

Single-Minded Devotion

1 Corinthians 7:25-39

Do you know what the leading cause of car accidents is in the U.S? According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, **distracted driving** is the leading cause of car accidents, surpassing crashes caused by drunk driving, speeding and other leading causes of accidents.

In addition to claiming 3,142 lives in 2019, 400,000 people were injured in crashes involving a distracted driver. Also, about 58% of these accidents involved teenagers. At the top of the list of the leading causes of distracted driving accidents is using a **cellphone** while driving, as well as eating food, drinking from a mug or bottle and applying makeup.

But the danger of distraction is not only a major problem when traveling on highways and roadways, its also a major problem in the journey of life, especially spiritual life. Regarding obstacles to spiritual health and vitality, Daniel Henderson often says, “The enemy does not have to destroy us, but simply distract us.” You see, like safely driving a car on the road requires our undivided attention, to be spiritually healthy and fulfill God’s purpose we must give Him our undivided devotion.

Because of things like distractions and the cares of this life, if we are not careful, our hearts can become divided. A divided heart is a heart stuck between two opinions, possibilities, or options. When a person has a divided heart or is double minded, he/she will be unstable in all their ways (James 1:6-7). A person with a divided heart may desire God’s best, but may not wholeheartedly commit to walking with God and seeking first His kingdom where the blessings of His favor and fellowship are found (1 John 1:6-9; Matthew 6:33).

Main idea: Christians must strive to minimize distractions to maximize devotion to Christ and His Kingdom agenda.

To unfold this theme, we are going to consider 3 biblical strategies for keeping our hearts from becoming divided in our walk with God and in the service of His kingdom.

1. Minimize Distractions

The first strategy that we want to consider to keep our hearts from becoming divided is to **minimize distractions**. After exhorting believers to remain in the circumstances they were in when they first got saved, be it marital status or vocation, so that they might fulfill God's Kingdom assignment, Paul continues:

“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. ²⁶I 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. ²⁸But 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” (1 Corinthians 7:25-28).

Keep in mind that Paul is answering questions from the church of Corinth about living the Christian life while remaining in the circumstances they were in when they first got saved. There were Christian couples that were in troubled marriages when they got saved. Some believers were married to unbelievers when they came to Christ and others were betrothed as Paul points out in verse 25.

Now the question coming from the betrothed seems to be, “should I follow through with getting married or remain unmarried.” And this question seems to be in the context of what status, *married or single*, would provide the greatest freedom to be devoted to Christ and His kingdom purposes.

It's important to note here that in Paul's day betrothed meant a person you were formally and legally arranged to be married to. Today a person engaged to be married is called a fiancé. Modern engagement is

typically an agreement to get married between two people romantically involved. But in bible times betrothal often involved a formal contract between two families and the contract was as binding as marriage itself. When marriages were arranged between families, often the bride and groom did not know each other and did not even meet until their wedding day.

In light of this, if a person in Paul's day was engaged to be married when they first got saved, and wanted to be devoted to Christ they might have struggled with following through with the marriage. To this Paul gave his trustworthy judgment in verse 26: *"I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is."*

Notice here that Paul's counsel to the betrothed to remain unmarried was given *in view of the present distress*. Some commentators suggest that the *present distress* Paul is speaking of has to do with extraordinarily difficult circumstances, like poverty or persecution, occurring at the time Paul wrote to the Corinthians. Therefore, in view of these difficult circumstances commentators also suggest that Paul's counsel to singles to remain unmarried is unique and related to the historical circumstances in first century Corinth.

However, there is no indication in Paul's writings and other ancient historical records that Corinth, which was a prosperous city, experienced greater Christian persecution than others places in Paul's day or even in our day. In fact, although there have been periods in history where great spiritual awakenings occurred, the bible doesn't teach that as we get closer to the Lord's return that things are going to get better. On the contrary, the bible teaches that as we move closer to the Lord's return, tribulation will increase not decrease. Concerning the end times, Jesus wrote, *"And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold"* (Matthew 24:12). And we see this happening in our day as lawlessness and violence, which has always been present, is increasing in frequency and intensity.

Now, as we will see, Paul is going to further clarify what he means by the present distress being a reason for remaining unmarried (v.29-31). But before he does, he makes clear that his counsel to remain unmar-

ried should not lead people, who are married, to seek to be free, or to believe that they have sinned, if they're single or betrothed and decide to get married (v.27-28). However, after clarifying that it's not a sin to get married, although he recommends celibacy, Paul further emphasizes: "*Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that*" (1 Corinthians 7:28b).

