

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

Dr. Stephen Felker

Pastor, Swift Creek Baptist Church, 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834

6/5/05

I Corinthians 7:1-2; 6-9, 25-28, 32-40 “Biblical Advice for Single Christians”

Intro. As I said last week, chapter 7 begins a new section in the letter to the Corinthians. Up to this point Paul has been dealing with problems in the church. Now, Paul begins here to answer some practical questions of the Corinthians under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And this morning I am going to use chapter 7 to answer one of the big questions that young people & single adults have: Should I remain single, or should I marry. Then, whichever way you go, you face other issues that will be addressed in this text of Scripture. For example, if you remain single, you have to face the difficult issue of sexual morality. While many today have cast aside biblical sexual morality, God’s Word still stands. So I will address that issue as well today.

There has been much emphasis in the Christian world upon the family: how to have a good marriage; how to have good and godly children. But much less attention has been given to what the Bible says about singleness. This is unfortunate, for there are more single adults in American society today than at any other time in our history. In fact, single adults make up 50 percent or more of the population of most major metro areas.¹ Certainly, this message is as relevant as ever. My message is not geared to helping singles “cope” until they get married. I hope to be practical and positive concerning the problems and blessings of singleness.

Now there are basically 3 types of single adults. We first think of those who have never been married. All young people start out that way, and these days, many young adults are staying single well into their twenties or beyond. Then there are many who are divorced. Finally, there are quite a few single adults who have become single through the death of a spouse.

Some of you may be thinking, “Well, I’m married, so there is no point in listening to this message.” But the fact is that any married person could become single as a result of death, divorce, or desertion. So this message is relevant or it could be very relevant to all of us. And if you have children or friends who are single, perhaps you can share with them what you’ve learned today. Besides, I will talk a little bit about some issues relating to marriage today as well.

Now even though Paul addresses the different groups of singles separately, what he says to all three types of single adults is very similar, so I will combine what he has to say to them. So let’s look at this passage of Scripture together and see what God’s Word has to say concerning this subject. And I’m going to use God’s Word to answer 2 basic questions regarding the single life.

First:

I. SHOULD YOU STAY SINGLE?

Paul suggests that for some people, this is the preferred option. But I want to make it clear that I am not suggesting that you become a nun. I am not suggesting that you become weird or some kind of a hermit. Get out of you mind such negative images. You should consider remaining single because the Word of God says so! Paul says in v.7a, “For I wish that all men were even as I myself.” Paul was a single adult, and he encourages other single Christians to consider remaining single. He also says in v.27b, “Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife.” In other words, if

¹ Preaching Now, 5/24/05.

your marriage has ended with a death or divorce, don't be in a hurry to get married again. I want you to consider singleness as a desirable option, not a dreaded destiny.

Now I realize that you will not choose to remain single without good reason. So the first thing I want you to do is this:

A. Consider the Reasons You Should Remain Single – Paul says you should consider remaining single because such a life is good. In fact, four times in this text Paul says that the single life is a good option. The particular Greek word for “good” (*kalos*) that is used here means what is “beautiful, noble, praiseworthy, commendable, or advantageous.” For example, he says in v.1b, “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” The verb “to touch a woman” (*haptomai*) is based on the Greek word (*hapto*) meaning “to kindle, to set on fire.” The word also means “to fasten one’s self to.” So Paul is not saying, “Don’t ever touch a woman.” He is not talking about a casual touch, but an intimate touch. Thus, it was a common Jewish euphemism for sexual intercourse. The phrase is used in that sense in Prov. 6:29, which says, “So is he who goes in to his neighbor’s wife; whoever touches her shall not be innocent.”² Then in v.8 he said, “But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am.” Then he says in v.26 that it is good for singles to remain as they are. So Paul says here that singleness, as long as it is celibate, is good.

Not only that, but Paul takes it to the next level in v.38, where he says that singleness can even be the “better” choice. Here Paul appears to be speaking of the father of a Christian young lady. He says, “So then he who gives her in marriage does well, but he who does not give her in marriage does better.”

This is direct contrast to what was taught by the Jews in Paul’s day. For instance, an unmarried Jewish girl was looked upon as a reproach. They looked upon singleness as disobedience to Gen. 1:28 where mankind is commanded to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth.

