

The Imperfect Church – 14  
The Focused Church  
1 Corinthians 7:25-40

### Introduction

Christina Hitchcock wrote a book titled *The Significance of Singleness*. In it she tells the story of Kate Bolick, a journalist for *The Atlantic*, who wrote about the reality of singleness and attitudes toward single people like herself. Regarding Bolick, Hitchcock wrote, "She noted that many single women still long for marriage and have a fear of lifelong singleness. She says that she experienced "panicked exhaustion" around the age of 36. (She was 39 at the time of the article.) She felt an intense need to marry immediately, even if it meant settling for a less than desirable or "qualified" man. She interviewed several single women in their early 20s. When she asked them if they wanted to get married and if so at what age they all answered "yes" and that they wanted to be married by the age of 27 or 28. She reminded them of her own age (39) and suggested that they could still be single at that age. She asked, "Does that freak you out?" She reports "again they nodded." Then one of the young women "with undisguised alarm" whispered, "I don't think I can bear doing this for that long."<sup>1</sup>

In our culture, there seems to be an unbalanced view regarding what Paul referred to in 1 Corinthians 7:7 as the gift of singleness. For some, their opinion falls on the negative side, believing that singleness is bad and will hopefully end soon. But this lack of balance can be seen on both sides of the marriage/single debate. Others prize singleness and view marriage as bad and something that should never be part of their lives. The famous Jewish Rabbi ben Azai asked: 'Why should I marry? I am in love with the law. Let others see to the prolongation of the human race.' In the Greek world, Epictetus, the Stoic philosopher, never married. He said that he was doing far more for the world by being a teacher than if he had produced two or three 'ugly-nosed brats'. 'How', he asked, 'can one whose function is to teach mankind be expected to run for something in which to heat the water to give the baby its bath?'<sup>2</sup>

TS – what are we to do with these extreme views, where one side says that marriage is the best and single people are second-class citizens who are incomplete without a spouse, and the other side says that singleness is best

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2018/september/bibles-high-view-of-singleness.html>, accessed 5/21/2019.

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, 3rd ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 82.

and married people are emotionally needy and can't handle being alone? Sadly, even faith groups have helped to promote these unbalanced, unbiblical views of marriage and singleness. The Roman Catholic Church will only ordain those who are single and celibate, regardless of whether God has given them that "gift." Many Protestant churches will not ordain single people because they are viewed with suspicion and as immature. Countless people are made to feel anxious about whether God would have them get married or stay single. For the most part in our culture today, the bent is toward marriage and against singleness.

Howard Vanderwell writes, "I believe most Christians don't subscribe to the legitimacy of singleness. I am convinced that is the reason for so much pain and hurt in the church about that issue. Directly or indirectly, subtly or not so subtly, we have ascribed to the conviction that singles are unfinished business. We say in groups and in private conversations, "Aren't you married yet?"

"What's a nice girl like you doing unmarried?"

"What you need is a good wife."

"Found anybody to date yet?"

"I'm praying the Lord will lead you to a good guy."

"It's too bad he's not married."

Parents say that; relatives say that. Family reunions apparently are notorious for saying those kinds of things. Books and articles are written from a Christian viewpoint that say, "If you will only commit your life to Christ, God will give you a marriage partner." Christ never said that. He said he will lead you to a life of meaning and purpose and fulfillment. He never said he would give you marriage. He's more concerned about other things. We need to accept the legitimacy of singleness. Simple mathematics say there are more women than men in this world, and there always will be. We need to accept it because there are some people whose circumstances involve singleness, and they have no opportunity to change. Others prefer not to change. We need to accept the legitimacy of singleness primarily because the Bible does. We have not read the Bible as carefully as we should about that.<sup>3</sup>

TS – he is correct. The only way to correct this unbalanced view is to look to Scripture to see how God directs this for us. What does He have to say about marriage? And more specifically for our text today, what does He have to say about singleness?

---

<sup>3</sup> Howard Vanderwell, "Christian Singles," Preaching Today, Tape No. 99, <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1996/december/2163.html>, accessed 5/21/2019.

1 Corinthians 7:25-40 – <sup>25</sup> Now regarding your question about the young women who are not yet married. I do not have a command from the Lord for them. But the Lord in his mercy has given me wisdom that can be trusted, and I will share it with you. <sup>26</sup> Because of the present crisis, I think it is best to remain as you are. <sup>27</sup> If you have a wife, do not seek to end the marriage. If you do not have a wife, do not seek to get married. <sup>28</sup> But if you do get married, it is not a sin. And if a young woman gets married, it is not a sin. However, those who get married at this time will have troubles, and I am trying to spare you those problems.

