

Text: 1 Corinthians 7:25-40

Title: SLIDE 1 Singleness Is Biblical, Too

Introduction

Good morning, church! My name is Jen Ashby, and it is good to be with you. I feel at home here in the Midwest, having grown up in Kansas through the age of 23, before I moved to other states. And now I make my home in New Jersey, where I serve the Metro District of the Christian & Missionary Alliance as the Director of Church Health. Since it's relevant to our topic today, I will also let you know that I am 50 years old, single, never married, and do not have children. My parents are with the Lord, and for the most part, I have not lived near my family for quite a while.

Years ago, when I was working in healthcare as well as in ministry, a coworker from my healthcare job asked me to sing at her wedding. The day of the wedding came, and it was a picture perfect day in a beautiful little white church with a steeple and stained glass windows. The couple looked amazing. They had given me a song to sing that I didn't know, and at one point the lyrics of the song went, *"When I met you, all my hopes and all my dreams were suddenly fulfilled..."* I was pretty nervous, and when the moment came, what I actually sang was, *"When I met you, all my hopes and all my fears..."* I heard the words come out of my mouth, and everything went into slow motion as I tried to think how I could end that phrase to make it work for the occasion. But once you put together "hopes and fears" there is no way to make that work at a wedding, so I just sang it out, *"When I met you, all my hopes and all my fears were suddenly fulfilled."* The couple, of course were totally into each other and didn't even notice. I got a couple of these looks from people attending the wedding. And, of course, everything was on video to be saved for posterity.

Now the messed up lyric is funny: all my hopes and all my fears. But let's be honest, the original lyric is also a little funny, too: when I met you, all my hopes and all my dreams were suddenly fulfilled? It's a little funny because even in the best, healthiest, most Godly marriages, life is not unicorns and rainbows *all* the time. But in our society, we idolize romantic love. In society, sometimes that looks like chasing careless romantic and sexual relationships. But sometimes in the Church, we also idolize romantic love. I'm not talking about this church,

specifically, I'm talking about the Church in general. In the Church, this idolization can look like the sentiment that married life is the *only* Biblical way to live, or the *most* Biblical way to live. But if we look honestly at our passage for today, and honestly at the New Testament as a whole, here is what we will find:

- Christian marriage is a good gift from God, and people who are married are instructed to steward that gift well.
- AND Christian singleness is a good gift from God, and people who are single are instructed to steward that gift well.

In other words, "Singleness Is Biblical, Too." When I say "Christian marriage" and "Christian singleness," I'm talking about lives that honor God in a number of ways, including living according to Biblical sexual ethics, which you have already talked about in this series on 1 Corinthians. Biblical sexual ethics means that sex is between spouses who are married to each other, and it means that single adults are celibate, not having sex.

Let's go to the text. As you've discussed, this is a letter from the Apostle Paul in Ephesus to a messy church in Corinth. We are starting in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, verse 25:

Remember goodness in singleness (v 25-28)

SLIDE 2 "Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. Because of the present crisis, I think that it is **good** for a man to remain as he is. Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. But if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this."

SLIDE 3 I'm naming this section "Remember goodness in singleness." In most Bible translations, you will not see the word "singles" or "single adults." You will see words like virgin (V 25), or widow, or eunuch. There is much debate around what Paul meant in V 26 about "the present crisis." Some say he was referring to an economic or environmental crisis at the time, like a food shortage – not a good idea to get married and have children that you cannot feed. Others say this is more about the value that Jesus has ascended to Heaven and said He is coming

back soon, so we really need to be preparing ourselves and others for the next life, not continued biological generations here on earth.

What I really want you to see in V 26 is Paul's phrase (Paul was single, by the way), "I think that it is **good** for a man to remain as he is." It echoes what Jesus said in **Matthew 19:12**. Jesus (who was single, by the way) had just affirmed marriage in the verses preceding this, and then He said in **SLIDE 4 Matthew 19:12**, "For there are eunuchs who were born that way and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others – and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."

SLIDE 5 Often in the conversation about marriage, I have heard Christians quote **Genesis 2:18**, "The LORD God said, 'It is **not good** for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'" And then by some, the only interpretation and application for the verse is marriage. Now did God say these words? Yes. Are we made for relationship with God and others? Yes. Is marriage a unique and sacred expression of this? Yes. Is marriage the only way to live in relationship, or the only way to move from "not good" to "good"? Apparently not, because Paul says of the virgin, "I think it is good for a man to remain as he is" and Jesus says of the eunuch "the one who can accept this should accept it."

