



I've known Brett and Ruth for almost 25 years and I can't think of any two people more qualified to speak on this issue than they are. When we started talking about shooting a Faith Story video on this subject they were the first two people who came to mind. I know we all appreciate their wisdom, honesty and vulnerability.

Here in our church about 60% of you are single. Yet singleness is a subject we don't talk about enough. The church often doesn't know how to address this. Most pastors, like me, are married and so we often feel like we lack the credibility to talk about it.

Most Christians would say we're created to be married. To be married is to be normal. What's implied in that assumption is that singles are incomplete or abnormal. Maybe we haven't come right out and said it, but we've implied it. Genesis says it's not good for man to be alone. We say, "That means everybody ought to be married." But it could also mean all human beings need deep, caring relationships and can't live in isolation. God does call most of us to be married, but not everyone. Jesus was a single adult, and so were his best friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus. John the Baptist was single. Paul wrote his New Testament letters as a single man.

This morning we're looking at what Paul said to the single people in the church at Corinth. He addresses three different groups of singles. This reminds us not all singles are alike. Some are young; some are old. Some have never married; others were married at one time. Paul addresses the unique situation of each one, but his overriding counsel to all is pretty much the same thing: stay single if you can; get married if you must.

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To the unmarried

First, he addresses those he calls "virgins." He's most likely talking to young people who are of marriageable age, but have never been married. Here is what he says to them.

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 do 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 (1 Corinthians 7:25–28).

Paul qualifies his advice by saying this isn't a command from the Lord but his own opinion or judgment. That doesn't mean we can take it or leave it; he's trustworthy. We need to take this seriously, as we do with all Scripture.

Paul's advice is clear: it's best to remain as you are. If you're not married, it's best to stay single. If you are married, stay married. Now someone could hear that and conclude, "Well then, if I don't remain as I am and I do get married I'll be in sin." So Paul is quick to add that if you do marry, you've not sinned. Earlier in v. 9 he even told single people it's better to get married than to burn with passion. In other words, if you can't control your sexual passions, it's better to get married than stay single and succumb to temptation. Marriage isn't a sin, but sex apart from marriage is.

So if you're an unmarried person and you can stay single, go for it. But if you really want to get married, then you need to know that's okay. You still may have to wait and trust the Lord for that to happen, but it's okay to want that and move in that direction.

To the engaged

The second group Paul addresses are those who are engaged. Look at what he says to them in verses 36–38.

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.

Depending on what translation you have, these verses are interpreted differently. I'm reading from the NIV today. The NASB translates these verses like this: "*But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin daughter, if she should be of full age, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry.*" So the NASB takes this to be referring to whether or not a father should give his virgin daughter away in marriage. But the NIV takes this to be referring to an engaged couple and what the engaged man ought to do in relation to his fiancé. I think this makes the most sense. People got

engaged quite young back then, and often it was years before they were married. We also know there were some in Corinth who said it was more spiritual for engaged couples to **not** get married and consummate their marriage.

In these situations, Paul's advice is clear. Again, stay single if you can. He even gives the engaged man an out: if he feels in his own mind it's right not to marry; or if he's not under compulsion, which probably means there was no prior marriage contract which obligated him to marry her; or if he's in control of his own will, which may mean he wasn't a slave and not required by his master to marry. If these things are the case, he didn't have to go through with the marriage.

But once again he's quick to point out there may be many good reasons for an engaged man to go ahead with the marriage. If he's acting improperly towards her (i.e., if he's not controlling his passions); if she is getting along in years, which may be a reference to childbearing years; or if he feels for some reason that he ought to marry her and that it's the right thing to do, then get married. And he makes it very clear—he's not sinning; he's doing what is right.

To the widow

The third group he addressed were single for a different reason; they're widows. There were many widows in the ancient world. Many of them were poor and dependent on others. Here is what he says to them in verses 39–40.

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.

He makes it clear when a woman's husband dies she isn't bound to the marriage any longer; she's free to remarry. But it's very important the man she marries belongs to the Lord. She isn't free to just marry anyone; she has to marry a believer. I'll talk more about that later. But, again, his opinion is it's best for her not to marry again. He even believes this comes from the Spirit of God!

So, essentially, Paul says the same thing to all three groups: stay single if you can; get married if you must. At the very least we can say from this being single isn't a diminished state of existence. It doesn't mean you're a failure or that you're cursed. A single person has the same value as any other member of the body. The church needs to learn how to value the single person. We must learn not to think of the church as a bunch of families, but as one family—the church family.

We need to integrate singles into the full fellowship of the church. There is a place for specialized ministries for singles just as there is for married couples. But these should never be a substitute for integration into the full life of the church's fellowship.

