

1 Corinthians: A Letter to a Troubled Church

A Single Life (1 Corinthians 7:25-40)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on March 26, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ We've been in a series in our English service, going through the book of 1 Corinthians. And in the past few weeks, we've been in chapter 7, which addresses a range of related issues like sex, marriage, divorce, and finding contentment in whatever stage of life you're in. **Anyone who questions the modern-day relevancy of an ancient book like the Bible simply needs to spend some time in 1 Corinthians 7.** That's especially true of today's passage. It's about singleness. Which is an extremely relevant topic for so many in today's society.

- ❖ **Today, there are more unmarried adults in the U.S. than at any other time in our nation's history.** In a Pew survey conducted last year¹, 49 percent of respondents were unmarried. Which comes at no surprise. Things have been trending that way for decades. **Very soon the number of unmarried adults in America will outnumber the married.**
 - And what's more significant is the percentage of unmarried adults who are *not* living with a partner or in a committed relationship. They're single. And they comprise 30 percent of U.S. adults. **Three-in-ten people that you'll meet are defined as single.**
 - And get this – 57 percent of these single adults are not currently looking for a committed relationship or even going on casual dates. **Roughly six-in-ten single adults are not actively seeking a relationship – let alone a marriage partner.** They seem to be content living the single life.

- ❖ Now having listened to Paul's words being read from this morning's text, you'd think he'd welcome that figure. **Didn't he say back in v8 that it's good for the unmarried to remain single as he is?** And in today's text, didn't he say that those who are free from a wife should not seek one (v27), and "*he who refrains from marriage will do even better*" than he who marries (v38). You'd think Paul would applaud this societal trend away from marriage.
 - But that's not the case. I'm sure he'd consider it tragic. For a couple of reasons. **First, it's not like the 57 percent who aren't looking for a committed relationship are committed to living a life of faithful celibacy – which is what Paul is advocating.** When he says it's good to remain single as he is, he means single *and* celibate – refraining not just from marriage but from any romantic or sexual relationship.
 - And that's obviously not characteristic of the lives of most unmarried adults today. The vast majority are very interested in sex and romance – just not in commitment. **So the kind of secular singleness prevalent today is different *in kind* to the scriptural singleness advocated by Paul.**

- ❖ These two kinds of singleness are also driven by two different visions for life. Secular singleness is driven by a fear of commitment or a self-serving desire for independence. **But the scriptural singleness described in our text is predicated on a different vision for life – one that is bigger, longer, and far more selfless.** My goal this morning is to help you see that difference and to especially help those of you in this season of life – **to maximize your singleness for the glory of God.**

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2023/02/08/for-valentines-day-5-facts-about-single-americans/>

- ❖ **To get there, I'll need to prove that Paul really is advocating for singleness.** I know that sounds strange to a lot of you because it sounds contrary to what you've heard in church. You've heard about the importance of dating with intentionality – with marriage in mind. We tend to treat getting married as the norm and expectation for all young people in the church. But then we read a passage like this. And now we're confused.
 - Ironically, Paul wrote this passage to free us from anxiety (v32), and yet his words have become a source of it. **Those married, or engaged, or who strongly desire marriage are left feeling bad that they can't live up to this biblical ideal.**
 - What we need right now is some clarification as to what Paul is actually teaching. What I'd like to offer this morning are four clarifications to Paul's support of the idea for single people to remain single.

Good pastoral advice but not a general rule

- ❖ Here's our first clarification: **Remaining single is good pastoral advice, but it's not a general rule.** Don't read Paul's words here as a fixed rule. Read it instead as pastoral advice driven by pastoral concerns. Paul does prefer the celibate, single life and wishes it for others, but he goes to great lengths to not absolutize his preference.
 - In fact we've noted in our study of chapter 7, that some in the Corinthian church were absolutizing celibacy as the truly spiritual path. To the point that married believers were refusing their conjugal rights and considering divorce. And apparently betrothed couples were wondering if they should call off their engagements.
 - **Now it'll surprise many of us to hear Paul say that he basically agrees that these unmarried believers should reconsider marriage.** But it's important to see that his rationale is different compared to the Corinthians.
- ❖ Last week, we considered the theological principle that undergirds his teaching in this chapter. The principle was summed up well in chapter 7:20, "*Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.*" **In other words, in whatever life situation you were in when you became a Christian, if you can remain in that position and still be faithful in your discipleship to Christ, then stay there.** Paul reiterates this principle in v26. "*I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is.*"
 - So if you were married when you became a Christian, then stay married. If you were single, then stay single. Look at what he says in v27, "*Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife.*"
- ❖ Now it was stressed last week that this too is *not* an absolute principle. **He is *not* saying a person who is converted to Christ while single is locked in that station in life – for life.** Just look at what he says next in v28, "*But if you do marry, you have not sinned.*" You're not violating a law of God. There is no fixed rule saying Christian singles must remain single.
 - Even the way Paul began in v25 suggests that he's not giving a fixed rule. "*Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord [by that he just means he's not aware of any teaching from the Lord Jesus on this subject], but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.*"

