

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Meaningful Singlehood I Corinthians 7:25-40

There comes a time in most young lives when the all-important thing is to be married. They think about it, talk about it, dream about it, pray about it, fantasize about it, and, of course, they worry about it. They are possessed by this one thought and it overshadows every other area of life. They rationalize that to marry would be to live happily ever after and not to marry would be to have a life not worth living. Not to marry would be the ultimate defeat and one would be doomed to a life of misery and drudgery.

To top it off, married adults, consciously and unconsciously, put a lot of pressure on singles to marry. Have you ever been in a conversation which goes like this: "Poor Benny Bachelor. He is 35 years old, attractive, has a good job, a dynamic personality but his life is wasted without a wife." Or, "pray for Sally Single. She is 30 years old, attractive, spiritual, not married and she doesn't want to get married. Something is wrong with her."

To make the situation more complex, it seldom occurs to singles and married adults who are always trying to marry off singles that there is something greater than marriage. There is something more important than marriage for some people and that something is meaningful, God directed singlehood. It is this state Paul wants to emphasize when he writes to singles in the Church of Corinth.

This section of scripture is very relevant for today. Singles are a very important part of American culture. Forty percent of all people over 18 in the USA are single. Thirty percent of evangelical Christians over 18 are single. Did you know that in Metro-Orlando alone there are approximately 333,500 adult singles which either have never married, are divorced or are widowed? That is 40% of Metro-Orlando which is single. Some have suggested by the year 2005 that number could be at 50%. Amazing!

ADVICE TO THE UNMARRIED 7:25-35

Now about. The Corinthians had written a letter to the Apostle Paul asking him to answer various questions on marriage. One must have been about celibacy—is it right and biblical to stay single? Is singlehood morally superior to the marriage state? Is a person a second class citizen if he or she is single?

The Corinthian church had a particular false teaching in their midst. There were some who taught singlehood was a superior moral state to marriage and that a person was more spiritual if he or she decided to stay celibate. The Apostle Paul does not deprecate the single state, in fact, he exalts it. He concludes that celibacy is desirable but not demanded. Marriage is good but celibacy is better under certain circumstances if a person has the gift of celibacy.

Virgins. This is primarily a reference to young unmarried women who had never known a man sexually. Perhaps a better translation would be "maidens." It appears the Corinthians asked Paul about the relationship of maidens to marriage, but Paul applied the truth to both young unmarried men and women.

There is no double standard in God's will for unmarried men and women. He expects both to be virgins. The saying, "Boys must sow their wild oats, and girls must be proper" is straight from the pit. God's standard is sexual purity for both men and women before marriage.

But I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. While on earth, the Lord Jesus said very little on the single state, so Paul gives his opinion on this matter. It is a sanctified opinion because Paul wrote as an Apostle being led along by the Holy Spirit. The Apostle was "trustworthy" and in I Corinthians 7:40 he says, "I too have the Spirit of God." What Paul had to say was just as inspired as what Jesus had to say and as authoritative. Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are.

This literally says, "It is good for a man to remain as he is." The first reason Paul thinks it is better to stay single is because of the present crisis, and he deals with this in verses 26-28.

Notice he says, "It is good for a man to remain as he is," so he is speaking to men as well as women. In this context, Paul is obviously referring to some specific crisis the Corinthians were experiencing.. He is not talking about life in general with its ups and downs but about times of crisis. My personal opinion is that this is referring to persecution, for we know from Acts 18 the city of Corinth was antagonistic to Christians. The days in Corinth were hard ones for believers. It was a time of persecution and suffering when one might have to leave home and loved ones at a moment's notice and flee those who hated Christianity. In light of these desperate times, Paul felt it best for men and women to stay unmarried. Single folks are best prepared to handle the pressures of being a Christian in times of crisis.

Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. Under the pressure of a major crisis, it is wise to stay single, but if married, one must do all he can to protect his family.

But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Notice Paul does not snarl at marriage in times of crisis. He just feels it is better to stay single. The fact of the matter is that most will not stay single, but it is best if they do.

