

Gospel Shaped Singles

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[0 : 00] Okay, so we've been thinking through gospel-shaped families, husbands, wives, parents, and children. And this morning, as Rob's already told us, we're thinking about what it means to be gospel-shaped when not married.

So that means that here this morning, perhaps you're a teenager. And as a teenager, you just assume that marriage is the next phase of life for you.

Perhaps you're a bit older and have yet to find that soulmate you long for and are struggling in that circumstance.

Perhaps you've been married, but you're currently living alone because your marriage has ended in the pain and hurt of divorce. Or your spouse died and you're just left with that overwhelming grief and loneliness.

So how does God's Word speak into those sort of situations? How does God's Word help us be gospel-shaped? Whether on the one side of the equation, you are the one living alone.

[1 : 13] Or on the other side, you're part of this church family, which together has the responsibility to engage and support those who are living alone.

I want to just very briefly lift out three points. The first one I want to say is this. Marriage is God's normal pattern, but not essential.

So I'm going to give you a very, very quick summary of the first 16 verses of chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians because it sets the context. Verse 1, concerning the matters about which he wrote.

There was issues in the church and the Christians at Corinth had written to Paul for guidance, particularly in this section, we believe. It was guidance on the place of sex and marriage for a Christian, for one who claimed to be spiritual.

And it was causing deep division. Some Christians apparently, still wrestling with the Greek philosophy they grew up with, took the line that to be spiritual, a Christian had to refrain from sex.

[2 : 23] Because sex was a physical expression and therefore it polluted the mind and the body. And so if you follow through, and I don't have time to do it, but if you read in your own time, verses 2 through to 7, it seems like married couples were being pressured to give up sex.

And verses 8 to 11, it seems like widows and widowers were being pressured to remain single. And even worse, if they had already remarried, it appears they might have been pressured even to abandon their new marriage.

And verses 12 through to 16, spouses in marriages where one of the spouses had become converted, had been converted, were being pressured into separating from the marriage, leaving the marriage.

Divorcing their non-Christian partners. So that's the context in which Paul writes these words. And his point in response to all that is very, very simple and very, very clear.

Paul teaches that being married or single is an issue of purposeful Christian freedom. If you look at verses 6 through to 8.

[3 : 39] Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. 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.

To the unmarried and widows, I say, that it's good for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. Paul knew that God's normal pattern right from the beginning of the world was marriage.

Yet, he encourages the Corinthians to remain unmarried like himself. He encourages those whose spouses had died to choose to remain unmarried.

Because we'll see when we get to verse 35, it's been read to us. Because that circumstance allows for a greater undivided devotion to the Lord.

And if you look at verse 26, 27, and 28 that's been read to us, Paul's point comes out again. He's really saying, look, being single, being married, it's entirely optional.

[4 : 50] It's a freedom. It's a choice. But what is not optional, as Gareth said, verse 35, is obedience and faithful service of Christ in whatever marital status you're in.

And Paul goes on to say, again, the first 16 verses, if you read them and think through them, you'll see all this clearly, I think. Either state, each state, has demanding responsibilities and wonderful opportunities.

So Paul's actually getting us to think about being married or being single, in a sense, in the same way. Each has demanding responsibilities.

Each has wonderful opportunities. The early verses of chapter 7, if you're married, then, says Paul, you must strive to be fully engaged in serving your spouse. And that's a demanding responsibility, including, says Paul, sexually engaged for the sake of your spouse.

It's a demanding responsibility. Verse 16, even if one spouse is an unbeliever, says Paul, there's a wonderful opportunity to model the love of Christ and perhaps see the unbelieving spouse saved.

[6 : 08] Have a look at verse 16. Wife, how do you know whether you will save your husband? Husband, how do you know whether you will save your wife? There's a demanding responsibility in a marriage where one spouse is converted and the other isn't.

But there's a wonderful opportunity at the same time. And likewise, he speaks to the widows and the widowers.

If you're single, he says, your demanding responsibility is to strive to resist temptation particular to your circumstance. Not necessarily more temptation or worse temptation, just different temptation particular to your circumstance.

And the opportunity is to use your freedom to serve the Lord in a way which your married counterparts cannot. Friends, the point is this.

Building gospel shape into this issue of marriage and singleness begins as we respect both circumstances.

[7 : 14] We will not make God's normal pattern into something that's essential. We will not resent or dismiss each other's circumstances, as Christians so often do.

We will not believe that one state is harder or better than the other, but that they're just different, quite different.

Each has its unique advantages. Each has its unique disadvantage. Each has its unique challenge. Each has its unique struggles. And so here, practically, you see, so often married people tend to think those who are single just have it easy.

And so we sort of mop our brain and think, well, us marrieds, we have such demanding responsibilities and demands on our times, and boy, I wish I was single. They only have themselves to get dressed.