<sup>29</sup> But let me say this, dear brothers and sisters: The time that remains is very short. So from now on, those with wives should not focus only on their marriage. <sup>30</sup> Those who weep or who rejoice or who buy things should not be absorbed by their weeping or their joy or their possessions. <sup>31</sup> Those who use the things of the world should not become attached to them. For this world as we know it will soon pass away.

<sup>32</sup> I want you to be free from the concerns of this life. An unmarried man can spend his time doing the Lord's work and thinking how to please him. <sup>33</sup> But a married man has to think about his earthly responsibilities and how to please his wife. <sup>34</sup> His interests are divided. In the same way, a woman who is no longer married or has never been married can be devoted to the Lord and holy in body and in spirit. But a married woman has to think about her earthly responsibilities and how to please her husband. <sup>35</sup> I am saying this for your benefit, not to place restrictions on you. I want you to do whatever will help you serve the Lord best, with as few distractions as possible.

<sup>36</sup> But if a man thinks that he's treating his fiancée improperly and will inevitably give in to his passion, let him marry her as he wishes. It is not a sin. <sup>37</sup> But if he has decided firmly not to marry and there is no urgency and he can control his passion, he does well not to marry. <sup>38</sup> So the person who marries his fiancée does well, and the person who doesn't marry does even better.

<sup>39</sup> A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but only if he loves the Lord. <sup>40</sup> But in my opinion it would be better for her to stay single, and I think I am giving you counsel from God's Spirit when I say this.

Let's remind ourselves of some of the context going on in this church in Corinth. As these new Christians are trying to navigate a new way of life that is following Jesus, they are trying to figure out how to handle this life-dominating relationship with their spouses. As we have already seen, there is tremendous sexual immorality in their culture, and that has infiltrated into their own church as well. Paul has already soundly dealt with the sin of sexual immorality in chapters 5 and 6. In a pendulum-swinging response to all of this sexual sin around them, some Christians in Corinth are wanting to forge a new path. Some are calling for celibacy as the only way to honor

Jesus in their lives. But some of them are married...celibacy is not the God-honoring decision if you're married. Some are advocating for divorce in the name of more faithful following of Jesus. Yet again, not a God-honoring decision. Others have found themselves, since they have converted, now married to an unbeliever. Do they leave or stay? The God-honoring decision is to stay. As they have asked him these specific questions, he has answered them one by one in chapter 7. In our text for today he brings all his arguments to a close, summarizing what he has taught so far. In so doing, Paul offers two truths that bring biblical balance to marriage and singleness:

### 1. SINGLENES IS PREFERABLE (v. 25-35)

This text is unique among Paul's writings. Typically, he is fairly forceful and blunt with his commands from the Lord. Here, he is uniquely cautious. He opens in v. 25 by saying he does not have a direct command from the Lord, so Jesus never talked about this specific issue. So he is offering his opinion on it (the word he uses for "wisdom" in v. 25 is the same word translated as "opinion" in v. 40). He brackets all of this with acknowledging he is giving his opinion. Now, his is a weighted opinion...he is an apostle called by God, and is currently writing what is an inspired NT letter. However, he is cautious and gracious, acknowledging that marriage, remarriage, and singleness are complex issues that do not always have a "one size fits all" answer. Notice his caution and his pastoral concerns...v. 26 "I think," v. 28 "I am trying to spare you," v. 32 "I want you to be free from concerns," v. 35 "I am saying this for your benefit," v. 36 "let him do as he wishes," v. 37 "he does well to marry," v. 40 "I think I am giving you counsel from the Holy Spirit."

With a unique softness regarding this issue, Paul addresses yet another question they have asked of him. After tackling so many marriage issues, he now looks at those who are single and/or engaged. Should they go ahead and marry, or is it better to remain single? V. 26 – "Because of the present crisis, I think it is best to remain as you are." He repeats his 3-time repeated refrain from the previous section...remain as you are. His counsel is for those who are single to stay that way. Why?

