exalting).
- Worldly troubles (θλίψιν δὲ τῆ σαρκί) (practical problems and responsibilities).

2. Kingdom Priorities (vv. 29-31)

²⁹ 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, ³⁰ and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, ³¹ and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

Clarify: ²⁹ This is what I mean, Do tell us Paul! ('Cause right now it's hard to see where you're going). Always helpful when the Bible clarifies (e.g., Jesus explain a parable).

God's Plan: the appointed time (καιρὸς) has grown very short... For the present form of this world is passing away. The new reality of God's kingdom has broken in. The heavenly reality has peaked through the veil of this earthly one.

- Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light (Rom 13:11-12).

However long this present world will last, it is passing away. We are one day closer to heaven every day. And we live in light of the quickly approaching return of Jesus.

- **That should change all of our priorities.**
- "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt 6:19-21).
- Our problem isn't that we have flipped the order of our loves, loving the temporary over the eternal. We put our hearts into things that are passing away (rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic). A paradox of the gospel is that the more you treasure heaven, the more joyful your life is on earth.
 - The more you love Jesus, the more you'll love your spouse.
 - The more you treasure heaven, the more satisfied you'll be in your singleness.

Priorities: In some sense, the eternal reality makes us look and live as if our current realities are real. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none can't mean no sex or divorce; already discussed this) but that our ultimate reality is not maintaining our temporary comfort but, rather, directing our energies to our eternal reality.

- **Tension:** Earthly vs. Heavenly living; day-to-day patience, eschatological anticipation; immanence vs. stewardship.
 - Tension is a sign of healthy theology. Requires wise applicaiton.

- If I had to guess, there are more of us *too invested in this life* than are *too invested in the life to come* (pastoral application).
- Tension: It is not good to be alone, it is good to be single (God has more than one way to cure our loneliness; community?). Singleness is good, loneliness is not. Marriage is good, but adds troubles. Marriage is a gospel picture but is not ultimate.
- He's not saying that the world is bad, that we should avoid the beauty and gifts of God's creation. But he is saying that even the best things in this life have penultimate significance. Even the best things in this life can be nothing but "second best." None of these things are necessarily bad, but they aren't ultimate (and we set ourselves up for failure when we make them ultimate). So, **before we invest in these things, make sure we have fully invested in the most important thing.**
- In the midst of all the ups and downs of life, the day is coming when God will wipe away all tears and joy will be complete (Rev 21)
- Not that these things are bad (necessarily) but that they are not ultimate
- So, remaining single *might* be the best use of your life. Consider contentment. **Consider that your present situation might be where God wants you. Consider that God wants to change you more than he wants to change your circumstance.**
- **Urgency of the kingdom vs. urgency of personal.** Do I only obey God with the leftovers of my life? Do I only obey God if he works in a way that fits into my plan? Do I only obey God after I get what you want?

3. The Challenge of Marriage and the Opportunity of Singleness (vv. 32-34)

³² I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. ³³ But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, ³⁴ 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.

Marriage Ain't Easy: ³² I want you to be free from anxieties. Paul is refocusing his audience on the practical challenges of marriage. It's good, but it's not easy.

House Divided: ³³ But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, ³⁴ and his interests are divided... But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband.

- If you are married, you necessarily have responsibilities. You have someone else (likely kids too) to care for, to look out for, to provide for.
 - Marriage gives you important, biblical, godly obligations (but they are still obligations).
 - As a married father of four, I have lots of things to focus on. I can't just worry about myself. My interests are, necessarily, divided.
 - BTW, this is why you should be called into marriage, rather than fall into (cf. "fall in love" vs. "walk in love," Eph 2).

- There are simply things that I cannot do because of my family responsibilities.
 - Rides to church, emergencies after bedtime, etc.

Undivided Priorities: The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord... And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit.

- When I went to seminary (engaged but not married), I was committed to maximize my time to learn as much as I could of God's Word. I was able to devote a certain amount of time that would have been impossible as a married man if was going to honor God in my marriage (Greek paradigms taped on the wall like a conspiracy wall with red lines, etc.).
- As a single person, you have the opportunity to focus on the things of the Lord in a unique and important way (especially those without kids).
 - There is a freedom and flexibility you have to serve the Lord. That will not feel like a gift unless you see knowing and serving God as more valuable than than your bucket list and personal preferences. Singleness is not an opportunity for personal fulfillment but a chance to invest more time and energy in the Kingdom of God.
- Pendulum: Marriage is best to singleness is best (just the way you are). This isn't a sermon to make you feel better about yourself if you're not married, it's a sermon to call you to invest your life in the Kingdom of God. This isn't a therapeutic balm for those who will spend Valentine's day alone, it's a call to action for those who've been gifted a season where they can invest their undivided focus in the things of God.
 - Your singleness will be wasted if you don't leverage it for God. Don't waste your singleness (Piper-ism).
 - If you look back on your single years and are able to say, I did all the hobbies I wanted, I traveled all the places I wanted, I had all the friendships I wanted but **not** I lived with undivided focus and attention on God and the things of God, then you missed a divine opportunity.

4. Take This Advice Seriously (vv. 35-40)

³⁵ 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. ³⁶ If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. ³⁷ But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. ³⁸ So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better. ³⁹ A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. ⁴⁰ Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

Help Not Hurt: ³⁵ 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.

- Not a “tight rein” (literally) but to free them. Paul is not calling people to this type of life to **hurt** them but to **help** them. Single is not a curse, but a blessing. **Do you see it as such?**
- Singleness is not an obligation, but an invitation to know and serve God (e.g., spiritual disciplines).

Marriage is Good but not Automatic: ³⁶ If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. ³⁷ But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well.

- Part of a larger conversation (perpetual engagement?).

Both Good, One Better: ³⁸ So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

- ὁ γαμίζων τὴν ἑαυτοῦ παρθένον (he who marries his virgin)
- Good (rightly directed love), better (God-directed self-control)? Why, because of its practical use for the kingdom.
- Not ontological superiority. No spiritual elitism. But, in this context, with this call, with this conviction, it is a great and good thing.

Marriage Matters: ³⁹ A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.

- No divorce (reiterate). Remarry (only believer)
- What God has joined, let no one separate (Gen 2, Matt 19).

Paul's Wisdom: ⁴⁰ Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

- It is okay and good to marry, but Paul thinks it is worth considering the alternative. And rather than thinking of single service to God as settling, lesser than, ask yourself if it could be better or make you happier.
 - God's plan (single or married) is infinitely more joy-giving than any plan or path that the world draws up.
- Dig at the Corinthians who boasted in their spiritual gifts (Paul has the Spirit too).
 - People say “God told me” (doesn't matter if the Bible says something else; you're either making it up or misheard). But what if he “told me” something else?
 - Don't take your personal preference, intuitions, or desires and put them on God to spiritualize your wish and try and get what you want.
- **Have you taken Paul's call seriously?**

Conclusion

Paul is reframing the cultural narrative in Corinth (and in our world today) away from what is expected and even desired, from personal fulfillment to leveraging one's life for the glory of God.

- What does it look like for you, instead of trying to fit God into your life, conformed (transformed) your life into God's plan?
- What needs to change?