But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this. Paul is not saying marriage automatically brings trouble into one's life, although many can testify to the fact that while marriage lifted some major pressures, it added many more cares: education, food, clothing, housing, bills, in-laws, etc. It may be more fun to live with someone else but it is certainly much more complicated. However, Paul is thinking about trouble in times of crisis due to persecution. It is one thing for a man

to face persecution and even martyrdom, but it is quite another to bring this upon his wife and children. A man might be brave but turn coward at the sight of his wife and children being persecuted because of his personal faith in Christ.

Paul's point is that in times of crisis, single life has advantages. Singles can be more flexible, can adapt more readily to certain cataclysmic conditions, can pick up and move if necessary, and can act without handling the affairs of others for whom they are responsible. Paul is not putting down marriage but is suggesting that for some singlehood might be the better course to take because marriage increases responsibilities.

What then is the application for us? There is a biblical principle: In times of crisis, it may not be best to marry. There are some circumstances when marriage is not advisable or expedient: 1) When one is in deep financial debt; 2) When one has to go to war; 3) When one has been diagnosed as having a terminal or incurable illness; 4) When there are major areas of philosophical and religious disagreements between two people; 5) When there is a fierce independent spirit in a person, and 6) When there is no common ground scripturally to get married.

What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. Paul now gives the second reason why it is wise to stay single. It is that the time is short, and this is covered in verses 29-31. Some have thought this is a reference to the second coming of Christ, but it does not say this. I personally think Paul is referring to the brevity of life, especially in the midst of persecution. The older one gets, the quicker time seems to fly by. All men become aware of the shortness of time. Christians become aware of how few years they have on earth to do the things God desires and to fully experience the exciting adventures God has for those who love Him. Non-Christians are aware of the shortness of time, and their philosophy is, "Time is flying; we only go around life once, so let's grab all we can of it. Let's live it up with gusto. There is nothing beyond death so we have to experience all of life we can." This certainly is not the Christian philosophy of life. Christians are to use fleeting time to the maximum for eternal purposes -- to reach a lost and dying world, to build up the church, to serve the Lord, to develop a spiritual life through prayer and Bible study, etc. The center of the Christian's life should not just be making a living but making a life pleasing to the Lord.

From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; This is a very difficult verse to interpret. What does Paul mean? Should we neglect our wives, divorce our mates, leave our spouses and go to the mission field because the time is flying by? No, what Paul is saying is that married people have to keep things in proper focus. The husband and wife are not to live for themselves but for Christ and are to serve Him the best they can in spite of distractive responsibilities that come with marriage. There are higher demands and greater challenges than just maintaining a marriage. God has placed a man and a woman together so they can serve Him together. Therefore, Christian couples are not to let all the things the world around them lives for become the center of their lives. As Christians in a marriage, we must get the right attitude about material things, occupying our minds with spiritual and eternal matters rather than worldly matters.

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. Paul's advice is that it is not good to get wrapped up in the affairs of this world which will hinder our fellowship with Christ and our obedience to God's will. Weeping, rejoicing and buying are all legitimate and necessary aspects of life, but the highest good is one's service to Jesus Christ.

There are multitudes of Christians who had real spiritual zeal for Christ in their single state who after marriage became bogged down with children, home, jobs, paying bills, material concerns or whatever and lost that zeal. Surely marriage and children will change our zeal for service to Christ to some degree, but we must never let marriage kill our zeal for Christ.

Those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away. The King James Version says, "And they that use this world, as not abusing it." Christians must learn how to live in the world and yet not be an intimate part of the world system. The things of the world should never engross and possess the Christian to the point that he or she is unable to serve Jesus Christ. The things of the world are temporary, transitory and are passing away. They have absolutely no eternal value. That which is of eternal value is service for Jesus Christ. Success in business is not the greatest aim of life and should never be allowed to be so for a believer because the fame and the glory of the world is passing away.

