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Teaching: Carlon Tschetter
Series: Marriage God's Way
Message: Single On (With) Purpose

Transcribed Message
August 7, 2022
1 Corinthians 7

Early in the 18th century and into the 19th century, about 5% of the US population. Into the 20th century by 1970 that number had increased to 28%. 18 and older 28% by 1970. In 2021, that number had increased to 48%. I think I saw something this week that said in 2022 it is at about 48.5% of people who are single as compared to the beginning of the century when it was 5%. There are a number of reasons for that. People get married later. That age is increasing. People live together without being married, so technically they're still considered to be single. Divorce is more common. There are a number of different factors as to why that percentage has increased. Here at Covenant Community Church, we have 442 people who fall into the category of single. Of those, about 30% are 18 years of age and older. We're going to follow the pattern of the apostle Paul this morning. The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 in this passage that we've already read but in this overall 7th chapter he is stepping into this matter of marriage. He is talking about divorce but is also talking about what it means to be single. We're going to follow his pattern.

We've been for these summer Sundays we've been looking at the series on marriage. Within this series on marriage, we're going to do what Paul does and we're going to step into this matter of the single life. I think the reason Paul no doubt does this, and it's the same reason that we want to do it, is the realization that a single person can't live life the way God intends for them to live it unless they have a biblical balanced view and understanding of marriage. They're either going to over appreciate it and almost turn it into an idol, or they're going to underappreciate it and not realize the blessing that God has given to us within marriage. We don't want either of those. We want to have a biblical balanced view of marriage. So we're going to step in this morning to this series on marriage. We're going to talk primarily about this matter of being single. And just like for all of these weeks people who are single sat and listened

hopefully to the teaching of God's word about what it meant to be married, now all of those of you who are married get to sit and listen this morning about what it means and what it looks like to be single. I think there is help and instruction for all of us in this. So this morning 1 Corinthians 7 here's what we want to see. Remaining single is desirable. One could even say as Paul does it's beneficial but it's not demanded and it's not commanded.

Let's set the context a little bit for what we're going to look at this morning. In the church at large and also here at Covenant Community Church, there needs to be an appropriate focus on marriage within the life of the church and the whole matter of what it looks like to be a family. The first book of the Bible in the 2nd chapter Genesis 2:18. It's not good for a man to be alone. I'll make him a helpmeet. I'll make someone who will complete him. And that was God's commentary. At the end of that same chapter: "for this cause for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother." A man shall leave singleness. A woman shall leave singleness and they will get together and be married. Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. There is an appropriate emphasis in Scripture on this matter of marriage and on the family. It needs to be a part of the regular instruction in the life of the church since that is what God has designed for most within the human family.

But secondly, there also needs to be an appreciation of those who are single. There needs to be appreciation of those who are single. I see that in a number of ways. One, we don't want anyone to feel neglected. within the Covenant family. We don't want anyone to feel neglected. We don't want anyone to feel overlooked. We don't want anyone to feel like they're taken for granted. As I just said, in a typical church the focus is rightly going to be more frequently on marriage, on family, on parenting, and all that that looks like. But we don't want that message to be presented in such a way that those people who are single in some way feel as if they're undervalued. Seven weeks ago when we started this series, I think it was after the first lesson that we had I received an email, and the email said something like this: "Great! Another marriage series. Another reminder of what I'll never have." I don't have any idea if that was a guest. I don't have any idea if that was a regular attendee. I don't have any idea if that was someone just trolling me online. It kind of hurt a little bit to think that someone would believe that this

is something that they could never realize or never have, or that the church in some way would not be appreciative of where they were in life.

I think along with that we need to recognize the differences that exist among single people. Singles aren't all the same. It is very different to be single and be 20 than to be single and be 40. It is very different to be single because of divorce or to be single because you're a widow or widower. In whatever situation a single person finds himself, we want to bring value to them. We want to recognize and appreciate where they are in life. We want to appreciate their situation. We want to encourage, empathize, have them understand that we greatly value them as well.