- ❖ So you can trust Paul’s judgement, but he’s not issuing a fixed rule. **He’s carefully considering the unique circumstances in Corinth, and based on that, he’s offering pastoral advice driven by pastoral concern.**
 - This is clear when you consider v26 again. Notice how his advice about remaining as you are – is offered “*in view of the present distress.*” Apparently, there’s something going on in their context that leads Paul to offer this advice.

- ❖ This ‘something going on’ goes unnamed, but it must be some sort of crisis. Some think it refers to ongoing persecution. Others suggest a famine that created economic distress. **Either way – it’s because Paul is sensitive to what’s going on in their lives – that he’s compelled to recommend staying single.** All of this is coming from a pastoral heart.
 - We see that in v28. “*But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned.* So Paul is realistic. **He knows not everyone will (or can) take his advice. So he makes it clear that it’s not a sin to go against it.** But then he quickly qualifies his qualifier and returns to his original sentiment. “*Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.*”

- ❖ Now at first glance, that sounds like what many singles would say today. That form of secular singleness we mentioned would swear off marriage because it seems like such a constraint on your freedom and independence. Marriage will bring a lot of trouble.
 - But that’s not where Paul is coming from. **Whatever worldly trouble he has in mind is “trouble” specifically triggered by whatever that present distress is.** We wish he’d give us more context. But we just don’t know what it was.
 - What matters is that Paul the Pastor loves his sheep, and he wants to spare single members in his flock from anguish. That’s why he advises them to stay single. Not because it’s more virtuous. **But because he wants to spare them the pain and heartache that will be amplified in marriage by the present distress they’re facing.**

- ❖ For example, I wouldn’t be surprised if there are pastors and parents in Ukraine right now, advising their young people to remain in their singleness in view of the present distress. **In the face of war – where death and bereavement are ever-present troubles – I can imagine Christian singles being advised to remain as they are.** Pastoral wisdom would discourage any impulsive, rushed marriages in such unstable times.
 - Or let’s bring it down to a personal level. If one or both partners in a relationship have a crushing level of debt (school, credit card, etc.) and if their job situations are unstable at best, then pastorally-sensitive advice for them *could be* to remain single and not get married (at least not right now). **In view of their present financial distress, a marriage will certainly amplify their troubles, and you’d want to spare them of that.** That’s not a general rule everyone has to follow, but it could be good pastoral advice.

A better option when examined with eternity in view

- ❖ So that's what our passage is saying. Remaining single is not a fixed rule – just pastorally-sensitive advice. Now there's another clarification we could make: **Remaining single is a better option when examined with eternity in view.**
 - Listen to v29. Paul just said he wants to spare those considering marriage from any worldly troubles. He goes on to explain what he means. *“This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none.”*

- ❖ So besides factoring in the pressure of their present distress, Paul is also taking into account the fact that *“the appointed time has grown very short.”* Now what does he mean by that? Well, it's clear he has the end of the world (in its present form) in mind. He says that in v31, *“For the present form of this world is passing away.”*
 - **Some think Paul was convinced that Christ's return and the world's end was not just imminent but immediate.** As if it would take place in their lifetime. So since it could all end tomorrow, you should stay single. Spare yourself the trouble.

- ❖ **But this reading fails to consider the significance of the word Paul uses for *time*.** There are two words in Greek that mean time, *chronos* and *kairos*, but they imply different things. ***Chronos*** refers to minutes and seconds – to the measurement and duration of time. But ***kairos*** is used to describe a decisive moment in time – an epoch or age in history.
 - Now if Paul was saying in v29 that the *chronos* has grown very short, then, yes, his point would be that the end of the world is about to happen so spare yourself the trouble of getting married. **But Paul uses *kairos*, which is why the ESV translates it as “the appointed time”.** And when you consider how he uses *kairos* in other letters, the appointed time Paul has in mind is this present age we're living in – between Christ's first and second coming (cf. Rom 8:18; 1 Cor 4:5; 1 Thess 5:1).