So why is the choice to remain single a good choice, or even better choice? Well I want to give you 3 reasons from this text:

1. Better Potential for Devotion to Christ – Paul says in v.32, “...He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord—how he may please the Lord.” Then notice what he says in vv.34a, “There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body³ and in spirit.” And then he says in v.35, “And this I say for your own profit, not that I may put a leash on you, but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord without distraction.” The word translated “serve” (*euprosedros*) is an unusual word in Greek. It literally means “to sit by waiting to serve.” It is to be devoted to the service of someone. The unmarried person can give more single-hearted devotion to the Lord. They are able, because of fewer family demands and obligations, to be more devoted to the Lord’s work. In Matt. 19:12 Jesus spoke of those who stay single “for the kingdom of heaven’s sake.” If we are single, we can serve the Lord without marital distractions. That means you can dedicate more time to the Lord’s service. You have more energy to serve the Lord. Some are so worn out from children and domestic duties that they have little energy left to serve the Lord. Those who are single have greater freedom and independence. You are not tied down to family obligations. Paul was free to

² In Gen. 20:6 God said to Abimelech in a dream, “...I also withheld you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her.” Also Gen. 26:11 says, “He who touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death.” Ruth 2:9, “Have I not commanded the young men not to touch you?”

³ Don’t conclude from this that marital intimacy makes you unholy. Whereas the body of the married person belongs both to the Lord and their spouse, the body of the single Christian belongs only to the Lord. Keep in mind that the word “holy” simply means “separate.” Their body is more completely separated unto the Lord.

move about from city to city, preaching the gospel. He did not have to worry whether or not he was depriving his family of his time and attention.

David Brainard, the great missionary to the Indians, and Lottie Moon, the great Southern Baptist missionary, never married. Bertha Smith, a spiritual giant for Jesus in the last generation, never married. God uses single Christians. More than one church has been spiritually strong because of a group of dedicated widows staying on their knees in prayer.

So one conclusion that we should draw from all this is that it is wrong for us to look down upon a single person. They are very valuable for the life and ministry of the church. Such a person is not to be viewed as an unclaimed blessing or a loner. In some cases they have chosen the better life in terms of eternal values. Being single may well be God's perfect will and plan for his life. So if in the providence of God you remain single all your life, don't be bitter about it.

That reminds me of a story I read. An elderly woman died having never married. She requested no male pallbearers. In her handwritten instructions for her memorial service, she wrote, "They wouldn't take me out while I was alive, I don't want them to take me out when I'm dead."

2. Less Distracted by Trouble – In v.32a he says, "But I want you to be without care" or free from anxiety. Have a spouse and family gives you something else to worry about. Next, notice what Paul says in v.28b regarding those who are married, "Nevertheless such will have trouble in the flesh, but I would spare you." Paul says that married people will have trouble (*thlipsis*), tribulation, pressure. Now don't think for a minute that if you marry Mr. Right that all your troubles will go away. Some will, but you will pick up a whole new set of troubles!

Now why is it that marriage can be so much trouble? One reason is that when you marry, you are marrying a sinner, and the more of a sinner they are, the more trouble you are going to have. It is hard enough for a sinner to live with himself. But when two people are bound together in marriage, the problems of human nature are multiplied. Each person has their own likes and dislikes, their own characteristics, temperaments, and self-wills. Each partner has some degree of selfishness, pride, and thoughtlessness. Josh McDowell says, "What you are as a single person, you will be as a married person, only to a greater degree. Any negative character trait will be intensified in a marriage relationship, because you will feel free to let your guard down-that person has committed himself to you and you no longer have to worry about scaring him off."⁴ Furthermore, marriage involves conflicts, sacrifices, and adjustments that singleness does not. In fact, it takes most couples at least 7 years of marriage just to work out most of the adjustments needed for a successful and lasting marriage.

Another trouble that usually comes with marriage is children. I believe it is normally wrong to get married and refuse to have children just to avoid the trouble children bring into the relationship. Now the Bible says that children are a great joy and a blessing from God, but they bring into our lives great responsibility, hardship, and sometimes tears. Children cause you to lose sleep. Maybe they cause you to lose your hair! Why is that? It is because children are little, selfish sinners also! Furthermore, it's not easy to bring up children in the 21st century. Our children are subjected to pressures which were unknown years ago. And if you fail to raise your children properly, you will have even more trouble.