The fact that Paul recommends singleness over marriage because of what he called the *present distress* and also *worldly troubles* may lead one to believe he had a negative view of marriage. But nothing could be further from the truth. It's clear in verse 7 that Paul viewed both singleness and marriage as gifts from God. And in other scriptures, like Ephesian 5, he makes clear that marriage is a creation of God designed to display the sacrificial love of Christ for His bride the church. Concerning Paul's reasoning for recommending singleness as a better option for some believers there appears to be a difference between what he meant by the *present distress*, which he clarifies in verses 29-31 and *worldly troubles*, which he clarifies in verses 32-35. To explain what he means by the *present distress*, Paul continues:

"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." (1 Corinthians 7:29-31)

Notice that the *present distress*, which is a reason Paul gives for believers to consider remaining single, according to verse 29 and 31, appears to be related to the end times. The end times is the era between the first and second coming of Christ. Because of the redemption that Christ accomplished in His first coming, His commission to the church to make disciples and His promise to return, mature believers understand that the things of this life are temporary—that in light of eternity and the imminent return of Christ, *time has grown very short* (v.29) and *the present form of this world is passing away* (v.31).

As one commentator explained, “All Christians should therefore sense an urgency to serve the Lord, caused by the uncertainty of the time of the end, after which point it will no longer be possible to win any more people to Christ or to disciple them to maturity. Paul is well aware that **distractions** of marriage may temper this urgency. So those who choose to wed must not become so preoccupied with their families that they can no longer effectively serve Christ (29b). The same is true with other normal human activities—celebrations and wakes, commerce and shopping (vv. 30-31). All are legitimate endeavors, but all remain fleeting. The Christian should therefore be less involved in the affairs of this world than the non-Christians.” CRAIG L. BLOMBERG

Now, when Paul advocates for singleness *in view of the present distress* of living in a fallen world that is passing away, and the *worldly troubles* that marriage brings, he is not downgrading marriage. What Paul is stressing is that although marriage is a gift of God designed for our good and His glory, in a fallen world marriage between two imperfect people will add more **distractions** to our lives that will make devotion to God much more challenging.

Paul’s caution about marriage and His exhortations to not be so preoccupied with marriage that we lose our urgency for the things of God are not meant to disparage marriage, but to minimize distractions. Paul is also not saying that being single doesn’t come with its own challenges or that it’s free from distractions. What Paul is advocating is that whether we are married or single we must strive to secure undivided devotion to God (v.35). We cannot allow even good things, like marriage or our vocation, to become the main thing. Devotion to God and His kingdom is the way that God supplies all that we need including the grace to be content in our singleness or marriage.

Singleness can spare us from the complexities of family life so that we might have greater flexibility in our service for God. However, not every Christian views their singleness in that way. Some time ago a single brother, who had sunk into a deep dark hole of sin, asked to meet with me. He confessed that he had drifted so far away from God that he had become enslaved to sexual sins and had no peace. How he

got there is sadly all too common. He got so consumed in his career and working long hours that he wasn't making time for God. He was making good money, but he lost what money can't buy, *righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit* that comes from prioritizing our relationship with God.

Conversely, another brother in this church, who was recently between jobs, was offered a high paying job that required working long hours and working on Sundays. He turned it down. He turned it down because he resolved long ago that his singleness was for God and he was going to leverage it to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. He doesn't have a lot of earthy prosperity, but he has something far better, namely the joy and peace of fellowship with God. To stay faithful to God and fulfill His purpose for us we need to **simplify** our lives. We must strive like a good soldier of Jesus Christ, not to get entangled in the affairs of this life (2 Timothy 2:4).

This brings us to a second strategy for keeping our hearts from becoming divided in our walk with God.

2. Maximize Devotion

We must not only **minimize distractions**, but we must **maximize devotion** to God and his kingdom. Remember, after commending singleness, but then clarifying that it's not a sin to get married, Paul again cautions those who decide to get married that they will have *worldly troubles* (v.28). And beginning in verse 32 Paul elaborates on why he commends singleness and cautions those who are contemplating marriage. He explains:

"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" (1 Corinthians 7:32-34).

Notice the explanation Paul gives to the Corinthian Christians for commending singleness over marriage: “*I want you to be free from anxieties*” (v.32). What are the anxieties that Paul is referring to? What he is referring to is the concerns and responsibilities of a married person verses those of an unmarried person.

Paul is not stating that it is wrong to be concerned about fulfilling your responsibilities as a husband or a wife. In fact, the scriptures are clear that fulfilling our God given roles and responsibilities as a husband and wife demonstrates the committed love of God and serves His redemptive purposes in the world.

So, when Paul makes the comparison that *the unmarried man and woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please God, and the married man and woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please their spouse*, he is not expressing disapproval or contempt for fulfilling one’s responsibility in marriage (v.33). Paul is simply stating a general reality. And that general reality, Paul explains, is that a married person’s interests will be necessarily divided (v.34a).

Now Paul’s teaching on the benefits of singleness does not give a married couple with or without children a license to disregard the interests of God so that they might instead focus on living the American dream. However, if you are married and have children it won’t be as easy, for example, for you to just pick up and go on a short term or long-term mission assignment as it would be for a single Christian that doesn’t have the responsibility of caring for a family. This is not to say that a single person doesn’t also have worldly responsibilities, like working for a living or caring for an elderly parent. But generally speaking a single committed Christian is freer to serve not their own interest, but the interest of the kingdom.