They only have themselves to spend their money on. They only have themselves, and so the list goes on. Do you hear the attitude behind that? They've got it easy.

[8 : 32] And flip the coin. So often, single people think married folk have it made. Oh, if I was married, I would be happy.

I wouldn't be whinging about my husband like so-and-so over there. I would just think it was wonderful. I would never complain about my spouse. I would never complain about my children. I would never complain about the mess or lack of time. It is just, what is your problem when you're married?

Do you see what attitude underlies that? Marriage is God's normal pattern, but not essential.

Second thing is, you're validated by being in Christ, not your marital status. If you look now at verses 17 through to 24, the part that was read to us.

See, if you look at verse 17, 18, 19, it appears the pressure that I mentioned earlier on was continuing at different levels, and it was quite intense pressure. It appears that the pressure to demonstrate true spirituality in the church in Corinth was pushing some converted Jews to actually seek a surgical process to remove the evidence of circumcision.

[9 : 46] Now, that's a pretty intense pressure when you think what that might mean. Verses 23 to 24. It seems like converted slaves were being pressured to believe that they couldn't be truly spiritual while ever they remained a slave.

And so they became obsessed about getting their freedom. Verse 23. Have a look at verse 23. Paul says, Paul's point?

Our value, our worth as a being, as a person, is in the fact that we've been redeemed or bought by Christ and adopted as his beloved children.

So, here's the practical application. Physical circumstances are irrelevant to your worth, to your value. Slaves, freed, circumcised, uncircumcised, married, single.

Those categories are irrelevant when you're in Christ. Irrelevant to your value or your worth, that is, when you're in Christ. Because you're equally valuable to Christ.

[11 : 11] You've been validated by his death on your behalf. You're equally loved by Christ and equally spiritual. So, my friends, we need to hear this.

Everyone here needs to hear this. Being single is not second rate or second class as a Christian. Let's start with society.

Don't be fooled by the nonsense, the lie that our society peddles, which says a person needs to have sex to be fulfilled.

That's what our society teaches. Because sex validates. Sex is what turns boys into men and girls into women.

And it's just a pernicious lie. Now, come a bit closer, because, you see, I think some Christians give traction to this lie.

[12 : 16] And we do so by talking about our marriages in such unrealistic, smulchy, even dishonest ways, that we leave those who are single feeling inadequate or second rate.

And that, in turn, and I've seen this so many times over my ministry years, this, in turn, leads young singles to rush into marriage. Why?

Well, listen up, young people, here for a minute. Because so many young people get the notion that getting married is the pathway to validate you having legitimate sex.

Because that's what's going to make you complete as a person. You know what that results in? It results in the next generation of unhappy, failing marriages.

Because sex and marriage will never truly and sustainably validate anybody. Now, let me pause.

[13 : 35] In case you don't think I've been negative already, let me pause and be negative now. Let me give a word to the matchmakers among us. Put bluntly, you need to stop matchmaking.

Because the message communicated as you matchmake is that being single is second rate.

Or less than desirable. Or less than wholesome. Take it another step further. Matchmaking actually destroys gospel shape between brothers and sisters in Christ.

Because inadvertently it suggests that being married is more important than being faithful in the circumstance the Lord has put you in. In Paul's terms here, it suggests that we think our provision for singles among us is better than God's provision.

It says, well, God has put you in a particular circumstance. Just be content in God's circumstance. We say as matchmaking, well, actually, no, God's got it wrong. And I'll offer you a better provision.

[14 : 55] I'll push you to a better place. Whew. That's a big call, isn't it? And I'll tell you, matchmaking can actually destroy genuine friendships.

Because it just makes two single people, one who happens to be male, one who happens to be female. It makes them really awkward. Because everybody's going, ooh, so-and-so, talk to so-and-so.

And it destroys, potentially, the possibility of special relationships actually developing.

Because it puts everybody under pressure. My friends, it's cruel. It's unloving. And I so often get so upset when I hear Christians making cheap comments such as, so-and-so, you know, they're just too fussy.

I have urges to grab people by the throat at that stage. So far I've resisted. Don't push me. They're playing too, they're playing hard to get.

[16 : 08] Comments like that are just insensitive and patronizing. Because you don't know the context of the person. In fact, the reality I've seen, and there was half a dozen ladies in the church in Tarmouth where I worked for many years.

Pretty much my own age. They could have been married multiple times over. In terms of suitors asking them to get married. But they actually very courageously refused to accept anybody.

That is, a person who just come along and said, I'm a Christian man, therefore we're entitled to be married. No, they were actually not prepared to go down that pathway. And it wasn't about playing hard to get.

It was about looking for a partner who was going to be Christ-centered. Now that sort of stuff requires our admiration, our respect, our support.