- ❖ **So he does have the end of the world in mind, but you have to understand that Paul's eschatology was shaped by his Christology.** That means his view of the end times was shaped by his view of the Christ event.
 - The Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ was momentous in world history. Marking the end of one age and the beginning of another. So now, from a NT perspective, we're living in the last days (Acts 2:17; 2 Tim 3:1; Heb 1:2). **Paul believed the end-times had already broken into their present time (10:11).**

- ❖ So he's not counting down the days and focused on how much time we have left. **His focus, rather, is on how Jesus has completely transformed all the time we have – regardless of how long or short.** So just because Jesus never returned in their lifetime, that doesn't mean we can just ignore Paul's advice as if it were built upon a faulty premise.
 - **It was never based on the assumption that the end was coming soon.** It was based on the understanding that, for those who can see with eyes of faith, the future has been foreshortened. We can see the end with greater clarity and urgency.

- ❖ Have you ever stood on a mountaintop and noticed how the peaks of the other mountains around you seem a lot closer from that vantage point – closer than you know they really are? **Well, it's like Paul is taking us up to the mountaintop and helping us see the future – to see the end of the ages – from a new vantage point. And with eternity in view, we're in a better position to reevaluate our values and priorities.** That kind of vantage point can radically alter what you believe really matters in the here and now.

- ❖ Look at v29, Paul says, *“From now on”* and he gives four examples of how your perspective can change from now on. **First, it'll change the way you see marriage.** *“From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none.”* That doesn't mean you neglect your marital duties (cf. vv1-5). It just means marriage is not everything because it's not eternal. Your union ends at death (v39). When you say 'till death do us part', you do realize you're vowing to part, right? Just not until death. But, in the end, you are promising to part.
 - **Couples must not forget that their marriage is to be a picture of the relationship between Christ and the Church.** So as a picture, marriage is temporary by nature. Eventually you set it aside. Just as a picture of a long-lost love that a lover has been cherishing for years can be set aside when the lovers are reunited face-to-face.

- ❖ **Second, a clear view of eternity changes how you mourn and rejoice.** Keep reading in v30, *“and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing.”* He's not saying you literally should never weep (cf. 2 Cor 2:4) nor rejoice (cf. 1 Cor 16:17).
 - **Paul's point is that Christians should never forget that our tears and laughter are never the last word.** The sadness of singleness or that of a difficult marriage is never final. And neither is the joy and happiness of the single or married life. There is a Greater Wedding awaiting us. Where every tear will be replaced with perfect joy.

- ❖ **Third, a clear view of eternity changes the way you view your stuff and the accumulation of more stuff.** Look at the end of v30, *“and those who buy as though they had no goods.”* Paul is not pushing for a complete withdrawal from ordinary life. **He's just saying don't be consumed by your consumption.**
 - If I truly believe the present form of this world is passing away – along with my house, my car, my devices, my books! – then I won't be devastated to lose them. If I lose them right now, I tell myself I never really owned them in the first place.

- ❖ **Fourth, a clear view of eternity changes how you deal with the world.** Look at v31, *“and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.”* Again, Paul is not recommending to close yourself off from any meaningful interaction with the world (cf. 1 Cor 5:9-10). No, we are to be in the world but not of it.
 - So we get married or stay single. We find this job or that one. We deal with everyday decisions. **We're going to engage the world, but as Christians, we're not going to get wrapped up in it.** Because we know *“the present form of this world is passing away.”* Because we have eternity in view.

- ❖ **With that perspective, we know that being single and staying single is not the end of the world. And finding Mr or Mrs Right and falling in love is not the end all be all.** It's from that perspective – with eternity in view – that Paul could say that remaining single is better.

