

Redeeming Singleness from Misplaced Realities

1 Corinthians 6:9-7:40

Introduction: In a recent article in *desiringgod.org*, Katelynn Luedke explained the plight of a single Christian woman who desires to be married.¹

"I wanted an MRS degree. Instead I got a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science. I was never the girl who dreamed about getting married. I entered college single, and ready to take on the world. I had Christ, I was getting a good education, I was content. Desires for a family lived somewhere out in the land of my thirties.

*At some point in my college years, childhood friends began getting engaged, married, and then pregnant. Very quickly, 'it is not good for man to be alone' started sounding like me, too. (After a friends engagement) I realized that all I wanted was to be married and to start a family. The wife and mom job description was suddenly better than any job my diploma could earn me. So began my battle with **discontentment and loneliness**.*

Does this sound familiar at all? What do I do if I have a desire to be married but I am not (and have no prospects? How do I solve my plight of loneliness? What does it mean to **content in singleness**? Have I missed out of God's best? Is there some deficiency in me? Why did God say "He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor with God" (Prov. 18:22), give me a desire, and then withhold from me? That does not seem fair, or at least not right.

To make matters worse (or at least more difficult, it seems like there is polarizing pressure in our culture (marriage is lowered - see notes from last week) or in the church its seems like marriage is given privileged status above singles. Those who are not married are either relegated to a separate group or ignored altogether. Often once a person is married they can neglect their single friends or just plain act weird around them. Then we take into account all those who are not just young and single, but those who are older, divorced, and widowed, and we begin to understand that the answer to some of these questions are not so simple.

In her article, *"Singled out by God for good"*, Paige Benton Brown listed common ways that Christians tried to "explain" singleness:

- "As soon as you're satisfied with God alone, he'll bring someone special into your life" --- as though God's blessings are ever earned by our contentment.
- "You're being too picky - as though God is frustrated by our fickle whims and need broader perimeters in which to work.
- "Before you can marry someone wonderful, the Lord has to make you someone wonderful" - as though God grants marriage as a second blessing to the satisfactorily satisfied.

"Beneath these statements is the premise that **single life is a state of deprivation for people who are not yet fully formed for marriage**. Brown responds along the lines of what Paul states in 1 Corinthians, *'I am not single because I am too spiritually unstable to possibly deserve a spouse, nor because I am too spiritually mature to possibly need one. I am single because God is so abundantly good to me, because this is best for me.'*²

¹ <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-good-unwanted-gift-of-singleness>

² Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, p. 196-97.

Understanding what the Bible has to say about different stages of life is of utmost importance, not only to bring comfort, but better understanding. God has called us all to live for His glory, to live singly for Him, and has given us all that we need to accomplish this in Christ and His gospel. Grasping what the Bible says about this will direct us as we talk about the roll of sexuality, including how we encourage those who struggle with homosexuality, as we see that singleness is far from a negative reality.

Paul discusses singleness in 1 Corinthians 7, the fullest and most detailed section of Scripture regarding different conditions of relationship. But he discusses it in a broader context of our position in Christ, the place of sexuality, and the realities of marriage and singleness.

1. **Positional Realities** – Washed and Waiting (1 Cor. 6:9-11)

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality,¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.¹¹ **And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.**

- **The makeup of the church** - Notice the makeup of the church at Corinth was a reflection of its culture - there was about every category of sin, including sexual sin. Much like our culture, a large number of these were normalized and seen as good things rather than an offense to God. They had many broken people, who had many questions about how life should function after the gospel had changed them.
- **IDENTITY in Christ** - This point cannot be stressed enough, and if we can come to grips with this point, every person will leave here this morning changed. The key to understanding this verse, the gospel, and our very lives is that at one point they were engaged in their sin because that is **who they were!** But now, they have been **washed, sanctified, and justified**, which are past realities (something Christ has done) that has newfound positional realities. They are no longer categorized by their sin (you are a idolatrous follower of Christ) but now have a whole NEW REALITY. They will still struggle with sin, but NOT THEIR POSITION. We now have a **radically new relationship with Jesus, who now is our all, who is our satisfaction, and the ONE we live for.** He has made it all possible through His death, burial, and resurrection.

