

The Christian Family in Biblical Perspective
Seven Essentials in the Christian Family
“What About Singleness – A Christian Perspective”
1 Corinthians 7
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Last week we covered a subject on what the Bible says about divorce and remarriage. This series on Sunday night is supplemental to the series we are doing on Sunday morning titled the Seven Essentials in the Christian Family and handling some supportive subjects. I would like for you to look with me in this matter on Christian Singleness. Let's go to the Lord in prayer before we begin.

Father, thank You so much for these moments to be together and God thank You so much for the Lord Jesus, Your Son, our Savior. Thank You for Your Word that guides and directs us which is a light unto our life and a lamp unto our feet as we try to understand life and all of its chaos because of sin and bringing the order of Your Word from creation and redemption and the confidence of Your kind providence at work in our life. Help us to so order our lives and help us to be filled with ardor for Christ. May love to Christ guide us to the Truth and may the Truth give us direction as to how to love and follow our Savior with obedience. I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

We visited this text in 1 Corinthians last week where beginning in verse 10 it contains all these insights for us on divorce and remarriage but we want to come back now and look at this matter of singleness. Here is what we said about divorce and remarriage. The Bible says that God has joined a man and a woman together and only God can separate. When God separates God does not command divorce but He regulates it and He regulates it on the foundation of two things. One is on “pornia” which is sexual immorality, breaking the bound of marriage, by covenant unfaithfulness or by desertion and abandonment as was noted in the case of unbelievers leaving believers. So those have been established and placed in our confession. We understand those Biblical ground and they are there for protection. Divorce is never a solution. It is a protection and it always has consequences to it but it is a protection for victims and its actually an extension of mercy to those who have broken covenant because if in fact it had happened in the Old Testament they would have been put to death. But in this case they are not put to death but they are cared for in the sense of the person that they are victimizing is protected but they themselves still have the opportunity for repentance in terms of their life and walk with the Lord.

What about this matter of singleness? It's quite the phenomena today much more than it was in my growing up years. You never would have thought of a singles ministry in a church. You certainly would have a church that ministered to singles but there wouldn't have been a singles ministry. Today of course we have singles ministry and we talk about the issue. Even in evangelism we are aware of the vast growing number of singles that are in our communities and how do we as a church appropriately recognize the special challenges that singles face because all singles don't just fall into one category. Some are single just because they haven't found a married person yet. There are those who are called of God to be single. There are those who are providentially in this season of life who are single. There are those who are single by widowhood. There

are those who are single because of divorce whether it was sinful divorce or not a sinful divorce. There is all of this and then applying the Gospel to it of forgiveness, repentance, renewal and reconciliation and all of those challenges that are related to that. So this is something that takes quite a bit of walking through. No sermon by any means is going to answer all the questions.

So I just want to lay down 5 basic principles in this study but as we look at it I'm going to probably addressing something more and not so much the transition of single. I'm going to be addressing a little bit more of the extended singleness more than I am the matter of transition and how we see that or why is it here and how do we go forward with this. How do we examine it? How do we handle it? How do we minister? How do we care for one another and certainly maintain the fact that we are one in Christ.

When I talk to singles they kind of face the same paradox that God brings to married people. When you're married God tells you to make a priority of loving your spouse right? I'm going to look at a text in a few minutes where God says to those who are married, "Now I want you that have a wife to live as if you have no wife." How does He mean this? It's the matter of keeping our eyes focused upon Jesus and that Christ is our life. Then out of that life our wife isn't number two in our commitment, our wife is actually number one in our commitment. One may be thinking, "Harry what about Jesus?" Jesus is not number one, He is my life.

Let me use the example of Jim Elliot. Jim knows missionaries who hugged and kissed their wives and got on a plane and landed among Indians. The last thing they did before they got on the plane besides hold and hugged their children was they sang the hymn *Through Gates of Splendor*. They were fully aware that this call upon God was probably going to cost their life and those whom they were holding they probably would not see. How can I live that way? Only in Christ can I be sure that the One who called me to serve Him decided it would cost me my life then my wife and children would be safe in His hands. I don't have to hold back.

In the same matter as a single recognizing how God gifted and made you then I also can recognize that in Christ is my all and He is sufficient. No matter what my call in life is, married or single, God has brought me to that place and His is sufficient in every season of life. He is a husband to those who have no husband. He is a Father to the orphan. He is the One who will sustain us and He Himself will uphold us.