Not cheap comments. Because a Christian, you see, a Christian is called to be spiritually faithful. I can't find anywhere in the Bible that says a Christian is called to be married.

[17 : 21] Verse 17. Verse 22. Verse 22.

For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. God's challenge to his people is to struggle for faithfulness.

To be a slave of righteousness, whether you're single or married, circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free. Now, of course, it's always easy to say God is sovereign when life is happening as we think it should.

But Paul is very clear here that every circumstance, including being married or being single, is assigned by God and to be embraced wholeheartedly as the context in which God calls for faithful service.

My friends, there is no second best with God. Married or single, each is from God. Each is good.

[18 : 36] Now, if you're single then, you may look to the future with some degree of hope. The Lord may well, in his wisdom and provision for you, bring some person into your life in the future.

And you may well legitimately long for that. But in the meanwhile, God's challenge to you is to set your heart to delight in him.

And your current provision from the Lord. So the third and final point then is, to be gospel-shaped is to bloom where God has planted you. So the secret of thriving as a single person?

Well, I've already moved into it. It's embracing God's provision for you where you are now. Rather than trying to change your circumstance and asking him to enable you to live alone for his glory.

So I'd say to you who are single this morning, dare to see your singleness as a gift. Dare to see your singleness as a gift.

[19 : 44] Look at verse 7. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each one has his own gift from God. One of one kind, one of another.

The Greek word there is charisma. Meaning a grace-based gift. Which becomes a reality in the life of a believer by the energizing power of God's Holy Spirit.

In other words, God, by the power of the Holy Spirit working within you, enables you to live well and thrive to bloom in the place that he has put you.

He puts you here and he enables you, he gives you the tools you need, which is the Holy Spirit, to actually thrive in that position. Whether it's married or single. And notice in that context, Paul is actually describing also being married as a gift.

Being unmarried as a gift. Being a widow or widower as a gift. Even living with an unbelieving spouse as a gift.

[21 : 03] Embrace the reality that God has planted you as a single. Rile and lament your circumstance and allow bitterness, resentment, and things like that to grow towards God and towards others around you.

View your singleness as an opportunity to demonstrate that you actually realize you have the most important one-fledged relationship that any person can have.

The relationship with Christ. And that nothing else is desirable or necessary for intimacy, for security, and for satisfaction in life.

Delight that God's goodness gives you opportunity to engage wholeheartedly in a range of ministry options. Options that perhaps aren't as easily accessible to your married counterparts.

And Paul certainly picks that up in verses 26 and verse 28 through 32 through to 35. He's not saying that unmarrieds have this endless amount of free time.

[22 : 17] He's not saying that at all because there will be particular challenges that those who are single will have. Those who are married don't have them. We'll hear a little bit more of those from Judy and Ruth in a minute. But there are certain things that you can do when you're a single person that married people won't easily have access to.

Paul says, delight in that. And the final thing then is dare to live in the fullness of the future now. Look at verse 29 through to 31.

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. 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. 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.

Paul's putting marriage and singleness in its proper context. The present form of this world is passing away.

[23 : 25] And Paul's anticipating the very thing that Jesus taught. That a time is coming when there will be neither marrying nor giving in marriage. Because our focus will be entirely consumed around our true husband, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And an expression of that true and primary one flesh relationship. My friends, hear this very, very carefully.

This means that singleness is not an inadequacy or deficiency of the present as we look to the future.

Quite the opposite. Singleness in the context of total dependence on Christ for security, satisfaction and validation.

Is a glimpse of the fullness of the future in expression now. Man, we're so short-sighted, aren't we as Christians?

[24 : 37] When we think that marriage is the solution to our longing for intimacy and deep, stable relationship. Our restless loneliness which craves deep connection, satisfaction and love.

Our desire to have an extended family and descendants to remember us. Because no husband or wife can do this for us, for our spouse. That's what we look to Christ to do for us.

That ultimate reality is only found in a growing relationship with Christ. So, where do we look to? We look for Christ. And then we look, my friends, to one another.

Because at a practical level, our church family is the solution. So, we as a family here are to support those who are single.

And in the short term, offer that source of deep connection, love, support, understanding. That's the picture of the future.

[25 : 49] Under Christ. We ought to care for one another. Whether married or single. In a way that reflects our family character. Having been so deeply loved.

We ought to care for our brothers and sisters in Christ. As the reality of heaven now. And those of us who are married, we also are to live in the fullness of the future now.

Not obsessed with our marital status. That is the end point for us as Christians. Far from it. Far from it. And if anything less than that is true for either us as married or us as singles, then we won't have the gospel shape that the Lord intends us to have.

Let me pray. Lord, help us to hear this teaching. It may well be challenging. It may well come across as being ridiculous in terms of what's claimed and stated.

But Lord, help us to hear your spirit speak to us through your word in this matter. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.