2. **Sinful Realities** – Fleeing from what enslaves (1 Cor. 6:12-20)

"All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be **enslaved** by anything.¹³ "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food"- and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.¹⁴ And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!¹⁶ Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "**The two will become one flesh.**"¹⁷

But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? **You are not your own,**²⁰
for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Reasons to flee

This reality gives us a whole new reality toward sex. Sex in our culture (and most likely in Corinthian culture) has been attached to our identity (you must engage in this if you are to be a thriving human) while simultaneously disconnecting it from value or meaning (its just sex). We are called to a clear command in terms of sex outside of marriage: **FLEE**. Get away. Run. Don't look back. Sexual

immorality is **enslaving, it attaches a member of Christ to a prostitute, it devalues the covenant of marriage, and is sinning against our own body.**

Power & Purpose in Purity

Notice at the end of this section that the reason for sexual purity comes out of our **identity in Christ**: *we are inherently no longer our own because we have been bought with a price.* That means that Christ now owns us, since He has given us His righteousness and we are now slaves of Him. This leads to a very clear understanding of what our **lives are, and what they are for.**

- **God's desires trump ours** - *What do I do with my desires for good things?* Yield them to Christ. *What do I do with my desires for evil?* Repent and yield them to Christ. We must understand that Christ owns us. Too often we flip this script and think that somehow God is there to facilitate and carry out my desires, instead of the other way around.
- **We are to seek to glorify Him, not ourselves** - My body, my life, my time, my money, all of me is now given to glorifying God. This means I will fight my **selfishness** (the killer of all relationships) and die to myself daily. It means we begin to ask the right questions. Instead of "*why does God not give me what I desire*", it changes to "*how do I glorify God where I am at today.*"

The greatness of glorifying God in Christ - - Here is why this is refreshing, life giving, and freeing news. God commands us to glorify Him wherever He has placed us, and we can do it **ONLY** because of Christ. That mean if we are relegated to a bed fighting cancer or an autoimmune disease, or if we are in a lonely and unequally yoked marriage, or are taking care of a loved one, we can glorify God in that place and condition! It is not based on our accomplishments (look what I did for you), but on His accomplishment and our yielded obedience to Him.

3. **Celibate Realities** – Celibacy and fulfillment (1 Cor. 7:1-6)

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."² But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.³ The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.⁴ For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.⁵ Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.⁶ Now as a concession, not a command, I say this.⁷ I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

Goodness

Building on our flight from sexual immorality, Paul sought to answer questions that the church had. Some had believed they needed to get out of the marriages they were in, and some had sworn off sex altogether, based on their former lifestyles. Paul began by affirming that **NOT** having sex in one's life is a **good thing**. In other words, engaging in a sexual experience **DID NOT CREATE MEANING OR VALUE** in ones life. Sex was created as a gift in marriage, but was not given to those outside of marriage.

Guardrails

But Paul also acknowledged that one of the ways to destroy a marriage is through giving into the temptation of sexual immorality (seriously, how many marriages have dissolved because of this), married couples **SHOULD NOT** seek celibacy. In fact, part of marriage is giving up authority over ones body to our spouse. The only time we would abstain from sex in marriage is for a (short) time that we'd

devote ourselves to prayer. In marriage then giving ourselves to each other is a good thing, one that brings glory to God, and is an act of worship.

Gift

One may think that Paul would then say he wished everyone would experience. But he actually says the opposite. He said that he wished everyone would be like him (single and celibate), but each has been given his **own gift from God**. His meaning is simple: whether you find yourself married or single, each reality is a gift, an act of grace from God.

But what about the whole "gift of singleness" aspect? The "gift" of singleness is not some backhanded curse (ah man, I got the gift!). It is merely a recognition that whatever condition that I am in, whether by choice or forced on me (by a spouse leaving or dying), it is a gracious gift from the Lord. Some have embraced their single life as a way to uniquely serve the Lord³, while others live hopeful that God will bring about their desire. The key is finding contentment in whatever condition we find ourselves, which Paul addresses next.

4. **Settled Realities** – Content in Remaining (1 Cor. 7:17-24)

Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. ¹⁸ Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. ¹⁹ For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. ²⁰ Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. ²¹ Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. ²² For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. ²³ You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. ²⁴ **So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.**

Source of Contentment

Paul makes sure that we understand that we should be content in whatever condition we find ourselves in: *unmarried and widowed* (8), married (9), unequally yoked marriages (12), unequally yoked with a consenting spouse (13), unequally yoked marriage where the spouse leaves (15), circumcision (18), slavery (21-22). In other words, whatever the reality you find yourself in today, you have the grace to glorify God, finding what Paul said was the secret to contentment "**I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me**" (Phil. 4:10-13).

Secure in Identity

The reason for our contentment is our security in Christ. Paul is very clear that contentment IS NOT IN OUR CONDITION, since if a slave was able to be set free, they should take it. The conditions we find ourselves in are fluid. Those who are single may get married. Those who are married may lose their spouse. Those who do not desire the opposite sex may have their desires change and may get married. **Conditions are fluid. The source of our identity is not.** So we are to remain **with God** in whatever condition we find ourselves in, because He never changes.