So let's get a good start on this. The Biblical view of singleness for the Christian is either a calling or it is a providential circumstance in our life in which the Lord is developing me and or allowing me the opportunity for undistracted and therefore expanded ministry for His glory. If I am in a position of singleness, it is a situation in life under the sovereign hand of God whereby He has either called me to this life of celibacy to serve Him or He has providentially placed me in a circumstance as I look to Him who is my life that He is developing me for life, for ministry, for future marriage or whatever aspect of calling in life that I have. And no matter if it is a providential circumstance of transition in my life or a calling the Bible is abundantly clear that I have been given a special place for extended and increased opportunities to minister to the Lord that my married brothers and sisters don't have.

So, why would there be singleness? I can't cover everything here but I would like to give you some thoughts that I have jotted down. So why is extended singleness here today? I believe God's Word is true. I believe His Word is utterly reliable. I believe His

Word is very practical. I believe God's Word contains all that I need. It is sufficient and practical to equip me for every aspect of my life and that includes this one. It's not an encyclopedia. It's not a science book but it is a book that gets me to a living relationship with Christ and out of that relationship with Christ He will guide me in every aspect of my life and in every circumstance of my life. Nothing is out from under His sovereign control. Nothing in my life right now surprises Him.

So if I am in a position of extended singleness or I am ministering to someone, why are they in that position? Number one, extended singleness is the result of sin. Now I didn't say that all single people are sinful. Let me explain what I mean. One reason you would have extended singleness is because of war. By in large, up until we have redefined army today, who usually used to fight the wars? The men did. When you fight a war people get killed. So because of wars there would be not as many men as there would be women. Why do you have war? It is because of sin.

Another reason why there is extended singleness is because of a disproportionate death rate and a disproportionate birth rate. When God started everything He made marriage. He made man, male and female and then they were married. We had one man, one woman and they matched up and that was it. There were no spares around at all. Now we don't have that. We have a disproportionate birth and death rate. Men used to die quicker than women but men don't die as quick as women do any more. I sold life insurance for a while when I was putting my wife through school and I found out back in those days that men died when they were 74.8 years old and women died when they were 78.6 years old but I want you to know given the egalitarian view of life, they way we put women out to defend us now and because of the stresses of life where women are working more they are also dying faster. Isn't that a great blessing of our culture? So the death rate is getting a little close but up until now there had been a disproportionate death rate.

There is also the disproportionate birth rate. If you were in China today which mandates a certain size family in particular areas of China you would know that you could only have so many children and guess what most of them want? They want a boy to carry on their name. So guess who gets aborted? The girls and babies are the ones who do. So we have sinful views of life and disproportionate births and deaths.

A third reason for extended singleness is sicknesses. Sin has brought sickness into the world.

Number four is because of disabilities. Because of various disabilities people are not able to function in a marital relationship that has certain responsibilities in life.

Another reason is the consequences of sinful behavior. Sometimes because of sinful behaviors like addictions one is not marriageable. Sometimes because of a sinful divorce one is not able to remarry. So here are the consequences of sinful behavior.

Another reason is because of worldly standards and expectations. This is when Christian men and women are anticipating what the standard they are looking for. I'm probably about to get in trouble here but I'm going to go ahead. This is when someone wants to marry someone rich, someone that has connections and they have this and they have that and I hope that at some point they were baptized and joined a church. The spiritual qualifications of what we are looking for should be is this man going to love me like Christ loved the church and is he going to carry me to the next level to follow Christ. It's kind of like the person says I hope he has all of this and by the way I hope he'll take

me to church every once and a while. Or men when wanting worldly standards would say, this is what she has to look like and I want a righteous runway babe, Christian woman and by they way I'd like her to have a quiet time every once in a while.

The Bible says, charm is deceitful and beauty is vain but a woman who fears the Lord shall be praised. Do we put those things in place that we ought to be putting in place when we are trying to see who God has called us to marry?

I would like to include in this that there is a lot of extended singleness because of fear. There is a fear of commitment, a fear of responsibility, a fear of vulnerability, a fear of expectations and that's why God made us to be intimate. When we fear the intimacy you will find men moving into internet pornography that has "intimacy" with no expectations and no relationships which is false intimacy or an addictive behavior that destroys or woman who perhaps technologically seek intimacy through a chat room or by distance because then there is no expectations. These are the sins of fears in our life.