Surely there is more to Christianity than owning a lovely home, slaving for a retirement plan and cramming our twilight years with a few activities we may enjoy before we die. Christians, if we do not have the time to get all the worthwhile enjoyments and pleasures here and now, we will have lots of time to get them in eternity. What awaits us Christians in the future is so incredible that to give ourselves fully to the pursuit of the things of God here is much more intelligent than to waste our whole existence on secondary levels of activity and involvement.

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. The third reason Paul says it is better to stay single is to be free from concern (anxiety). The single person has less to distract him or her from the service of the Lord. Singlehood makes possible a degree of dedication and devotion of commitment to the work of Christ that married life does not allow. The unmarried have the potential to wait upon the Lord without distractions. They can give the majority of their time and thought to the things of Jesus Christ.

But the married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife--and his interests are divided. The married man has divided interests and loyalties. He wants to please the Lord and he wants to please his wife. Both are legitimate, God-given pursuits. The married man has obligations he must discharge and this demands some attention to the things of the world. In fact, the married man has the potential to get all wrapped up in worldly pursuits to care for his wife and family and forget his higher responsibility of service to Christ. This can be devastating to the spiritual life of a man.

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. The unmarried woman can serve the Lord better because she has fewer distractions. She is set apart in body and spirit to more complete service to Christ. The married woman must divide her attention between Christ, husband and children and this is the right thing to do.

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. What Paul had to say about the advantages of singlehood were not to discourage the singles at Corinth but to encourage them. He was giving advice he thought was best for singles. Yet, he did not want to put them in a noose or straitjacket, and they were perfectly free to choose the life they wanted to live whether married or unmarried.

Most singles, men and women, really struggle with the idea of being single for life. Yet, when they do understand this is God's choice for them, they become grateful to the Lord, finding a new peace and determination for service for Christ. In the single state, they discover that Christ can meet their loneliness, for they appear alone but are never alone because God is with them. Single Christians should not grumble about their state, nor should they pout with the "woe is me" blues, but they should give themselves to the service of Christ. Look at the Apostle Paul. Because he had no distractions, he was able to move all over the Roman Empire. Out of his complete dedication and devotion to Christ, he changed the world through his preaching and letter writing. Remember, even Jesus Christ was a single person. Therefore, we know that God has a very special plan for the single who is dedicated to Him.

When I was in Kenya, there was a single man named Vincent who was convinced God had given him the gift of celibacy for the time. He was from Uganda and in my class. He wrote a paper entitled, "The Single State" and here are some of his thoughts about being a single person: 1) I can have more time to devote to the Lord's work and potentially be less distracted from the cares of temporal life; 2) I am free to take risks that a father might not take who has the whole family dependent on him like traveling to a foreign land and doing risky jobs; 3) I have freedom to move around the world without having to pack up a household first, and this freedom has brought me moments that I would not trade for anything else this side of eternity; 4) I can adapt to perilous situations like the rugged life among the primitive tribes, in a guerilla war zone or in disease and famine; 5) The single state enables me to get the most out of the time God gives for His work, and one of my chief delights is that I do not fit my ministry around a family schedule, having to be home at a certain time every night; 6) I care not where or how I live or what hardships I go through, so that I may gain souls for Christ; 7) God is sovereign over who gets married and who does not, and He can be trusted to do what is good for me.

ADVICE TO ENGAGED COUPLES 7:36-38

If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. If a couple is engaged, usually betrothed by parents in New Testament times, and she is getting older with the possibility of missing her best child bearing years, they should marry. Neither the man or woman is sinning by getting married. "Acting improperly" most likely refers to sexual temptations and acts short of intercourse.

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 even better. If the couple wants to stay engaged and have control over their sex drives, then it is O.K. Yet, if they marry God approves and if they don't God approves. But Paul thinks if they stay single, they are better off.

Some scholars think this whole section is about a father and his virgin daughter. If the father thinks he has bridled his daughter to the extent she might be tempted to engage in premarital sex, then he may give permission for her to marry. In those days marriages occurred when girls were anywhere between fifteen and twenty years of age. Parents in the New Testament had tremendous responsibilities in picking the right mate for their son or daughter, and determining when the child was emotionally ready for marriage. If this is the correct interpretation, there is a very important principle we must not overlook: Children who are considering marriage should not do so unless they receive their parent's consent. God says we are to honor our parents, and because parents have wisdom, we should listen to them about the person we think we want to marry. If parents do not approve and we marry anyway, we will most likely always have problems with our parents.