Then I think thirdly, we want to see singleness as something that is positive. Listen to what Sam Alberry says. He said, "If marriage shows us the shape of the gospel (this picture of Christ and the church), singleness shows us its sufficiency." I just think that's excellent. Marriage shows us the shape of the gospel. Singleness shows us the sufficiency of that gospel. The Bible after all is filled with stories and accounts of single people. Jesus falls into that category. Jesus was single his entire life. Jesus never stepped into and enjoyed the different things that we think are a part of marriage that a single person might feel like they're missing out on if they don't ever realize. Jesus lived that life. He lived it perfectly. He lived it beautifully. He lived it as an example for every one of us. The apostle Paul would be in that same category. We have all of the stories. Mary and Martha and Lazarus and Anna and Simeon and the list goes on and on. We're never told anything about Nehemiah's family. We don't know anything about Daniel's family. We don't know anything about John Mark's family. Were they married? The Holy Spirit never thought we needed to know that. Maybe they were single. We don't know. But the point is this.

Singleness is never treated as something strange or different in the Bible then it would be to be married. It's never put in some kind of a category where we would see it in a different light. In fact, as we see in this 1 Corinthians 7 passage, Paul actually prized being single. There were people, it is totally conjecture, that think at some point Paul was married and maybe he was, but that's just what it is. It's conjecture. We don't know. At this point in his life, 1 Corinthians 7, he is single. So let's turn to 1 Corinthians

7again, and as we do that, I want to set the context of this entire book of 1Corinthians to give us a little bit of an understanding of what's happening here.

You remember that in the first half of the book Paul is dealing with the church in disarray. For the opening six chapters, he's dealing with problems in the church at Corinth. Problems like division. People following after other people rather than following after Christ. He is dealing with issues like members of the church suing each other, taking each other to court, lawsuits against each other. There's immorality that he discusses in the 5th and the 6th chapters. A church that had some significant things that were going on. And then you remember in the second half of the book starting at about chapter 7 where we are, he starts answering questions that they had evidently said to him so that in chapter 8 he is talking about Christian liberty. In Chapter 11 he is talking about the role of women. He's going to talk in chapter 15 about the resurrection. In chapter 16 about money and giving. He's answering questions that they had sent to him and one of those questions is this matter of marriage, divorce, and singleness. In the 7th chapter, that's what we encounter.

Let's look at what does God say to singles. I want to say this on the front end of this morning and next Sunday. We're not doing KidsBreak so you didn't see all of the kids run out this morning. I guess in some sense I want to put parents a little bit at ease that we're dealing with subject matter this morning that in some respects could be a little bit difficult. Next Sunday, it'll be a little bit like that again. I'm going to be speaking a little more euphemistically. I will try to be a little less frank than I would normally like to be because my philosophy is it's in the Bible and we need to say it. We need to speak it. But I will be a little bit more careful about that under these circumstances.

But all that to say this. You open up 1 Corinthians chapter 7 the first 6 verses Paul is talking about intimacy in marriage. Evidently in Corinth, there was a group of people who were saying that the way to a greater holiness is to simply abstain from any kind of intimacy in marriage. You are more of a more holy person if you don't engage in intimacy. Paul is going to take that on in those first 6 verses and then he's going to step in at about verse 7 and following and say listen, you need to realize though that marriage is a wonderful thing. Marriage is a gift that God has given, but also you need to realize that there is great joy and purpose in being single.

There are four things that I want to draw out of this passage about what God says about being single. The first one is this. Singleness is a gift. Verses 7 and 8 "I wish that all were as I myself am." What was Paul? He was single. "I wish that all were as I myself am, but each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows, I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am." That word good is the Greek word *kalos* which is the idea of beautiful. A beautiful thing, Paul says. So here's the question that is often asked after reading those two verses. Is singleness a spiritual gift? Is singleness a spiritual gift?

I can hear the single people think if it is I don't want it. I want to take that single gift test again and I'm going to make sure that I don't score to where I have singleness as a gift. Now there is a little bit of a debate here. If you believe that singleness is a spiritual gift, you probably do it on the basis of the fact that this is the same word, this idea that Paul expresses here at 7 and 8, that it is a gift. It's the word *charisma*. It's the same word that he uses in 1 Corinthians 12 to talk about spiritual gifts. But I don't believe that singleness is a spiritual gift and here's why. I don't think it's a spiritual gift like teaching or serving or helps or giving or other things that we commonly think of as a spiritual gift. I don't believe it's a spiritual gift for at least three reasons.