Another reason could be because of false teaching. I don't know how prevalent this is now but it was prevalent when I was a young man coming through youth groups. Basically it was this teaching that if you really are spiritual then you're not going to be married. Real spiritual people don't marry is what they would say. Then they would say if you don't get married there's a higher life of promises that God is going to give to you. Then there was the notion of devotion saying if you really love Jesus you will go be a missionary and you won't let a marriage get in the way.

I want you to know something here. For those of you who are okay that I'm your pastor and you are grateful for that and want to keep me then the best thing you can do is pray that Cindy, my wife, keeps breathing because if she didn't I'm not sure I could function well. I know the Lord would supply my needs in those moments but I was not called to be single and most of what I am able to do in ministry is because God has gifted me with someone that can assist me. It's not a higher life for me to say God did not gift me to be single but I'm going to go ahead and be single because that way actually I will be more effective when in fact I wouldn't be effective that way. I don't have those gifts.

Let's pick up on this first point by looking in 1 Corinthians 7. 1 Corinthians 7:1,2 says, *1 Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."* *2 But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.* God has give you sexual appetites and the needs for that intimacy and so where did God provide for that to be met? People will ask, do you get married for sex? The answer is absolutely because that's the only place that it's supposed to be. God has gifted you there so Paul says if God has gifted you for that then given that gift of sexuality then let each man have his own wife and each wife have her own husband. It's not the only reason you get married but is certainly a vital part of marriage.

1 Corinthians 7:3-5 says, *3 The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. 5 Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.* So what did we just learn about marriage in this text? It is something we have already learned. Number one is that marriage is a covenant. Number two it is heterosexual. It's

a man and a woman. Number three it's monogamous meaning one man and one woman. Number four it is ministerial even our sexuality. The husband's sexuality is not there for him but for his wife. The wife's sexuality is not there for her but for her husband. You will notice that in that sexual relationship there is no hierarchy. The man's body belongs to his wife and the wife's body belongs to her husband. It's a reciprocal relationship. The sexual relationship is expected to be regular in the context of marriage.

1 Corinthians 7:6, 7 says, **6** *Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. 7 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.* Paul obviously is not married and is letting you know that in the context here. He is saying if you don't have the gift of celibacy and have those normal sexual desires that God has given to you then you need to marry. Don't burn with passion and begin to satisfy those things in an ungodly way by perversion and promiscuity or lustful thoughts or actions. He says, "No you enter into a marriage and you have a solid relationship within marriage and part of that relationship is a sexual relationship. I am not commanding you if you really love Jesus to go be single but I wish that you were all like me."

Then Paul will go on in 1 Corinthians 7 to say why. He will it is because if you are married you not only have those benefits but you have those responsibilities and you always have to think about them. You will always have to think about your wife, your children and those responsibilities in life. Paul says if God calls me I don't have to worry about my wife, children or the dog. I'm single so I can get up and go. I'm free to make that move. After Paul says this is not a command he says each one has his own gift from God. So this is a matter of giftedness. It's not if you get married then you really don't love the Lord. He is saying that here is a wide open opportunity for extended service, an immediate response if you are unmarried like him but this is a matter of giftedness. Are you gifted?

In Matthew 19 Jesus deals with the same thing when these people are asking Him if there is such a thing as no-fault divorce. Jesus answers them, "No, only in such cases of sexual immorality which breaks the covenant, otherwise then you are not a candidate for remarriage because you have unbiblically broken the marriage." So after the disciples hear Him say this here is what is says in Matthew 19:10, 11; **10** *The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry."* **11** *But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but **only those to whom it is given.*** It is only for those whom God gives the grace to do this and God gives the gifts to do this. He goes on to say in Matthew 19:12, *For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.*

So the disciples are thinking, "Man it's just better not to get married and to say single." Jesus says to them, "Only if you are gifted." Those needs of sexual intimacy and conversational intimacy and other intimacies, unless God has gifted you for that with calling or spiritual gift or His providence has called you for it then its not a matter of something that you should embrace or seek in your life.

So back in 1 Corinthians 7:8, 9 it says, **8** *To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. 9* *But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.* So I have

given you the reasons for extended singleness so let me give you a second thing. Extended singleness is not only a result of sin, the reasons I have already gone over, but also there is another aspect to why there is singleness and that's the result of God's grace in our calling, giftedness or the present opportunity that He has sovereignly placed in front of you. God in His sovereignty in dealing with this broken world has either given you a present opportunity for singleness, an undistracted devotion and a need to come and seek Him for sufficiency or He has actually gifted you and called you to be celibate and to serve Him. In the midst of this broken world God's grace is able to call you to that singleness or is able to gift you for that singleness or is able to sustain you in this present opportunity.

