

1 Corinthians 7:17-40 – Singleness

Introduction

If you had to finish this sentence what would you say: “The single life is....” Sorely missed? Fun? Average? Painful?

When I was single there would have been periods when I would have said: “the single life is great!” But then there were other moments when I would have said: “the single life is awful.” One such time of struggle came following in my early working life when all my close friends started pairing up. I just felt pretty lonely in life.

I remember a wedding I went to during this period where almost all the other guests were coupled up. Now this wouldn't have been such an issue, but for the wedding dance at the reception. After the married couple had their first dance, the MC invited all the couples up to join them and literally all but one or two of us left for the dance floor. I remember seeing all the happy couples dancing and feeling totally left out with my loneliness on full display.

Maybe some of you have one or two experiences like that.

Singleness can be enjoyed but it can also be a real struggle. And in the struggle, you sometimes get the well-meaning things people say that just don't really hit the mark:

- “Don't worry, there's plenty of fish in the sea.” But, is there? Not everyone gets married. What if I'm in for the long haul here?
- “Cheer up, singleness is a gift, so enjoy it!” How can I enjoy something that I can't stand?
- “Don't, worry, God's got you.” I know that's true, but how? *How* does he help me?

In tonight's passage *God* speaks into the issue of singleness. And thankfully, He doesn't come to us with clichéd one-liners. His word gives us all a way to think about singleness that

is encouraging, honest, wise, and helpful. He speaks about the identity you need to have in a world that often downplays singleness. He shows you the blessings of singleness. He provides the wisdom you need to use when thinking about marriage. He speaks of the help you need to know when the struggle bites.

This talk while very much applied to the unmarried among us, it will have application and insight for the married too. So, as always, each of us needs to be listening in. Those are the four things we'll think about. Let's look at the first point.

1. The Identity God wants you to have. (vv.17-24, 29-31)

The identity God wants you to have. Single believers (as with all believers) are called to have their identity firmly placed in Christ. This is crucial because our culture often promotes romantic love as the place to find one's greatest satisfaction and identity.

This is all through Hollywood. In the movie, Jerry Maguire, you get that famous line spoken by Jerry to his wife Dorothy: "You complete me." And that's how much of our culture – particularly pop-culture tends to think. We need to find a romantic partner to "be completed." Thus, to be single is to be somehow incomplete.

Think about most Disney/pixar movies up until the last 5-10 years. The main character almost always *has* to have a love interest that ends in happily ever after. Again, the subliminal message of pop-culture is: "unless you're paired up, there *is* no happily ever after." This is actually why I appreciated Frozen. It was one of the few Disney movies that highlighted the bond between sisters rather than lovers (and in a house full of daughters, I'm all about healthy sisterly bonds).

But it's not just in pop-culture. Even in the church, we can speak and act in ways that imply people need someone else in their life to be completed. Vaughn Roberts – a single man who is a pastor in the UK speaks about a friend of his who belonged to a young adult church group called “Pairs and spares.” Even in Christian community, single people can be made to feel like spare parts in their families, social groups and churches.

The subliminal message of world around us tends towards seeing singleness and celibacy as a problem to be solved – a state to be changed.

But did you notice what Paul seems to be saying something very different in our reading tonight. He seems to be saying that when a person has their identity in Christ, they *don't* have to change their situation or relationship status (providing it is not sinful). You see Him starting to make this case in v.17:

¹⁷ Let each one live his life in the situation the Lord assigned when God called him.^[k] This is what I command in all the churches.

Verse 20:

²⁰ Let each of you remain in the situation^[k] in which he was called.

And again, in in verse 24:

²⁴ Brothers and sisters, each person is to remain with God in the situation in which he was called.

Some believers in the Corinthian church were thinking, “Unless I change x about my circumstances, my life is somehow less honouring to God or less purposeful, less complete – we got a glimpse of that last week with some in the church thinking they needed to leave their unbelieving spouses.

In verses 17-23 others appeared to be wanting to change other aspects of their lives - their ethnic identity through circumcision or their social standing through gaining freedom from slavery. But it’s like Paul is saying: “You don’t need to change your situation in life. If you know Christ you have a glorious new identity that far outstrips anything the world offers. Christ *gives* you unthinkable value and purpose in God’s eyes. Think about how revolutionary that would have been for a Christian slave to hear.