Earlier in the chapter, Paul has said if you are already married, don't seek to be unmarried. In V 23 he says, "are you pledged to a woman?" in other words, are you engaged, betrothed? Do not break it off. But if you are free from commitment, don't look for a wife. What Paul is saying here, and also what Jesus was saying in Matthew 19 about actually *choosing* to be single and not marry was a very, very countercultural idea at the time. (We know that not everyone who is single today has chosen it, per se, it is often more layered than that, but think about this with me.)

From Old Testament times, to New Testament times, and for many centuries after that, and for some places in the world even today: most people could not survive without being part of a household. The household was bigger than the nuclear family of dad/ mom/ kids, but still, most people could not survive without the provision and protection of the household. It wasn't just impractical; it was virtually impossible for most people to choose to be single. Additionally, way back

in Genesis with Abraham, a covenant relationship with God included biological children, and physical land. To have a spouse and children was a mark of God's blessing, and to be without a spouse and children was a mark of God's curse. So virtually no one chose singleness on purpose.

There is a significant shift in emphasis from God's command in Genesis to "be multiply, be fruitful, and fill the earth" (physical descendants)... to Jesus' command in Matthew to "go and make disciples of all the nations" (spiritual descendants). This is one of the shifts in emphasis between the old covenant and the new covenant.

And so yes, both Jesus and Paul affirm marriage and family in the New Testament, but they both also put a lot of emphasis on spiritual heirs, the family of God, the household of God, the Church. Think about passages like **Matthew 12:47-50**, when someone tells Jesus that his mother and brothers are outside asking for him, and he points to his disciples and says, 'these are my mother and my brothers.' This whole letter that you are studying, 1 Corinthians, is Paul's instructions to the church, the family of God, the household of God. No longer is marriage and childbearing the only mark or the primary mark of having the blessing of God. (And even in the Old Testament, there were exceptions to this.)

If you are single, remember goodness in your own singleness. If you are married with friends or children or relatives who are single, remember goodness in their singleness. Not everything is or should be moving toward marriage or remarriage for those who are divorced or widowed. Singleness isn't necessarily a "stage" or a "season" that we pass through to get to the "real deal" of marriage. Singleness isn't second best, or second class, or less than. I hope you hear my heart: My desire is not to devalue marriage, but rather to raise the value of Christian singleness so that we have a more Biblical theology about both of these gifts. My desire is not to devalue biological families, but rather to raise the value of the family of God, the household of God so that we have a more Biblical theology about both of these. Let's keep going in the passage.

Develop an eternal perspective (v 29-31)

SLIDE 6 "What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that **the time is short**. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if

it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if **not engrossed** in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.”

SLIDE 7 I’m naming this section “Develop an eternal perspective.” Our time on this earth is short. Our time in the next life is long. And whether we live in Christian marriage or Christian singleness, our lives here are meant to be foreshadowing of what is to come. I remember as a young adult, when my desire to be married felt pressing, and when numerous of my friends were getting married, I frequently heard that people who are married are special because their lives are a picture of the Jesus and the church. That comes from Paul’s words in **Ephesians 5:25-33**, and it’s true. Christian marriage is meant to be a sign pointing us to the future wedding of Jesus and the church in **Revelation 19:7**. But thing is that I was in a context that had this robust theology of marriage, and a theology of singleness that could basically be summed up as “just get married.” I wanted to get married, but it wasn’t working out. And when you hear a lot of positive things about marriage, and you hear silence about singleness, you get the message: Married lives are special because they mirror something special. Single lives are not special.

It was much, much later before I learned what Danielle Treweek has articulated so well in her book, *The Meaning of Singleness*. Christian marriage is a sign of the coming wedding of Jesus and the church, and Christian singleness is a sign of the coming age when we will all be married only to Jesus. In **Matthew 22:30**, some Pharisees have asked Jesus about a woman who has been married, widowed, and remarried several times – to whom will she be married in the next life? And Jesus answers, **SLIDE 8 “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage…”** Marriage, children, the nuclear family is good, but this is not the unit that’s going to last into eternity. The unit that’s going to last into eternity is the family of God, the Church. At the resurrection, people will not marry or be given in marriage. The only marriage will be that of Jesus and the Church. And if that bums us out... then we are missing how amazing that is going to be. I don’t know exactly how it’s going to work with our human relationships, but I know life with Jesus is going to be awesome for all of us.