The third thing is extended singleness is God's providence. What do I mean by this? God may have me single because I'm not ready to be married. God may have me single as a providential act because not only am I not ready to be married, I don't have the right criteria in my heart and in my soul of who I'm to marry. God may have me single providentially because there are others looking at me and as they are looking at me God has me in a position to be able to encourage them so that in my demonstration that Christ is enough and sufficient they can take heart. God may have me in this position providentially because my view of marriage is not a good gift from God but something that I've got to have or I can't serve God and that's idolatry. Anything that takes God's place, even God's good gifts of a spouse, child, home, is idolatry if someone says, "unless I don't have those things I can't serve the Lord." You have just erected an idol before the Lord. So God in His providence has me there.

This leads me to number four. Extended singleness is not only God's providence but is God's protection. God has me in a place where He is protecting me. I am a blessed man. When I married Cindy I out-punted my coverage on that day. That was a day whereby God's grace the Lord allowed me much blessing in my life but there were numerous situations prior to then where I very easily could have ended up married and it wouldn't have been such a blessing as has been proved out.

I went up to a place called Geneva College and I preached in a couple of churches where I did a conference there about 14 years ago. The pastor took me out with one of the elderly women in the church. We went to one of the restaurants that she owned and the three of us sat down to eat. She was delightful in her conversation, unbelievably witty. It was a very awkward time because she was a wit and I was only half way there in the conversation. I just enjoyed so much my time with her. Afterwards, I know this is something I shouldn't have done but I looked at her and said, "Ma'am it's pretty clear that you are not hurting and you are a delightful lady in many, many ways yet you have been single your whole life. May I ask you a question? Have you ever wanted to be married? I probably shouldn't be asking this question but I just wanted to." She very kindly looked at me and said, "You're not the first young man to ask me that question. There have been more than one occasion and God has sustained me all these years. I don't think I was gifted to be single but God's grace sustained me. There were many times that I wanted to be married and there was more than one occasion where I could have been married but they were not God's man for my life and I realized to serve Jesus Christ it was better for me to be single and want to be married than to be married and want to be single." What maturity she had where she refused to have marriage something

at all cost but she kept in place that profile and said if God has not provided a man then God will provide the grace.

So there is God's singleness as His providence in your life, God's protection of you and then extended singleness as God's preparation. One time I was in a singles conference and I had the enormous blessing of serving with four other people in speaking. Then they put us on a panel and there were about 2,000 singles in attendance. The singles started firing questions at us. One person got up and said, "Pastor, you've been telling us all along about what it means to be properly prepared for marriage in your seminars and plenary sessions. Alright preacher how will I know when I have found Mr. Right?" I said, "You know that is a great question but I think that is a second question. I think right now if you are single what ought to preoccupy you as a Christian is this and how I wished someone had said this to me. Your objective is not primarily to find Mr. Right or Mrs. Right. Your first objective is by God's grace to be Mr. Right or Miss. Right." God prepare me to be an asset in the life of the one that You would call me to.

Here are some takeaways. The first one is to understand the difference between extended singleness as a present condition where God will sustain you and extended singleness as a calling in life. I mean calling in the sense that it is a gift and directly that the Lord has so fashioned you and worked within you that those dynamics that would normally be met in the context of marriage that He has so equipped you that your calling allows you to pursue that extended singleness. If you are in extended singleness because of the chaos and brokenness of this world as a present condition then realize and flee to the Lord whose grace will suffice.

This last week I did a series of interviews on this program we do called "Conversations with Harry." The lady I was interviewing was named Sue. She embraced the life of singleness and she said, "I'm really not gifted to be single but I'm going to pursue singleness. Let me give you two things pastor." I said, "What is it Sue?" She said, "Number one is I know at this present time my children are looking to me to pursue marriage, even a remarriage I would bring my devotion of necessity away from them toward that courtship and they are not in a place where I can do that right now so I'll just turn that over to the Lord into the future if He wants it. My children need me right now and I'm going to give all my attention to them." The second thing she said was, "I'm able to do that because I know God's grace is sufficient for me. There is nobody that wants to be embraced more than me and my Savior in my worst moments will awaken me even in the morning. I sense His arms of grace enfolding me and that's enough."