Religious people will use anything in their lives to elevate themselves and look down on others. Jesus told the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Both were praying, but the Pharisee was comparing himself to the wretchedly sinful tax collector next to him. "God I thank you I am not like this tax collector. I pray several times a day, I fast, I give, etc." But the tax collector was so convicted of his sin and in awe of being in God's presence, he couldn't even look up. He just sat in God's presence in sorrow over his sin. Jesus said it was the tax collector who went away innocent in God's

sight. Religious people like to compare themselves to others and use whatever they are doing to promote themselves and make their category better than the other.

People in Corinth were doing this regarding marriage. Remember, there are those who are calling for celibacy and divorce, in the name of honoring God. They think sex is evil, marriage is sinful, and only single people can be more highly devoted to God. To them, being single was a superior category of person. They are a better class of Christian. But that is not what Paul teaches here. He doesn't say to stay single because being single makes you a better, more mature Christian. He doesn't make moral judgments about the issue. He offers his counsel based on "the present crisis." What's the crisis that would push people towards staying single?

Scholars are divided over what exactly he means by crisis. It is likely a combination of factors. Christians in Corinth do not have an easy life. They are enduring persecution for their faith, ostracized by family and friends. There are records of a famine around Corinth in this time period. They are also facing extreme levels of temptation at every turn. Paul's counsel is simple...life is hard enough, why add the burden of marriage? Single is simpler. Notice how he ends v. 28 – "Those who get married at this time will have troubles, and I am trying to spare you those problems."

While this could seem like a negative slant towards marriage, he isn't slamming marriage at all. He is being realistic. Remember, he is talking to people who are engaged. If there is any demographic of people that idealize marriage and have a naïve, utopian view about how wonderful it's going to be, it's the engaged. They have no idea of the problems, heartache, disappointment, and pain that marriage can cause. As great as marriage is, and life-changing and encouraging as your spouse can be, two sinners uniting in marriage causes problems. Paul knows that. He was previously married (either she died or left him when he became a Christian). He is simply giving an honest assessment...life is hard enough as it is without adding more trouble.

There is an additional aspect to this "crisis" that needs to be brought out. There is an "end of the world" piece to this puzzle. Part of their present crisis was trying to separate from the sinful world around them, and place their hope in the world to come when Jesus returns. That's pretty tough stuff to accomplish. But that is where Paul goes next as he starts giving a couple reasons for singleness being preferred.

1 Corinthians 7:29-31 - <sup>29</sup> But let me say this, dear brothers and sisters: The time that remains is very short. So from now on, those with wives should not focus only on their marriage. <sup>30</sup> Those who weep or who rejoice or who buy things should not be absorbed by their weeping or their joy or their possessions. <sup>31</sup> Those who use the things of the world should not become attached to them. For this world as we know it will soon pass away.

The time is short, Jesus' return is imminent. Therefore, since the world we know is going to pass away, we must focus on what is to come. That is one of the reasons he gives to stay single. And he applies the same truth to married people...for those who have a spouse, they are not to focus only on that relationship. When he says, in v. 30, we should not "be absorbed by", and when he says, in v. 31, "should not become attached" both mean the same thing. While we are part of this world, and utilize the things of this world...it is not supposed to dominate our lives. The world to come is supposed to dominate our lives. And from the perspective that the future brings, we are to then live faithfully today.

Just a few days ago our family got back from vacation. It is our favorite time of year as we vacate normal life and hit the road. I look forward to vacation for months and months. And I give a daily countdown to our family as it approaches. Once a vacation goes on the calendar and all the bookings are confirmed, the countdown begins. And as the trip gets closer and closer, it starts to dominate our lives. It even dictates our decisions. Since vacation is coming, it affects how we spend our money now, so we can have the necessary cash to take with us. There are supplies to purchase, details to work out, stuff to pack. The week or two prior to leaving, the fact that I'm leaving even dictates what meetings I am able to take (as some of you experienced having to schedule far out with me), what tasks to accomplish, and countless other things. That trip dominates everything because we have to be ready to go.

That is Paul's point. Jesus is coming back. We are people who are defined by, and driven by Hope. The reality of his return dictates everything about us. We are to be absorbed in, attached to, Him. Paul continues that same idea with another reason to remain single...you can be singularly focused on the Lord and his work in the world.