To be a slave in Paul’s day was the absolute lowest rung on the social ladder. And yet even to Christian slaves (to whom the world loudly and unashamedly said: “you are less than others”), Paul says “you have value, you have worth, in fact you share in the greatest privilege imaginable because you belong to Christ.” So, yes, if you can gain your freedom, go for it (v.21), but that won’t make you more loved, more accepted in God’s eyes. You are love now, you can live for God now.” Why? Because:

²² ...he who is called by the Lord as a slave is the Lord’s freedman. Likewise he who is called as a free man is Christ’s slave. ²³ You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of people.

If you are a believer here tonight, you too are the Lord’s freed man or freed woman. Through his death and resurrection, Christ has freed you from the power and penalty of sin. And that is a wonderful privilege. You will no longer stand before God on judgment day and be found guilty for your sin and rejection of Him. You are at peace with God and will be welcomed by

Him as one of His children, forgiven, accepted, adopted. Paul is helping us to ground our identity in Christ – we are saved by him and we are to live for Him, whatever our situation or status is – married or unmarried. Jew or Greek. Slave or Free.

So to the singles among us, God is saying: “If you are in Christ, you don’t have to change your relationship status to be more faithful or more valued or more complete in God’s eyes.

In our sex-saturated and romantically obsessed world, single people are often taught to think of singleness and celibacy as the big problem in their life that needs to be fixed. I remember seeing posters up for the movie *40-year old virgin* and thinking: “our culture thinks singleness and celibacy is one huge joke. One huge problem.

But singleness is not your biggest problem. Sin is your biggest problem. God’s judgment is your biggest problem. And that says Paul *has* been fixed by the One who bought you at a great price (v.23). Jesus secured your forgiveness at the cost of his own life in your place. Jesus gives you what you most, Jesus brings you into a loving relationship with God, and in that sense, Jesus really does complete you. And if you’re not a Christian, that the message you need to hear above all things tonight.

The difficulty is that we often forget the glory of our identity as Christians. I remember this being the case for me, when I found singleness a drain. In my darker moments I tended to view Christ as more of a consolation prize. “I don’t have the great gift of marriage that I really want, but people keep telling me I have Jesus.... That’s something right?” Jesus is not just something, He’s everything! Marriage *can* be good thing, but like everything in this world it is tainted with sin and will pass away. By contrast, the life you have in Christ will never end and the glory of that relationship will last for eternity. Our identity in Christ leads

us to think not just in terms of this life but the next. And it's that "other-worldly" view that I think Paul is getting at with his words in vv.29-31, where he speaks of those who have wives needing to be as those who have none, those who weep as though they did not weep, etc. All the joys and challenges of this world are passing away and we therefore need ground our identity in Christ and be heavenly minded: Verse 31:

"The world in its current form is passing away."

But the first point to make on the topic of singleness is really the same as every other situation in the Christian life – Ground your identity in Christ.

2. The blessings God wants you to see.

Second, the blessings God wants you to see.

Singleness according to God contains real blessings. Unfortunately, sometimes it's spoken about as though it were a curse. When U.S. supreme court Justice Kennedy wrote his opinion in support of same-sex marriage, he spoke of those who could not marry as "those condemned to live in loneliness." One writer for the WP accused the Justice of "singling shaming" and rightly pointed out that there are many who believe their singleness is a blessing not a curse. But you don't have to read the WP for a defence of singleness, God gives it to us in this passage. In fact, God views the single life with such regard that Paul actually counsels many in the Corinthian church to opt for singleness as the better choice in their circumstances. Verse 38:

...he who marries his fiancée does well, but he who does not marry will do better.

And again to the widow Paul says in verse 40:

... she is happier if she remains as she is, in my opinion.

Now, this shouldn't come as a surprise in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul has already spoken of singleness as a *gift* from God. Not a curse, but a blessing. The challenge is that many of us look at singleness as the gift you'd rather not receive... "Thank you for the thought God, but I'm not really in to this... Maybe give someone else would like it.

But we need to remember who the giver is. He's not some work colleague that doesn't really know us or care about us. He is the God who the Bible says is profoundly good and who never makes mistakes, and does not short-change his people. And so if *He* gives a gift, even if it is just for a time, we need to trust that he has a good purpose for that gift in our lives. And Paul says there are two good purposes/benefits.

- (1) Single people are spared the "troubles" of marriage.
- (2) Single people can devote themselves more fully to God's work.

1. Spared the "troubles" of marriage [vv.25-28].

First, Single people are spared the "troubles" of marriage. Look at verse 25:

²⁵ Now about virgins [those who are not yet married]: I have no command from the Lord, but I do give an opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is faithful. ²⁶ Because of the present distress, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. ²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸ However, if you do get married, you have not sinned, and if a virgin^[u] marries, she has not sinned. But such people will have trouble in this life,^[o] and I am trying to spare you.