One, the Bible nowhere says that it's a spiritual gift. Now you say, wait a minute. you just said that it's the word *charisma* which is the same word is used for spiritual gift. Yes, I did say that. They are the same words but in every list that we have in the New Testament – in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, 1 Peter 3 – where we have the list actually of spiritual gifts listed. Marriage is never listed as a spiritual gift. Singleness is never listed as a spiritual gift. I would think if it was a spiritual gift that it would be in one of those lists but it's never listed in that way.

Secondly, Paul clearly states that you can choose whichever one of these that you desire. You can choose marriage or you can choose to be single. That would be very different than any other spiritual gift. How are spiritual gifts given? They are given sovereignly by the Holy Spirit according to 1 Corinthians 12. The Holy Spirit sovereignly gives to each person according to as He wills. And so if we choose this gift, it would be very different than any other spiritual gift. You don't just choose the spiritual gift that you

want. It is sovereignly given by the Spirit. I don't believe that it is a spiritual gift in that same sense.

Thirdly, spiritual gifts are given to be used. They're given to be used. How would you use the gift of marriage if you are single? How would you use the gift of singleness if you were married? Did the Holy Spirit give you that gift then He took it away from you after you got married? I think it's better to see the gift of marriage and the gift of singleness not as a spiritual gift but as a blessing of God on that season of your life. It's a gift in that sense. God has given you a gift of singleness for that particular time in your life. God has given the gift of marriage for that season of your life. I think what Von Robert says about this is right on. "As long as you have it, it's a gift from God. Just as marriage will be God's gift if you ever receive it, you should receive your situation in life whether it's single or married as a gift of God's grace to us."

You might've heard the name John Stott. John Stott was a great churchman and pastor. He was a writer of many different volumes and commentaries on Scripture. and he was a single man all of his life. He says this: "I have myself found help in 1 Corinthians 7:7 for here the apostle writes each man or woman has his or her own gift from God. One has this gift and one has another. The gift translates *charisma* which is a gift of God's grace, so whether we are single or married we need to receive our situation from God as His own special grace gift to us. Marriage is a gift from a wise kind father." Christopher Ashe says this: "I know which gift I have by a simple test. If I'm married I have the gift of marriage. If I'm not married I have the gift of being unmarried. My circumstances are God's gracious gift to me and I am to learn to accept them from His hand as such." First, Paul says singleness is to be understood as being a gift.

Secondly, singleness, he says, has its advantages. Singleness has its advantages. Look at verse 26 and 27. "I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is in whatever state he is." That is married or single. "are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife." So the first thing Paul says in those verses is there's more freedom. There is more freedom in difficult times for someone who is single as opposed to somebody who's married. It's uncertain what he means when he says in verse 26 – I think that in view of this present distress. Some people think that was the persecution that was

about to break upon them. Or others suggested it was the famine that was having severe effects. We don't know exactly what that was. Jesus had already said in John 14 in this world you're going to have trouble. In this world you're going to have distress. In this world you're going to have difficulties. A single person simply has greater flexibility. They have greater flexibility in the light of some of the challenges that come our way. They can do things on a shorter notice. They can do things without consulting with anybody else. They can make a decision without having that decision have ramifications on other people immediately in their life and their circle. If their job situation changes they don't have to worry about their kids in school, or to worry about their wife if she has a job or their husband if he has a job. There is just the flexibility. Paul is saying one of the advantages of being single is you have a greater flexibility. You can respond quicker and more easily without as many challenges as someone who might be married. Marriage simply increases one's responsibility.

Secondly, a single person has more flexibility to do gospel ministry. It is not just a flexibility in general, but now he says there's a freedom and flexibility with regard to the ministry. Look at verse 32: "I want you to be free from anxiety. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife 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." So again a single person is simply able to devote themselves more fully to God's work. There are going to be just built-in limitations that come with marriage. In marriage our primary responsibility obviously is in our relationship to the Lord, but in response to things that we can say yes to, we have to always be mindful, even in terms of ministry, of the impact it will have on our marriage, on our family. And so that freedom and flexibility to step in and do ministry has to be gauged by our responsibility to our wife and husband and family.