5. **Practical Realities** – Advantages and Freedom (1 Cor. 7:25-40)

³ Elisabeth Elliot was widowed after her husband died on the mission field. She wrote, "*Having now spent more than 41 years single, I have learned that it is indeed a gift. Not one I would choose. Not one many women would choose. But we do not choose our gifts, remember? We are given them by a divine Giver who knows the end from the beginning, and wants above all else to give us the gift of Himself.*" From her book, "*Let me be a woman*"

Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.²⁶ I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is.²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife.²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.²⁹ 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,³⁰ and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods,³¹ and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.³² I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord.³³ But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife,³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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.

Finally, Paul lists out advantages to singleness, where he gives reasons why he would desire others to be as he was: **single and celibate**.

Freedom from unique troubles (7:25-28)

It is good to remain as you are. if you are single, stay single. If you get married, you have not sinned, but must understand that the **grass is not greener on the other side**. If you believe marriage will fill voids in your heart or solve the longings of your heart, you will inevitably exchange one difficult reality with another. In marriage, there are worldly troubles. Conflict grows when two sinners are called to live in close proximity and intimacy. Marriage reveals sin and demands constant sacrifice. Marriage does not ULTIMATELY SATISFY my desire for intimacy or sexual satisfaction, so we are left wanting from our unrealistic expectations. **Marriage is good, but it is not ultimate. Christ is.**

Awake to the way things really are (7:29-31)

The time is growing short, so Paul commands that we are to live in a way that acknowledges and embraces the conditions we are living in: marriage, sorrow, rejoicing, buying, and doing business are all things everyone is involved in, but they are NOT ULTIMATE. We know that all of these, even marriage, are passing away for a permanent reality of a future kingdom and state with Christ. All of us, single, married, divorced, widowed, or unequally yoked are called to live with a greater reality, to cultivate our thinking around the fact that we are bought, owned, and live for Christ's glory, not our own. This is why we don't focus on teaching about marriage or singleness specifically all the time, because we ALL need to learn to follow Christ, to be satisfied in Him, and to glorify Him, and when we do, we live out our condition fully.

Freedom from (certain) anxieties (7:32-35)

Finally, he pointed out that married couples have **unique anxieties** apart from those who are unmarried. Responsibility, sacrifice, pressure, giving up authority over our bodies, and seeking to please our spouse (especially when we do not feel like it) leave us uniquely anxious. One who is unmarried is freed up from these types of anxieties (yet, admittedly, have their own set of anxieties). The point that Paul drives at is clear: **we strive to promote good order, and secure UNDIVIDED DEVOTION TO THE LORD**. Notice this was not given just to singles, but to all of us. **Our goal in any and every condition of life is NOT to let the condition dominate, identify us, or become idolatrous**. In other words, all of us are to live singly, focused not on ourselves but on Christ who has purchased and freed us from our sin.

Some takeaways from this:

- **We do not find our identity in our conditions, but in Christ** - In other words, you are not seen as a "single Christian" here, but as a Christian who currently is unmarried. This matters in how we structure this church, as even shepherding groups are not designed around any reality except Christ!
- **Marriage and kids are highly valued, but not ultimate** - When we make something good into something ultimate, we make it an idol. Only Christ is ultimate, and only He can fill the voids in our heart. We can take marriage as the gift it was intended to be when we are satisfied in Him, and can thrive without marriage when we are satisfied in Him.
- **We must fight for the right expectations in life** - Unfulfilled expectations lead to disappointment, bitterness, and anger. The grass is not greener somewhere else. Answer this question. Which is easier (or better): being a man or woman? Submitting as unto the Lord or loving like Christ loved the church? Being married or being single? Be careful. Make sure you answer these Biblically. The answer is that neither is better, since all can glorify God in Christ, and all carry unique difficulties.
- **Don't believe the lie, expose it** - Do not believe that no one understands, or that your condition is so overly unique that you can't relate, or that somehow you are alone. Don't believe that a change in church (with a better group for me), change in condition (if only I was _____), or a change in ANYTHING external will fix, solve, or bring you ultimate happiness. Only Christ can do this.
- **Fight to cultivate your identity in Christ alone** - All aspects of my life: freedom, identity, contentment, and devotion are found in Christ, nothing else. This means we must cultivate right thinking (from Scripture), so that we can live, love, and obey in whatever condition we find ourselves.

Concluding Questions:

- How do we encourage each other in the conditions where we find ourselves? What responsibilities do we have to those in other conditions (what responsibilities does a married couple have to a single person, divorced, widowed, etc)?
- What are areas have we thought wrongly about those in other conditions? Are there any areas we may have offended, hurt, or sinned against them?
- How do we secure undivided devotion to Christ in the stage/condition you are in right now?