If you're single, get into other ministries. Pray with people. Serve with people. Study with people. Don't isolate yourself. For those of you who are married, do whatever you can to make sure there are open doors for singles in your group and in your family. My own family has had the joy and privilege over the years to call many single adults our best friends. They forged a unique and special relationship with our kids that I am so grateful for.

But we're still left with the question of why does Paul hold the opinion that singleness is preferable, especially when God created marriage in the first place? The reason is it's easier for single people to single-mindedly serve the Lord. To Paul, the most important thing about you isn't your marital status, but who you're serving.

It's easier for single people to single-mindedly serve the Lord.

In v. 26 Paul spoke of some "present crisis." Scholars differ over what he was referring to. Some think there was some crisis going on in Corinth like a famine or impending war. Others think he was speaking of the tribulation that would proceed the Second Coming of the Lord. Jesus had even predicted the fall of Jerusalem within the lifetime of that generation, which would take place about 15 years after Paul wrote this letter. To me that makes the most sense in view of what he says in verses 29–35.

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. 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.

Paul says in light of the fact that "the time is short," it's best not to be engrossed in the things of this world. That's hard enough to do when you're single, but it's even harder when you're married. That's what Paul means in v. 28 when he says if you get married you'll "**face many troubles in this life.**" A married person can easily get bogged down by things of this world, but this world is passing away. Our focus should be on what lasts and on pleasing the Lord. Later he says a married person is concerned about the needs of their spouse; about pleasing their spouse, and the

reality is sometimes that can distract you from pleasing the Lord. If you're single you can be more single-minded. If you're single like Ruth you can have dresses for Joy Prom laid out across your living room and not worry your husband will be upset. If you're single like Brett you can lead worship somewhere most every Sunday and not worry whether your wife will resent it.

Now it's important to add that just because you're single doesn't mean you'll single-mindedly serve the Lord. You'll be tempted like anybody else to accumulate the possessions of the world, to fill your time with things that aren't eternal. I know a lot of single believers who are single-minded not about pleasing the Lord but about nabbing a husband or a wife! But in being single at least you'll have more opportunity to be undivided in your pursuits and have a simpler life. Maybe that's what Paul means when he says to widows down in v. 40 that they will be "happier" if they stay single.

Guidelines for singles today.

So what does all this mean if you're a single adult today? Let me give you a few guidelines based on what we've learned from God's word.

First of all, view your single state as a gift and a calling. Look again at v. 7. *"I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that."* A gift is something God has given us out of his grace. In v.17 he says this is a "calling." The fact that this is a calling reminds us that our marital status isn't primarily about us and our choices, it's about God. It's about the One doing the calling.

How do I know if I have that calling or gift from God? The answer I normally hear is if being single isn't hard for you, if you kind of like it, then you probably have that gift. There is some wisdom in that. The calling we have often fits with what we do well and what we enjoy. **But**, many of us are called to things that aren't easy for us. Moses was called to lead Israel out of Egypt, but he didn't feel like that was a good fit for him at all. Ask most married people whether "gifting" equals "ease"—they may feel they've been called to be married, but few married couples will tell you marriage is easy.

Perhaps as Brett said in the video we shouldn't fixate on the lifelong call to singleness. Some people might be called to that, but most people are called to singleness just for a time, if even a very long time. If you're single right now, you're called right now to be single. You should live the single life as fully as you possibly can. The problem comes when the assumption is that this is somehow a lifelong calling—panicked singles fear they might have that gift forever! But think about other callings. My calling as a pastor isn't for life. The day will come when I'll no longer be pastor of a church. Right now that's my calling, but not forever. You might be called and gifted to be a stay-at-home mother of small children right now, but that won't be your lifelong calling.

It makes sense to view your singleness that way. Embrace your situation by faith as what God has for you now, but realize that could also change.

So if you have that gift now, live with quality now. Don't wait to really live. Don't live in a holding pattern. Get out of neutral. Put your heart into good high-quality, single-minded living for Christ. You have time and energy that otherwise you wouldn't have. Take that and put it into positive, constructive, long-term ministry. Some day God will ask you, "What did you do with that time I gave you?"

The second thing I would say is that you need to cultivate deep, caring relationships. Consider the relationship between Paul and his friends. Read the New Testament and you'll see Paul wasn't a loner, but a man with many friends, both male and female. Have you ever read the last chapter of the book of Romans? Paul greets a plethora of friends and coworkers. He greets his fellow tentmakers, Pricilla and Aquilla, who he says risked their own necks for him. He greets Epaenetus, Ampliatus and Stachys, all who he called "my beloved." He greets a man named Rufus and his mother who he says was also a mother to him. Or have you read Acts 20 where Paul says goodbye for the last time to his Ephesian friends. Paul's ship is about to sail and they kneel down together and pray and it says *"they began to weep aloud and embrace Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again"* (Acts 20:37-38). Paul had the kind of deep sharing and caring in their relationship that matches what a lot of married people have.