When he talks about their concern about worldly things in verse 33. But the married man is anxious about worldly things. That's not sinful things. It's worldly in the sense of temporal. It's worldly in the sense of things that are of this world. Our human responsibilities that we have day-to-day. Those who are single potentially have more

time to give to the Lord's work. They don't have to worry so much about being home at a certain time because of their family or marriage responsibilities. They can maybe go places that somebody with a family might not consider going to out of safety and concern. There are just some of those freedoms and the flexibility that Paul is talking about. Paul is saying to singles take advantage of the gift of singleness in service to the gospel, in service to the church.

I would just say this. Here at Covenant we have a whole bunch of single people who are doing ministry every week in the life of our church. I know we could not do ministry the way we do it without the single people who are doing what they're doing. They are a significant part of the life, of our church, serving in all kinds of ways and helping in all kinds of areas of ministry. I looked just at our list of missionaries, some 30+ missionaries. A fifth of all of our missionaries are single. They're serving sometimes in places and having flexibility and freedom that somebody that is married and has a family might not be able to do in the same way. We are greatly blessed here at Covenant by the fact that we have singles who are in fact doing the very thing that Paul said. They have a greater flexibility for gospel ministry.

Then notice the third thing about this matter of their ability to serve in verse 5. They have more freedom to devote themselves fully to God. "I say this for your benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord." We're all responsible for the stewardship of our time. Every one of us. It doesn't matter if you're married or single. You're to steward your time. There isn't anybody married or single that gains any great eternal value by binge watching some Netflix show. If you're single, if you're married, there isn't any eternal value in that. But here Paul says there is something uniquely available to a single person in terms of giving their full devotion to the Lord. They can run full speed ahead into their relationship with Christ, giving themselves with a greater freedom and flexibility to service in the church, and within the community, and to the greater church, to the gospel. Giving of themselves in ways to the word and to just their own personal growth that might not be available in the same way to a married person.

We see that in a little picture even though they were probably both single. Mary and Martha. Mary ministering to Jesus. Martha being divided. Now they were probably

both single but one of them gives us very clearly a picture of what it looks like to step into full devotion to Christ and be there to learn from him. So there is then this idea that singleness is a gift that God gives. He gives advantages and opportunities that being married and having a family doesn't offer us in the same way.

Now notice, certainly singleness can be hard but it should not be viewed as a trial to be endured. That goes back to that earlier point that I made about we want to see singleness as being something that is positive. I think there is something for both those who are married and those who are single at this point. I want to speak first of all to those who are married. I guess my admonition to those of us who are married would be simply this. Single people are not our project to get married. Some of you married people believe that you have the spiritual gift of matchmaking. You think as you look at a single person I've got somebody in mind for you. I'm not saying that that's always bad. I'm just saying sometimes that needs to be dialed back a little bit. Sometimes we just need to be a lot more considerate about what that single person might be feeling about that in our desires for them. I know that we need as well to be a little bit more mindful of what we say to single people.

I read a great blog this week by a single lady and she was talking about this very thing. She was talking about things that married people generally say to her as a single woman and she was just giving some advice back to us about things that we say to them that we are obviously good intentions with no ill will at all, but maybe we need to be a little bit more mindful about what we say. For instance, she says I often hear a married person say to me: I'm praying that God will provide somebody for you. Well, if she has shared that that is a prayer request that they want you to pray about, that makes perfect sense. But this lady came back with a great answer I thought and said, maybe you should be praying that I become the person God wants me to be rather than focusing on somebody that might be out there. She also mentioned the fact that sometimes people say something like I cannot believe that somebody hasn't come along and snatched you up. She's like well okay, that's nice too, but she said then that gets me thinking. Yeah, why hasn't anybody come along and snatched me up? Is there something wrong with me? I think those kinds of things just being considerate and mindful of what that might look like and how that person might hear what we're saying. If

we believe what Paul is saying about the single life – that it is a gift, that there are advantages, and in seasons of life there are things that they're able to do that the rest of us can't. Let's be mindful of how we see that.