ADVICE TO WIDOWS ABOUT REMARRIAGE 7:39-40

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. A widow is free to marry the husband of her choice according to Paul. Apparently she did not have to get parental consent, although that might not be a bad idea. The widow is free to remarry but only in the Lord. She can remarry only a Christian. Christians are told not to be yoked up with unbelievers and this certainly applies to marriage. "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness... What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever" (II Cor. 6:14-15)?

An old Puritan preacher once said, "If you marry a child of the Devil, you will be sure to have trouble with your father-in-law."

When a Christian marries an unbeliever, there is really no possibility of true oneness. Paul says a widow facing her declining years, if she senses a great loneliness and needs companionship, may remarry in good conscience, but she must not marry just anyone out of loneliness. She must marry a Christian and preferably a Spirit-filled Christian.

In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God. If a widow stays single, which Paul thinks is the happier state, she has more time to serve and please the Lord. Many times widows and widowers admit that the second marriage was a mistake, although sometimes the second marriage is a real blessing.

Marriage is serious business. Warren Wiersbe in the book *Be Wise* suggests five questions to be answered when considering marriage: 1) What is my gift from God? 2) Am I marrying a believer? 3) Are the circumstances such that marriage is right? 4) How will marriage affect my service for Christ? 5) Am I prepared to enter into this union for life?

Every single person when feeling a little panicky about not being married should meditate on the truth that there is something worse than not being married and that is being married to the wrong person. Or as Jim Fitzgerald wisely says, "Better to be single and want to be married than to be married and want to be single."

CONCLUSION

There are some basic concepts Christians need to understand about celibacy. First, a single person must have the gift of celibacy. "I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that" (I Cor. 7:7). This gift involves control over one's sex drives so as to avoid sexual immorality. Second, the gift of celibacy may be temporary. A person may have the gift for five or ten years and then choose to get married. C.S. Lewis did not get married until he was 60 years old. Third, a single person can serve the Lord more effectively than a married person. The issue is not moral superiority or higher spirituality but a matter of time and undivided attention to Christ and His kingdom. Fourth, never think of a single person as strange, odd or perverted. Never call a single person an "old maid" or a "weird bachelor," for he or she may bring glory to God in a way that no married person ever could. It is not disgrace to be single. Fifth, there is no spiritual advantage in being single over being married—both are gifts from God. However, the Roman Catholics and others have taken the single state to be morally and spiritually higher than the marriage state. The priesthood takes the vow not to marry for this very reason. It may interest you to note that the celibacy of the priesthood was made mandatory under Pope Gregory VII in 1079 A.D. An unmarried priesthood has no biblical or historical support. However, for some Christians to stay unmarried is to their advantage. Yet, the single state has nothing to do with spirituality or moral superiority but the use of time. Sixth, some of the best Christians of all time have been single men and women: the Apostle Paul, St. Augustine, Robert Murray McCheyne, Florence Nightengale, Hemietta Mean, Lottie Moon, John R.W. Stott and many others.

There are multiple millions of singles in the United States today, and the philosophy of most is, "Live it up; swing as much as possible; do your own thing; live life with gusto; have sex without the responsibilities of marriage." God has some very serious and sobering thoughts for the modern-day single. He says, "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for fornicators (those guilty of premarital sex) and adulterers (those guilty of extramarital sex) God will judge" (Heb. 13:4 NASB). God honors the single state, but He hates all sexual immorality and will judge it!

Are you single? Have you involved yourself in activities which displease the Lord and which stir His wrath? There is forgiveness. There is hope for a better kind of life. There is power to cope with sex drives. Jesus Christ died for sin and sinners. No matter how rank your sin, whether it be gross immorality or sins of the mind, Jesus Christ forgives sinful people and places His eternal love upon them. Trust Christ and he will wipe your sinful state clean making you a new creature in Christ.