If you're single, cultivate relationships with people who will pray for you, who will correct you when you get off track; who will become a buffer to you when the rough edges of life rub you raw; who will support you when you carry on large responsibilities; who will listen to your doubts, to your fears, to your questions, to your concerns; and who will celebrate with you when there is joy. It's not good for anyone to be alone. Open up to other caring relationships.

The third thing I would say is never lower your standards just to get married. No marriage is better than a bad marriage. Let me tell you a story about a woman named Olivia Langdon. You've never heard of her, but she was married to Mark Twain. From what I can tell, Mark Twain wasn't a Christian, nor did he claim to be when he began courting Olivia. Back in Twain's day, a man typically had to get permission from a woman's parents before marrying her. Mark Twain had a problem. Olivia came from a Christian family that wouldn't allow their daughter to marry an unbeliever. To overcome this obstacle, Twain took on the guise of a spiritual seeker who needed the support and prayers of Olivia's family in order to clean up his life. Influenced by Olivia's prodding, he presumably converted. Olivia's family was convinced

Twain was a Christian and permitted the marriage. But Twain's conversion was an illusion. One scholar insists that Twain "was a man in love, wooing a woman he hoped to marry. His 'religious' feelings at that time, expressed in love letters to Olivia, disappeared as soon as the nuptials were over." After their wedding, Twain ridiculed Olivia's faith. Soon Olivia's fervent faith cooled. Eventually she forsook her faith altogether, and a deep sorrow deluged her life. Mark Twain loved her and never meant to hurt her, but he had broken her spirit. He said, "Livy, if it comforts you to lean on your faith, do so." She replied sadly, "I cannot. I don't have any faith left." Twain often wished he could restore Olivia's faith, but it was too late.

I must tell you that I've seen this happen more than once. As you consider a mate, be careful about those who profess to believe but have no track record of really following Christ. Be cautious about who you marry. Give it plenty of time. Ask: will this person help me or hinder me as I seek to grow as a fully devoted servant of Christ?

Conclusion

Let me tell you about another woman. Her name is Henrietta Mears. She's considered by many to have been one of the most influential Christian women of the 20th century. She was the founder of Gospel Light Publications. She was C.E. Director at Hollywood Presbyterian Church, developer of Forest Home Conference Center, and a respected Bible teacher who helped train almost an entire generation of pastors. She wrote a book, *What the Bible is All About*, that is still widely read today.

She began her adult life as a high school chemistry teacher in Minneapolis in the 1920's. Before long she was asked to teach a Sunday School class at the First Baptist Church of five eighteen-year-old girls who called themselves "The Snobs." She took on this challenge and from that small clique she developed a class of over 500. She also taught the Bible to the football team.

In 1928, Henrietta was offered a position as Director of Christian Education at Hollywood Presbyterian Church. From that time on she was involved in full-time ministry. When she began the Sunday School enrollment was 450. In two and a half years enrollment increased to more than 4,000. While there, she wrote her own Sunday School curriculum. Within a few years she was

receiving orders for her curriculum from all over the country. Gospel Light Press was born. Though she had no formal theological training, she made as great an impact on the world with her life and ministry.

What's interesting is as a young woman she fell in love with a banker. When the young man proposed marriage, he assured her that, despite his not being a Christian, he "admired her religious convictions." She longed for companionship, children, family life. She liked the idea of marrying a banker, like her father was. She agonized and prayed: "Lord, you have made me the way I am. I love a home, I love security, I love children, and I love him." She left it in the Lord's hands, saying, "You have promised to fulfill all my needs. I trust in you alone."

In the end, she severed the relationship and remained single her entire life. She once said, "I've never missed companionship." Her best friend once said it would have been hard for her to find a mate who could live with her because she was so spiritually focused and she loved the apostle Paul the most! When Mears's many students expressed their desire to follow her example in remaining single, she rebuked them: "Nonsense! The Lord intends for you to marry; that is the way he has made us. It just so happens that in my case that wasn't his will."

She was right. At one time or another, God has called most of us to get married. If you want to get married, you ought to get married when the Lord provides the right person. But in the meantime, live out your calling as a single person to serve the Lord single-mindedly. We need to honor both the calling to be single and the calling to be married.

Remember what Paul said up in v. 22? He said if you were called while a slave, you're the Lord's freedman. If you were called while free, you're Christ's slave. The idea is your identity is in Christ. That's the most important thing about you. I think Paul would say the same thing here. The most important thing about you, the thing that will last forever, the thing that defines your worth and identity as a person, is not whether you're single or married; it's who you are in Christ.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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