Helpful to help you serve the Lord without distraction

- ❖ Now there's a third clarification to make: **Remaining single is helpful to help you serve the Lord without distraction.** Paul is trying to help Christians find whichever course of life best enables them to serve God. Again, this is coming from a pastoral heart – looking out for what's best for individual believers.
 - Start reading again at vv32-34, *“I want you to be free from anxieties. 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.*
- ❖ **Now in this section, Paul's reason for recommending singleness has little to do with the end times and more to do with encouraging a single-minded devotion to the Lord.** He starts in v32 saying he wants us *“to be free from anxieties”*. The word *anxious* means to be divided or fragmented. He goes on to say that the married man (or woman) is anxious (fragmented) about worldly things. *“His interests are divided.”* (v34) **In other words, a Christian husband is fragmented between pleasing his wife and pleasing the Lord.**
 - Let's be careful. Paul is *not* saying that pleasing your spouse (or merely wanting to) is inherently a troublesome burden. He's *not* portraying marriage as a ball and chain. Now you have to think about your wife and her interests! As if that were a bad thing.
- ❖ **But he is acknowledging that marriage comes with responsibilities that can't be ignored.** Practically-speaking, you only have so much time in the day to devote directly to serving God. For married people, our interests are divided between God and family – and rightly so. It's pleasing to the Lord when we serve our family. **But single people, like Paul, can give undivided attention to serving the Lord without having to worry about family and providing for their daily needs.** That's Paul's point.
- ❖ He goes on v35 to explain that he's giving this advice for the good of singles in the church. *“I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.”* The word for *restraint* is literally a leash or lasso used to lead a horse. Paul cares for these unmarried believers. **He's not trying guilt them or force them into remaining single.**
 - He has no intent to leash them and restrain their freedom to marry if they so choose. **His intent here is to help single people discern what course of life will best enable them to serve the Lord without distraction.**

- ❖ **Remember, how we saw, in the beginning of chapter 7, how singleness is described as a spiritual gift given to some in the church (cf. vv7-9).** Well, if this advice to remain single feels like a leash around your neck – if it feels too constricting and causes anxiety – **then that’s a pretty good indicator sign that you don’t have the spiritual gift of singleness.** For you, it would be most beneficial to pursue marriage.
- ❖ But for some here, Paul’s advice is resonating with you. You see the wisdom. It doesn’t feel like a constricting leash at all. In fact, it’s inspiring you! **Then perhaps that means you have the spiritual gift of singleness. Receive it with joy and take advantage of the undivided, undistracted attention that you can give to the things of the Lord.** Don’t despise your gift. Use it joyfully for the glory of God and the upbuilding of the church.

Practically advantageous but not morally superior

- ❖ Now our final clarification is this: **Remaining single is practically advantageous but not morally superior.** That’s a summary of vv36-40. Here Paul addresses betrothed couples. In v36, he imagines a man who might be thinking that he’s not “*behaving properly*” towards his fiancée. Now there’s no need to read into this anything immoral. That phrase could simply mean “acting against social custom”.
 - **The man might conclude that ending the engagement would be socially improper.** If he thinks that and if “*his passions are strong*” – that is, he wishes to marry – then Paul is realistic with his advice. They should get married. “*It is no sin.*” He goes on to say in v39 – speaking specifically to widows considering remarriage – that you’re free to marry whosoever you wish so long as you marry “*in the Lord.*” **Meaning you marry another Christian.** That’s the only requirement.
- ❖ But, if you look at v37, Paul explains that – if the man wants to end his betrothal – then three things need to be in place. **First**, he has to be convinced in his own heart. He needs to be “*firmly established*” that this is God’s calling for him and his betrothed. **Second**, he needs to be “*under no necessity*” and to have “*his desires under control*” – that is, he has no controlling need for sex. **Third**, he’s determined this for himself (“*in his heart*”). If he chooses singleness, Paul says, “*he will do well.*”
 - And then read his summary in v38, “*So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.*” **For the one who chooses to marry and for the one who chooses not to marry – they both do well.** But Paul won’t hold back from saying that the one who refrains will do even better.
- ❖ **But again, the point is that, by “better”, Paul is not saying the celibate, single life is morally superior. For Paul, the advantages of the single life are purely practical.** Both do well. Both please the Lord. But, like we said, the single person has practical advantages over the married person when it comes to giving single-minded devotion to the Lord and to ministry in the church or in the world.

- ❖ Not everyone can receive this advice to stay single. Only those to whom this gift is given. So let the one who is able to receive this receive it (Mt 19:11-12). **May your single life be a testimony to the supreme sufficiency of Christ – demonstrating that the abundant life that Jesus came to bring does not require marriage.** May your singleness preach that Christ is all and in him we have our all in all.

- ❖ But I'm realistic enough to know that the vast majority of you who are unmarried don't want that status for life. You want to get married. **Well, even if you don't have the spiritual gift of singleness, you can still treat your present-day singleness as a gift – and give it to God for as long as you have it.** The Lord means for some Christians to be single for a lifetime. For others, it's only for a season.
 - So if you're in that season right now, then ask yourself, "How can my singleness be leveraged for the kingdom of God?" **In what ways can I consecrate my singleness to the Lord and offer it as a gift to his church?** Perhaps by devoting yourself to intentionally discipling others or formally serving in our church. Or perhaps it's by blessing the global church by being sent on short-term or long-term missions. **How can your singleness be stewarded for Jesus and his name?** Give yourself to that.