Another big trouble is trying to please your mate. That's something you have to do to have a lasting marriage. Paul talks about that in vv.33 & 34. One reason this is so difficult is because men and women are so different! The average man can't figure out what makes a woman tick, and the average woman doesn't understand men. They can get frustrated trying to please their spouse. It

⁴ Josh McDowell, *The Secret of Loving*.

takes a great deal of love and effort to learn what pleases your husband or wife, and then it takes effort and sacrifice to do so.

Also, in v.26 Paul gives another situation when being married and having a family would be especially troublesome. Paul had already experienced persecution, and he probably sensed that widespread persecution was on its way. In fact, in only 10 years from the writing of this letter, Nero began his persecutions of Christians. This reminds me of what Jesus said in John 9:4, "I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work." Persecution is difficult enough for a single person, but the problems and pain are multiplied for one who is married. Paul already had experience quit a bit of persecution. If he had been married, his suffering would have been magnified by his worry about his family and knowledge of their worry about him. They would have been constantly fearful for his life. Who would have taken care of them in his absence?

No wonder Paul says of the married in the last of v.28, "Nevertheless such will have trouble in the flesh, but I would spare you." So if you are single, Paul would like to spare you a lot of trouble.

Now I don't want you to get the idea that Paul is anti-marriage. He is not. In Eph. 5 he uses marriage as a positive illustration of our relationship with Christ. Marriage can be rewarding. A loving, devoted, spiritual family is a source of great joy and strength. But Paul is simply pointing out that marriage may cause some problems while it solves others.

3. Another reason for staying single is found in v.39a. Marriage is a big commitment. Paul says, "A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives." By the way, the marriage bond applies to the husband as well. Marriage is a lifelong commitment. It is not something to be entered into lightly. You don't trade your wife in for a newer model after a few years. That's way some people stay single. They are honest enough to acknowledge that they are not willing to make a lifelong commitment to anyone they know. So it is better to remain single, than to be unfaithful to your spouse, or divorce your spouse.

B. Keep in Mind Your Moral Responsibility as a Christian Single - One primary responsibility of devoted singleness is sexual abstinence. Paul said in 6:13, "...the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord..." A few verses later he said, "Flee sexual immorality" (v.18a). Then he explained why, "...do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?" One tragedy in the Catholic Church has been the requirement that their clergy cannot marry. Certainly a devoted celibacy is commendable. But the problem is that there were numerous cases of priests who had mistresses. Their superiors would not allow them to marry and remain in the priesthood, but they overlooked their fornication. And worse than that, we have heard lately that not a few priests had homosexual relations, even with boys! So if you are going to remain single, the Bible is very clear in its teaching that you must refrain from sexual relations.

C. Recognize the Requirements for Successful Singleness – To remain single, celibate, and devoted to the Lord's service is not easy. So to succeed, you need to meet 4 requirements:

1. You Need to be a Christian – When we hold up God's standard of sexual purity for young people and other single adults, the world laughs and says it is unrealistic. But it is realistic and attainable if you are a Christian. You have the Holy Spirit within you. It is quite possible for believers. Remember, Paul is writing to Christians here. If you are trapped in a lifestyle of immorality, only Jesus can set you free.

2. You Need a Special Gift from God – Paul said in v.7, “For I wish that all men were even as I myself. But each one has his own gift from God...” Paul implies that you need the gift of celibacy to remain both single & celibate. In Matt. 19:11-12, Jesus acknowledges that not all men are able to stay celibate; only those to whom the gift of celibacy is given. But for a person who does not have the gift of celibacy, trying to practice celibacy can bring moral and spiritual frustration.

3. You Need the Virtue of Self-Control – Paul says in v.9, “but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry...” He implies that self-control is needed to remain both single and celibate. We need self-control and self-discipline in all areas of our Christian lives. Gal. 5:23 says that self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. You can’t live life with success if you give in to every desire of the flesh. When it comes to eating, sleeping, leisure, and sexuality, we need to exercise self-control. And if it is God’s will that we remain single, or that we delay marriage, He will give us control over our sexual passion and help us channel that energy into other areas of service.