Until then, Christian marriage and Christian singleness are both signs that the Church needs to help us with our eternal perspective so that we don’t get too

engrossed in our lives on earth. (“Engrossed” comes from **1 Corinthians 7:31**.) Christian marriage is showing us the future wedding of Jesus and the church. And Christian singles are a picture of the resurrection where there will be no human to human marriage. Treweek says single adults are “threshold people” who are in the process of transitioning from this world to the next and whose lives are already starting to exemplify this truth.

Let’s continue in this text.

Use freedom for devotion to the Lord (v 32-35)

SLIDE 9 “I would like you to be **free** from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs – how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world – how he can please his wife – and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord’s affairs: Her aim is to be **devoted to the Lord** in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world – how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in **undivided devotion to the Lord.**”

SLIDE 10 I’m naming this section, “Use freedom for devotion to the Lord.” It should go without saying that singles are not a monolithic group, just like married people are not a monolithic group. For example, if you are a single parent, especially if you are also working outside the home to support your family... you probably do not feel like you have a lot of freedom, or discretionary time, energy, resources. If you are a single who is caring for your aging parents or relatives, and you may be working outside the home as well, you also probably do not feel like you have a lot of free resources. If you are single and not caregiving, and perhaps only working one job, or no job... your available resources are different.

The point is that whatever uncommitted resources you have, and if you are single you may have more uncommitted resources, use those in devotion to Christ. I don’t always get this right, but let me give you a couple of examples. As a big example: when I was in my early 30s, I sensed the Lord call me to quit my job, move to Nyack, New York to complete my seminary degree, which meant moving into a dorm and working as an occupational therapist at the same time, spending down my savings and taking a risk that I wouldn’t be able to find another job in ministry when the degree was done. In some ways, that was easier to do because

that plan only had to work for me, I didn't have to think about how that would affect my spouse, my children, etc. Here's a small example: when COVID and the shutdown unfolded, I was troubled by the inequity for kids who did not have support at home for virtual learning. Through a local agency, I was able to do online tutoring twice a week for a girl in our community in just that situation. That was easier for me to do because I wasn't helping my own kids through virtual learning.

Even apart from using the freedom of singleness to serve others, to simply live a single, celibate life that includes peace and satisfaction in Christ, purpose and joy in Him, community and connection with others... this is a powerful testimony that both the Church and the world needs to see. My life is not all unicorns and rainbows, not all my desires are met, but it's a good life. I am blessed.

As we read the last verses in this passage, we hear that first point again – listen for it. Listen for the goodness of singleness:

SLIDE 11 Verse 36, “If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin – this man also does the right thing. **So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better.** A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. In my judgment, **she is happier if she stays as she is** – and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.”

So, the one who marries does the right thing, and the one who does not marry also does the right thing. Paul actually takes it farther and says that to not marry is “better” and the one who remains single is “happier.” I'm not sure I would push it quite that far, but we can say at a minimum that singleness is Biblical, too, that marriage and singleness are both good. They are equally good gifts. We may personally want one more than the other, but in the Kingdom economy, they are equally good. And both marriage and singleness are meant to help us have an eternal perspective, looking forward to the time when our marriage will be to

Christ alone. And whatever freedoms and resources we have in the meantime, we are to use those in devotion to the Lord.

Conclusion

SLIDE 12 I have not always had a good relationship with 1 Corinthians 7. In my 20s and 30s I was really wrestling with singleness. Some of that was my own, personal unmet desire, some of it was being in contexts that blatantly valued marriage over singleness, and then those things combined in a perfect storm to raise questions in my mind about what my singleness said about God's heart toward me, and what my singleness said about my adequacy as a woman. And whenever someone would bring up 1 Corinthians 7, and it was usually a married person who quoted it to me, it felt like they were using it to say that I should see something as good that didn't feel good. And it felt like they were saying that God was giving me a gift that I didn't want, while at the same time He was giving other people around me the really good gift that I wanted. I didn't really know how to process that.

I say this to acknowledge that while we have covered the basics of this text this morning, we have not begun to cover what it means to walk with Jesus through the emotional, social, physical, and logistical realities of singleness. AND no two experiences of singleness are exactly like.

But please hear me in this: for those of us who have said "yes" to Jesus, put our faith in Him, we are now "in Him" and that is our primary identity. Our primary identity does not come from our situation of married or single or single again or as a parent, etc. Those situations are secondary. Now, Jesus cares about our secondary, and He meets us in the secondary. But the primary, most important thing about us is that we are in Him, whole, complete, full members of His family, loved, accepted, wanted, and commissioned make spiritual heirs, disciples of Jesus.

Prayer