1 Corinthians 7:32-34 - <sup>32</sup> I want you to be free from the concerns of this life. An unmarried man can spend his time doing the Lord's work and thinking how to please him. <sup>33</sup> But a married man has to think about his earthly responsibilities and how to please his wife. <sup>34</sup> His interests are divided. In the same way, a woman who is no longer married or has never

been married can be devoted to the Lord and holy in body and in spirit. But a married woman has to think about her earthly responsibilities and how to please her husband.

In these verses Paul focuses his attention on a single word...*merimnas*. V. 32 has it as "concerns," end of v. 32 has it as "spend his time," v. 33 has it as "has to think about," v. 34 has it as "has to think about." The word typically translates as "worry" or "anxious."

Matthew 6:25-34 – do not worry about your life

Luke 8:14 – parable of sower, thorny soil, "care of this life"

Luke 21:34 – don't let your hearts be dulled by the worries of this life

1 Cor. 12:25 – all members of the church care for one another

1 Peter 5:7 – give all your worries and cares to God, he cares for you

Here is what Paul is saying...I want you to be free from cares/worries/anxieties (*a/merimnas*). Single people are free from having to worry about their spouse. Single people can devote all their cares/concerns on how to please the Lord, without having the cares/concerns about pleasing their spouse. A single person can be wholly devoted (v. 34 in body and in spirit) to the Lord, not divided.

Again, he is not saying that single people are better Christians. He is simply stating the fact that married people are divided (word means "in factions") in their loyalties. Though there may be more you want to do for the Lord, ministries you'd like to devote some time to...but you can't because you need to be at home. Your spouse needs your help to run the house. Your kids need your attention at home. Those are not bad things. Those are very good things, ways in which you can serve the Lord. But remember who he is talking to. He isn't talking to married people he is trying to guilt into serving more. He is talking to single people who need to know what is coming for them if they get married. Since Jesus is coming soon, and since you are currently free from time-consuming burdens like marriage and family...stay single and devote all your attention to the Lord. Notice how he ends this section:

1 Corinthians 7:35 - ***35 I am saying this for your benefit, not to place restrictions on you. I want you to do whatever will help you serve the Lord best, with as few distractions as possible.***

That is his motivation. This counsel is for the benefit of those who are currently single. This is worth considering. If staying single will help you serve the Lord best, with fewer distractions, perhaps this is God's call on your life. Or...maybe marriage is the better route to take.

## 2. MARRIAGE IS VALUABLE (v. 36-40)

1 Corinthians 7:36-37 - <sup>36</sup> But if a man thinks that he's treating his fiancée improperly and will inevitably give in to his passion, let him marry her as he wishes. It is not a sin. <sup>37</sup> But if he has decided firmly not to marry and there is no urgency and he can control his passion, he does well not to marry.

If you are engaged, moving towards marriage, desire to get married, and you know that is the better option for you, then get married. If you know you won't be able to stay sexually pure (remember, singleness is a gift from God, giving that ability), then get married. He already said this in v. 8-9 – <sup>8</sup> So I say to those who aren't married and to widows—it's better to stay unmarried, just as I am. <sup>9</sup> But if they can't control themselves, they should go ahead and marry. It's better to marry than to burn with lust. It is better to honor God as married than dishonor him as single.

But...if you have decided firmly (phrase means "in your heart"), you believe God is calling you to remain single for sole devotion to him and his work in the world, and if you are gifted by God to remain sexually pure, then, as Paul says, you "do well not to marry." There are benefits to that calling that are worth considering. And with that, he now comes to a great conclusion in v. 38 - <sup>38</sup> So the person who marries his fiancée does well, and the person who doesn't marry does even better.

Getting married is good. It is valuable. Don't misunderstand Paul's teaching about singleness to mean that marriage is bad. It's not. It is a wonderful, God-honoring relationship, through which God will transform you into greater levels of maturity and Christ-likeness. That relationship mirrors the relationship between Jesus and the Church (Ephesians 5). It is good and to be affirmed. But single people are not second-class citizens, nor second-class Christians. Just because marriage was best for you, doesn't mean it is for them. And vice versa. Don't project God's call on your life onto theirs.

1 Corinthians 7:39-40 - <sup>39</sup> A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but only if he loves the Lord. <sup>40</sup> But in my opinion it would be better for her to stay single, and I think I am giving you counsel from God's Spirit when I say this.

So for those who are married...stay married. You are bound (word used to refer to physical restraint). But for those who are single, or single again...if God calls you to get married, the only restriction is that they love the Lord. But if God calls you to stay single, it is a good gift and should be welcomed.