There are many great blessings of marriage, but there are real challenges and complexities too. Sometimes we forget this. But in marriage everything has to be communicated and consensus found – where you will live, how you will spend your time together, what you will eat, who you will hang out with. And where communication is not great those complexities can morph into real points of hostility and frustration.

Sometimes these challenges and complexities of marriage can be strained by external factors like economic down turn, the lockdowns of a pandemic, a new medical diagnosis. I suspect a number of married couples discovered this during covid... All these challenges that were present but kind of managed prior to covid, suddenly became overwhelming under the new pressures. Marriage, particularly when it's under severe external pressure can have significant challenges.

And it seems there were real external pressures in Corinth. The 'present distress' Paul speaks of here is likely a reference to a famine or increased persecution of Christians... Either way, Paul knows that this "present distress" would just exacerbate the "troubles" of marriage, and he wants to spare the single Corinthians of these. "Guys, it's not a bad thing that you don't have to go through some of these stressors."

"If you get married, you haven't sinned says Paul." I just want to spare you some of the real challenges of marriage." So, that's one benefit, believers are spared "troubles". But that kind of has a bearing on the blessing Paul highlights.

2. Undistracted Devotion

Single people can be devoted more fully to God's work. Their interests are less divided.

I remember when we used to go away for 8 days a year on bible college mission trips. These missions were a time when we'd visit some town or city in Australia and spend a week sharing Christ with people and working to support the local church community. But for the married guys with kids on mission it was often a time when our wives had to bear the full load of childcare. And so, for a number of us, college mission always had this tension going on. On the one hand we were concerned with the mission – sharing Christ and encouraging his local church. On the other hand we were concerned for our wives back home and how they were coping under the load. I remember, when we did a mission trip to Fremantle, our middle daughter Esther who was a baby at the time got really sick and Ruth was just getting hammered by tiredness. The reality is that our important ministry to our wives and children can sometimes have real impact on our capacity to minister to others. As good as that mission was, I *did* find it challenging – burdened in the evenings by the needs of my wife and kids. But my single buddy found that mission great! – his evenings were spent hanging out with people and having late night gospel chats. This is kind of what Paul is getting at in verses 32ff:

³² I want you to be without concerns. The unmarried man is concerned about the things of the Lord—how he may please the Lord. ³³ But the married man is concerned about the things of the world—how he may please his wife— ³⁴ and his interests are divided. The unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But the married woman is concerned about the things of the world—how she may please her husband. ³⁵ I am saying this for your own benefit, not to put a restraint on you, but to promote what is proper and so that you may be devoted to the Lord without distraction.

Now, I want to point out at the start that Paul is not suggesting that investing in your marriage or kids or homelife is bad or even a lesser form of ministry. In other letters like Ephesians and Colossians Paul speaks of loving your wife or your husband as God-honouring things to do (a *ministry* of love). What I think Paul is referring to here is the way in which a single person is not as limited in the “who” and “how” of their service to Christ. A married person is more confined in ministry to their spouse/kids. A single person is (by and large) more able to love and serve in the church and wider community. Their interests in Christian service are less divided in *that* sense.

This is not to say that single people do not have busy lives, or other important priorities. Paul is simply making the point that the absence of such a massive responsibility like marriage, does allow for more freedom in the way you serve Christ.

One of the things I’ve loved to see at Bundy is the way so many unmarried people give of themselves to serve Christ in so many different ways. I see you serving in SS, kids club and youth group. I hear of singles inviting people over to encourage them. I see singles bringing friends to CE, serving on Sundays, offering late night ride homes after GG, gathering at SNAC events. It’s wonderful to be a part of a church where single people *do* use the blessings of their gift for God’s good purposes.

Singleness has its challenges, but God says it has its real advantages too. So if you’re unmarried, God’s word is encouraging you to see those blessings, give thanks for them and continue to give yourself to serve the one who first served you.

Elizabeth Elliot who was the widow of the slain missionary Jim Elliot gives a good reminder to make use of the gift God gives you today, regardless of what gift you might have tomorrow:

“Single life may be only a stage of a life’s journey, but even a stage is a gift. God may replace it with another gift, but the receiver accepts His gifts with thanksgiving. This gift for this day. The life of faith is lived one day at a time, and it has to be lived—not always looked forward to as though the “real” living were around the next corner. It is today for which we are responsible. God still owns tomorrow.”