Then I guess as a single person you can ask the question why am I single? Or you could ask the question God, why am I single? What do you have for me in this season? What does it look like right now in your plan and your desire for me as I am single? What do you want me to be doing in this specific season of my life? That I think is what Paul is arguing for here in 1 Corinthians 7. How can I best serve my Lord in this season and this time? Here's the point. It's clear from Paul's teaching under the direction of the Holy Spirit that he did not in any way see singleness as some hindrance to joy. It's not some hindrance to God for fully using that person at that season in their life. He didn't think of singleness as being the winter of their experience and they're just waiting, longing for spring to come. He didn't look at it that way at all. He saw it very much as we have said as a positive thing. Someone said: "Far too many singles fear that they're missing out on God's plan or God's best for their lives if they aren't married. Many singles feel as if their lives are a holding pattern like an airplane that is supposed to be landing at its destination but has been told simply to circle the airport." Paul pushes back against that mindset. He sees it as something that is a gift, something that in fact is advantageous, something to be accepted.

Then the last thing. Singleness is not permanent. Singleness is not permanent. Many single people will marry. Many single people will remain single. But no Christian single is single forever just as no Christian married person is married forever. In Revelation 7:17, John reminds us that earthly marriages are a reflection of something far better to come. Listen to what he says. "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." Which is to say to us that human relationships are important, but none are more important than our eternal relationship with Jesus Christ. Listen to how John Piper put it: "God promises you blessings in the age to come that are better than the blessings of marriage and children. Marriage is temporary but what it stands for lasts forever. Marriage is a temporary institution that finally gives way to the relationship to which it was pointing all along – to Christ and the church – at which point marriage fades away.

It becomes unnecessary. The way you no longer need a picture of someone when you finally see them face to face.” So whether you're single or whether you're married, neither of those states in that sense earthly wise is permanent and forever.

What do we take away? Again, I say to all of us whether we're married or single, the deepest needs of our life, the deepest needs of our soul are not to be satisfied in marriage. That's to over desire something. That's to require of marriage something that God never intended for it to realize and to accomplish. They're found in Jesus Christ and in his unconditional love for us. If you're single this morning, my final word of encouragement is be the person that God has called you to be. Don't be so concerned with finding the right person. Be far more concerned, far more interested in being the right person that God has called you to be. Pursue God. Be involved. Serve others. Realize the gift that God has given and the advantages that come with it. The joy that God intends for you to step into. Just as we said earlier on in that Sam Alberry quote, let us who are married, let the shape of our marriages be a picture of the gospel, how we relate to each other as Christ and the church, caring for, nurturing, loving, submitting – all of those things that are the shape of the gospel in our married experience. Then you as a single person let the sufficiency of the gospel be on display in your life, that you fully do realize that the deepest needs of your soul can't possibly be met by another person but they have to be met by God alone and by Christ alone. He alone is sufficient to do that. In either of those, in all of our lives, what is it that ultimately we're saying is simply that we all want to put the gospel on display.

The gospel reminds all of us of our great need. Our great need of forgiveness. Our great need to have our relationship with God restored in such a way that only he can do it. You can work between now and eternity and you will never earn the gift of eternal life. It can't be earned. It is given as a grace gift and that's what God wants for all of us to be absolutely certain of this morning. We understand that the sin that has separated us from God has been taken care of, the penalty has been paid through what Jesus did for each one of us on the cross. That's the gift that we want all of you to receive.

Let's pray together. Father God, we're thanking you again for this season in the life of our church as we look at this gift that you've given to us of marriage or of

singleness. Father, I pray that the beauty and the shape of the gospel will be seen in all of our marriages. I pray, Father, that the sufficiency of the gospel will be seen and realized in the lives of all those who are single. Most of all, Father, our heart is that each person here this morning is absolutely confident if they were to die today that they know for sure that they would go to heaven. Not because of what they're doing or what they've done, but because of what has been done for us by Jesus on the cross. If we will simply believe that and trust that, you give to us the gift of eternal life. For that, Father, we are forever thankful. In Jesus name, amen.