Stephen Um put it this way, “Let’s say a friend called me with a crisis, but I’m with my wife. I can’t just say, ‘Honey, I have to go, My friend needs me.’ I can’t just get up and leave, because I have obligations to her that I have to consider. Now this doesn’t mean that when you’re married, you don’t have to love your neighbor. Too often married folks hide behind their families so they don’t have to do this. And when

you're single, it's not that you don't have any obligations, but you have one less. Your interests aren't divided, at least not here. You are uniquely free to care for others outside of your family, and that pleases God."

It's important to note that the explanation Paul gives for commending singleness, namely to be spared from worldly trouble, was not meant to make a person who desires marriage feel guilty or a person who is married to regret being married. To make this clear, Paul continues:

"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" (1 Corinthians 7:35).

Paul commends singleness not to make life more difficult, but for the benefit of the unmarried. And he's not saying that it will be easy to be single any more than it's easy to be married. But that if we leverage our singleness for God and His kingdom, which singleness more freely affords, we can live a happy and fulfilling life to the glory of God. And the same is true of marriage.

Let me reiterate, although singleness can promote good order, "the advantage of a more orderly, less complex way of living" (Sam Allberry) and although singleness affords greater freedom to seek the Lord, being married doesn't give us an excuse not to seek first the kingdom of God. Yes, generally speaking being married comes with greater responsibilities, but that is all the more reason why we need to minimize distractions so that we might maximize devotion to God.

We must simplify our lives as best as we can and doing so will often come with certain sacrifices. We may need to give up some worldly things, like material possessions or work less hours. Don't believe the lie that deciding to simplify your life would be too costly. It's too costly not to.

This brings us to the third and final strategy for maintaining our devotion to God in a world full of distractions.

3. Missionize Decisions

In addition to minimizing distraction and maximizing devotion, in order to keep our hearts from becoming divided, we must **missionize decisions**. How many of you know, not everyone decides to remain single or get married for the right reasons? It may also be possible that, although you may have a strong desire to be married, the opportunity to be married to a suitable mate has not presented itself. But whether you have the opportunity to decide to marry or not, desire alone should not be the determining factor.

Regarding someone that has the opportunity to be married, Paul writes: *“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”* (1 Corinthians 7:36). It’s important to note here that Paul is not saying that sexual desire should be the sole determining factor for deciding to get married. In verse 39 Paul clarifies that a person is free to marry only in the Lord. Paul is also not implying that the gift of singleness is free from the tension of any sexual desires. As Sam Alberry explained, “Paul’s point is that those who can marry appropriately are free to and, if their sexual desires risk **distracting** them from a wholehearted focus on the lord, are encouraged to.”

Let me add, if the opportunity to marry is not available there’s grace available from God to control sexual desires and be content in the Lord (Galatians 5:16). God’s grace is enough in every season of our lives (2 Corinthians 12:9). In fact, knowing the sufficiency of God’s grace in relationship with Christ is a prerequisite for marriage. In other words, you don’t get married because Christ is not enough, or is incapable of giving you contentment in singleness. You get married because God provides the opportunity and the gift to be married to a biblically suitable mate. Apart from God satisfying the deepest needs of our hearts through relationship with him, we will be hard pressed to find true and lasting contentment in singleness or marriage.

God did not design the covenant of marriage to bring ultimate fulfillment. The mission of marriage is to display the sacrificial and sanctify-

ing love of God to the glory of Christ until death do us part. If you get married because you're looking to a person to give you ultimate self-fulfillment you are getting married for the wrong reason. Strong passion (not out of control desires) and the right marriage partner are factors for getting married, but not the ultimate factor. The ultimate factor is that together with your spouse you are committed to fulfilling God's mission for marriage.

God's mission not self-interest is the ultimate factor in deciding to be married and also in deciding to remain single. Concerning remaining single, Paul continues: "*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*" (1 Corinthians 7:37-38).

Notice that Paul explains that the reason to remain single is not out of **necessity**. In other words, you're not deciding to be single because you feel obligated or because of cultural pressures or selfish desires. Rather the decision to remain single is rooted in being firmly established and determined in your heart to, not secure self-interest, but to secure undivided devotion to Christ and His cause.

Remember it's our devotion to God that enables us to be content whether we are single or married. Its also the main reason why we are free to marry in the Lord (v.39) and why Paul concludes, "*Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God*" (1 Corinthians 7:40).

Paul's judgement on singleness being a better option for some was not hypothetical. He gave it in the Spirit of God, the same Spirit by which He was enabled as a single man to find ultimate fulfillment through His devotion to God and in the service of His kingdom.

Conclusion

It's been said, decisions determine destiny. To make decisions that will lead to the fulfillment of God's best for our lives we must seek to **missionize decisions**, especially in regards to singleness and marriage. In other words, when making decisions we first ask, will this decision help me to advance God's purpose for my life, namely to know Him and make Him known.

Remember, the enemy doesn't have to destroy us, but to simply distract us. Therefore if we are going to stay devoted to God's good purpose for our lives we must **minimize distractions** by simplifying our lives so that we might **maximize devotion** to Christ and His cause. Devotion to Christ, who gave His all for us, is where we will find are all to the glory of His name.