God wants you to see the blessings of singleness.

3. The wisdom God wants you to use [vv.36-40]

Third, the wisdom God wants you to use. Marriage *remains* an option for singles, but it requires thoughtfulness.

I suspect that for a number of single people listening to this, you might be thinking, “Look, I *do* think my identity is in Christ – I’m sold on that. And I *do* hear what Paul is saying about the advantages of singleness – I’m trying to live them out in my life as best I can... but I just still desire to be married. Is that somehow wrong?”

God’s answer to you here is no. It is okay to want to get married. You see this even as Paul highlights the benefits of singleness. Verse 28:

²⁸ However, if you do get married, you have not sinned, and if a virgin^[v] marries, she has not sinned.

You see it again in verse 36:

³⁶ If any man thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, if she is getting beyond the usual age for marriage, and he feels he should marry—he can do what he wants. He is not sinning; they can get married.

There are marriage and betrothal customs we may not be that familiar with here, but Paul's point is that if you want to get married, you can get married. If you don't want that's well and good too. Verse 37

³⁷ But he who stands firm in his heart (who is under no compulsion, but has control over his own will) and has decided in his heart to keep her as his fiancée, will do well. ³⁸ So, then, he who marries his fiancée does well, but he who does not marry will do better.

There is freedom on the question of marriage. Thus we need God's wisdom.

Some of you are single right now and may be trying to figure out how to think wisely about the potential option of marriage. There are three things that I see this passage asking you to wisely consider as you think about that: Desire, Timing, Person.

1. Desire.

First. You need to wisely consider your desire for marriage. As I mentioned earlier, our culture tends to tell us that it is abnormal to actively remain single and celibate. And so, we can all feel that push to get coupled up and married. But for some of you, that desire may not actually be there and that is okay. Some Christians may just lack the desire to get married for no other reasons than they just don't want to – that's okay. Others may desire the single life because they don't want the “troubles” Paul speaks of here on top of other struggles they may

already have – that’s fine. Some will want to be freed up to serve Christ in some other way as Paul has been talking about and that’s great. Jesus also talks about those who:

... who choose to live like eunuchs (single and celibate) for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 19:12).

And then others of you may not have the sexual desire for members of the opposite sex, and therefore marriage as God defines it (between a man and a woman), may simply not be a compelling option to you.

Wisdom will lead us to think carefully about the desires of our hearts when it comes to marriage. And we need to be a church that recognises there is choice in marriage and not to assume people simply *need* to progress to that state. Questions like: “So when are you getting married? Or, “I see you’re still single” aren’t actually that helpful because they imply that there is a necessary progression in people’s lives towards marriage. But that is not what the Bible teaches. So that’s the first thing to wisely consider. Do you have desire?

2. Timing.

Second. You need to wisely consider timing when it comes to marriage. Is marriage actually a possibility in your life stage right now? This passage reminds us that there are times, when it may just be unwise to get married – even where there is desire. Paul speaks about the “present distress” (v.26) as a moment of bad timing for many in the Corinthian church. Out of concern for them, he let them know that getting married in such circumstances may just cause too many problems... And we need to hear that concern.

There are other circumstances in life, where getting married, will unwisely bring about too many other issues. We thought a couple of weeks ago about the 17 year old boy who desires to get married but needs to wrestle with the fact that timing is not on his side. There may be other timing factors though that will make things difficult. Study demands, OS deployment for work or mission, lack of regular income. You might be coming off a bad break-up and just need more time to process that.

You might also think you simply haven't had the time to get to know the person you are dating.... It would be distressing to find out on the other side of marriage that your spouse has an anger issue or a control issue that you never fully noticed beforehand. And this point leads to the third thing to consider.

3. Person.

You need to wisely consider what sort of person you would marry. And we see this consideration coming out in Paul's words. You see it there in his final words to the unmarried widows of verse 39:

³⁹ A wife is bound^[a] as long as her husband is living. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to anyone she wants—only in the Lord.

As many of you will know, the Bible lists a few explicit things that Christians are to keep in mind when thinking about marriage – the person needs to be a member of the opposite sex, can't be a close relative, can't already be married. But here Paul focuses on another explicit thing God wants Christians to keep in mind. Christians are to marry Christians. That's what he's saying when he writes "only in the Lord." Now some have argued that the Bible doesn't really say Christians can't marry people who aren't Christian, but that's actually not true.