The second takeaway is if you have been called or gifted by God's providence or you are in a present condition that God has placed you in then cease this moment in time that's been entrusted to you. It's a time for prayer. It's a time of thanksgiving to the Lord for His sovereign grace that's at work in your life. It's a time to ask God for wisdom for decisions about relationships yet in the future. It's a time for patience and contentment in the Lord. It is a time of purity in the Lord in thought, word and deed. Harry, what if I falter? God will forgive you but there are marks and things upon us that hurt deeply. God please give me a heart for purity. It's a time for expanded service. If the Lord has put me here in this present condition providentially or gifted me then I know for one thing that extended service is that I am able to bring to the ministry of the body of Christ that my married brothers and sisters can't because they are encumbered with

various world cares. So thank You Lord for putting me in that place of extended service. So Lord, what is it for Your kingdom that I can extend in my ministry during this time?

The third and final takeaway is in all situations of life whether I'm single or married we are called to believe, experience and display the absolute sufficiency of Christ in all of life. I have mentioned this to you before but I'd like to say it again and say something on the other side of it. When I was younger I was very immature and Cindy and I were in the car the other day talking about this. When we were coming along in marriage we were both raised in a church although I had rebelled against it and we had all been taught that you were to marry a Christian. I was in the Alliance church and Cindy was in the Southern Baptist church. Which meant basically they had gone forward sometime in the worship service, they had gone to the altar. You sled under. That's like absolution if you got up to the altar.

When we were dating I was able to tell her because of the church I grew up in that we taught the Southern Baptists how to do altar calls. I had been forward I don't know how many times. At youth mission conferences, revivals and Sunday evening services we would sing the hymn *Just As I Am* and I never knew it had that many verses and we looked at each other as we would sing and sing and sing and think one of us has got to go forward or this service will never end. We would all take turns and go forward in the youth group. I went forward when I was 11 but we weren't taught about what to really look for. There was this kind of notion that it was going to work out.

In my case, intuitively there was something about her that was so different from any and all that I had ever dated. I just for some reason knew that she was to be my wife and I am so grateful for that but in my immaturity, when we were married, I was standing with my daddy before I was to get married and my dad said, "Son, how so you feel?" I said, "Daddy I'm fine." He said, "Let me see your hand." I opened my hand and you could have washed a car with all of the sweat that was in my hand. He said, "Son I think you're a little nervous." I said, "Daddy I am a little bit nervous." I was starting to get this sense that this is for life. Marriage is kind of the big date. You don't have to take her home now, right? You go home together. So we got married and then I would wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat because this was for life. I had enough drilled into me that you didn't get married thinking about divorce. This was for life. Cindy had it drilled in her. Her mother was not all that excited about the choice. She blessed it but she wasn't all that excited. I remember her telling Cindy, "Honey on January the 26th when you go out that door it shuts. If you have a problem I don't want to see you on the back porch. You're walking out so go make it work. If you have a problem, work it out. Don't come back here."

We were both kind of told that we were supposed to get this thing done. So there we were and I would wake up and see her. I would wake up in a sweat and think this is for the rest of my life. There is no going back. This is it. It happened on January 26, 1969 and not many days after that was when I would wake up in cold sweats thinking about that. I'm older now. I still wake up and given my age I wake up more at night than I used to. Now I look over at her and think, "I can't believe how little of my life I have to live with her." I don't have many more sunrises and sunsets. Most of them are behind me. What has happened is I have known her love and the depth of it and therefore as I would anticipate life out there I pray all the time, "God, I know we are going to go home one day, can You take me first, because if You take her first You have got a lot of work

to sustain this guy back here. It will be a whole lot easier if You just go ahead and take me first.”

But in the context of that as I look at her and think about that I also know that God makes no mistakes. Which ever one of us goes to be with the Lord first, if we don't go together, God's grace will sustain us in that day. It will not be short. For as much as I am overwhelmed by the love I've known from my wife that love has been made possible by her and from her because of Christ's love in her and that love from Christ is mine with or without her and He will sustain me. He will sustain you. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we have been able to spend together in Your Word. We pray that You would speak to our hearts and our lives. Father, we pray that we who are married in our devotion on the one hand will show all of the priorities of God's Word but on the other hand also show that Christ is enough. Those who are single and are able to deal with the issues of marriage or non-marriage are able to cease this moment in life because of the sufficiency of Christ. While we know we have special dynamics and needs in ministry because of the seasons of life we all find ourselves in and we need to address it but yet would You make us one body where the world sees a people who have known the love of Christ, show the love of Christ and proclaim to the world “Christ is enough!” I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.