4. You Need Contentment – Notice what Paul said in v.27, “Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife.” In other words, be content with whatever marital state you are in. He also said in Php. 4:11, “...I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content.”

So I believe that if you are single, or have become single, you should first consider whether God wants you to remain single, and devote the rest of your life to serving Him, and serving others in His name. But singleness is not the best choice for most of us. So you may consider the next main question:

II. SHOULD YOU MARRY INSTEAD?

That’s a big decision isn’t it? In fact, that is one of the 3 most important decisions of life: “What will you do with Jesus? What will be your career? And, Will you marry, and if so, who will you marry? What you decide on those 3 issues will determine your future.

A. Consider One Reason for Marriage: It Helps Prevent Sexual Sin – Paul said in v.2, “Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.”⁵ Furthermore, he said in v.9, “but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.” Being single increases the danger of sexual immorality, especially for younger adults. This is especially true in a society like ours, where sexual license is freely practiced and glorified. There are so many sexual temptations, and a *satisfying* marital relationship certainly helps. In fact, God created sexuality for pleasure (Prov. 5:18-19) in order to create a bond that will keep married couples together.

I must say that this is not the only reason for marriage. Marriage is to meet the need for companionship (Gen. 2:18). Marriage is about love and commitment. Marriage is the proper foundation for building an enduring home for the next generation of children (Gen. 1:28). So marriage cannot be reduced simply to being God’s escape valve for the sex drive. If the pleasure of sex is the primary reason you are getting married, then your marriage is probably will not last. Marriage does not end temptation to lust and immorality. Young ladies, if you give up your virginity before marriage, you will have no idea if that fellow is truly committed to you and is

⁵ Now when Paul said in v.2, “let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband,” he was not giving a command for every believer, as v.6 makes clear.

marrying you for love, and not just sex. But a guy who is willing to abstain from sex until marriage is most likely committed to you and to the Lord. That's the kind of guy you want to marry!

B. Don't Reject Marriage, Thinking Its Unholy - Some believers had evidently gotten the idea that being single and celibate was more spiritual than being married, and for all practical purposes they treated marriage as unholy or even sinful. But notice v.28, "But even if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned." Likewise, he says in v.36, "But if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin, ...let him do what he wishes. He does not sin; let them marry."⁶ Unmarried Christians should not feel guilty about getting married. Heb. 13:4 says, "Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled...."

C. Only Marry a Christian – Paul says in v.39, "...if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord." Likewise, he said in 2 Cor. 6:14, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers...." This is one of the most important considerations when getting married. Why is that? Amos 3:3 says, "Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" If you marry an unbeliever, you will only compound the trouble that marries brings.

D. Don't Make Marriage a Misplaced Priority - In v.27b Paul writes, "Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife." Getting married or remarried should not become your #1 priority in life. Sometimes when single people reach a certain age, they put all their energy into frantically finding a mate. When this happens, they compromise other more important issues just to get a mate. Some will compromise sexual morality to keep a potential mate. Some will marry the wrong person just to get married. If you marry outside of God's will, you will live a miserable life. Listen, to be single in God's will is infinitely better than being married outside His will. Single loneliness is far more to be desired than marital misery. Matthew 6:33 gives us our priority as a Christian: "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." Put God first in your life, and if it is His will, He will bring into your life that special person He wants you to have.

When I met Cheryl, she was actively living for the Lord, and growing in her faith. She worked in the bus ministry, reaching boys and girls for Christ. She wasn't looking for a husband as her main priority. She placed the Lord first in her life. And then the Lord brought us together. Then we married, and for over 27 years now we have been a team in the Lord's service. You will never find Mr. or Mrs. Right until you get right with God.

Conclusion – [Use marriage to illustrate salvation. Then make salvation appeal. Next, appeal to single adult who will commit to remaining single to more fully serve God, if He wills.]

Sources: John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Jerry Vines, *God Speaks Today: A Study of 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

⁶ This passage, vv. 36-38, probably refers to the common custom of arranged marriage. However, it could refer to a man's choices regarding his fiancé.