Throughout the whole OT, God commanded his covenant people Israel to only marry those within the covenant. In Proverbs 31, where the author is speaking about the wife of noble character, he says that a “woman who *fears the Lord* is to be praised.” God wants his people to marry those who fear Him. Moreover, the NT describes marriage as a partnership that pictures the redeeming love of Christ for his church. *Both* parties (not just one) are called to see their marriage as about Jesus not just themselves.

Now, in the Christian community some believers will already be married to unbelievers. We talked about the complexities of that last week. The point here is that wisdom (and obedience) will lead us to marry one “who is in the Lord” – a Christian. But, in many ways, that’s not the totality of the matter. Paul has spoken of the idea of being a “slave of Christ” – it’s an image that speaks of Christ and his gospel being front and centre of our lives. And therefore one of the questions must surely be – how much does Christ and the gospel rule this person’s life? Is Jesus more of a side interest, or does he rule their world? That’s actually a crucial question because it has implications for your life with the person. If Jesus really matters to someone, living His way will matter to them. Thus if Jesus matter, kindness will matter for he calls us to kindness. If Jesus matters, forgiveness will matter, for he calls us to forgive as he has forgiven us. If Jesus matters grace will matter, repentance of sin will matter, thoughtfulness will matter, compassion will matter. These are all characteristics that make a marriage work.

We need to look for a person who loves Jesus, but we also need to be that person who loves Jesus.

If you’re single and wondering about the idea of marriage for you. I would encourage you to think wisely about the question of desire, timing and person. If you are unsure about one or more of them, I would encourage you to hold off on marriage – at least for the time being.

But, as many of you will know, that won't necessarily be easy which leads to the final thing I see God saying to singles in this passage tonight.

4. The Help God wants you to know.

Finally, there is the help God wants you to know.

I suspect there are many of you here who are actually fine in your singleness. But I know, there will be others of you who are struggling – perhaps from pure loneliness, or a struggle with sexual self-control, or maybe from the grief of seeing your married friends drifting further from you relationally. Singleness *can* be really hard. Maybe you're at that point tonight. Maybe you've had it with singleness. Maybe you're thinking, "if I have to go to another wedding where I get the message "two are better than one" from Ecclesiastes I'm going to crack." IF that's you, I want to finish by briefly mentioning three sources of help that God gives.

1. Himself.

First, God gives you Himself. Did you notice back in verse 24 Paul says:

²⁴ Brothers and sisters, each person is to remain with God in the situation in which he was called.

"Remain *with* God." It's easy to miss, but vitally important. The single Christian does not do life alone at a fundamental level, he or she does life *with* God. God has given His people His Spirit and calls us to cry out to him in times of struggle and to ask for his grace to sustain us.

Psalm 34:18:

*¹⁸ The LORD is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*

1 Peter 5:7

⁷ Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

God will never leave you or forsake you. So in your struggle, keep speaking with Him and asking for his help to endure and to grow in faith and love through your suffering.

2. His people

Second, God gives you His people. We all long for deep relationships in which we are known and loved. The church should be the place where single people find this. Later in chapter 12 Paul will speak of God's purpose in the church community:

²⁵ ... that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶ If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

We need to be a church where we have *equal* concern for each other – not just focusing on our spouse, or family, or little friendship clique.

Maybe that means going to the occasional SNAC event or other social get together if it means you can connect a little more with those who might be feeling lonely.

On the 3rd of July we are running a Single-minded conference. This is the sort of thing that I think all of us could benefit from – because singleness is something church not just some individuals need to think about.

Do I know those who might be lonely? Do I have equal concern for them?

3. *His Future.*

Finally, God gives you the promise of a better future to come. You may not have marriage now, you may not have it ever, but you do have a better relationship with Christ. Like everything else in this world earthly marriage passes away (v.31). Not so with our relationship with Christ - that will last into eternity.

I'll finish with the words of Vaughn Roberts which he wrote in a helpful article on this matter:

Many who are presently single will one day marry. Others will remain single throughout their lives. But no Christian is single forever. Human marriage reflects the marriage God wants to enjoy with his people forever. The Bible speaks of Jesus as the bridegroom who will one day return to take his bride, the church, to be with him in the perfect new creation. On that day all pain will disappear, including the pain of a difficult marriage or singleness. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and a great shout will be heard: "Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready" ([Rev. 7:17; 19:7](#)).

After we had spoken about heaven, an elderly single lady said to me, "I can't wait for my wedding day!" We should all share the same hope. And we can already experience something of that intimate marriage with Christ here on earth by the work of the Spirit in our lives.

Human relationships do matter, but none is nearly as important as our eternal relationship with Jesus.