

'Singleness, Marriage & Eternity'

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[0:00] Well, a country boy decided to propose to his girlfriend and because he's from the country! He decided to use hay bales saying marry me complete with a tick the box for y yes and! They noticed which one the spray can is on which tells you which answer he's hoping for.

And so he blindfolded his girlfriend and then they drove out there and then led her around to the back of his ute where he got down on one knee, took the blindfold off and proposed and she ticked yes and here they are walking away. But here's the question, how would you react if she ticked no? If she said, actually I think you're great but I've been thinking about becoming single for a little while because I know that will help me follow Jesus and I didn't know how to tell you but I've decided not to marry anyone. How would you respond to that? Now as Christians we know that there's something supposed to be good about that but is there part of us that kind of still think she's a bit crazy? My point is we're so conditioned by our world to see singleness as a kind of second class existence that we just assume everyone would choose marriage and for some who would like to get married but for whatever reason have not been able to get married they can also feel like second class citizens because again we've been so conditioned by our world to assume that everyone will just get married. But the truth is we all start off as single don't we? And even for those of us who get married half of us will sadly become single again when we lose our spouse or they lose us. More than that as we saw last week Paul affirms singleness as a gift just as marriage is. I wish that all of you were as I am in other words single but each has your own gift of either singleness or marriage. Even Paul and Jesus himself were of course single and by the end of our chapter Paul even says singleness is better.

And so singleness is not some weird state to be in it's really of genuine worth. And so let me show you from the Bible where Paul begins with a principle that he said last week about remaining in the situation as Christians. So point one verse 25. He goes now about virgins I have no command from the Lord Jesus but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. Now notice a couple of things. First what follows is not a command but it's Paul's judgment or opinion and yet it still carries weight because he is the Lord's apostle who is trustworthy. And so we still need to listen to it and feel the weight of it. Second though he's addressing those who are not yet married. The word virgin refers to those who are single but at an age when they could marry. In fact for some in the passage they're already engaged to be married. Either way he goes on to say to remain living as a Christian in whatever situation God has placed them. Verse 26. Because of the present crisis I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. I hear he's speaking to men because they typically proposed in those days. In fact I still think it's the case today that the majority of men do the proposal. But he's saying if you're pledged to get married then get married. You know remain in that situation or if you are free from such a commitment then remain free. It's like that principle we saw last week in verse 17. Nevertheless each person should live as a believer, a Christian, in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them just as God has called them.

And this week in our passage it's given a reason. Verse 26. Because of the present crisis. The problem is we just don't know what that present crisis was. History tells us that there was a famine around this time whose effects were felt for many years including rioting for food. So we have ancient sources that tell us these things. And so perhaps marriage and the children that would usually follow means more mouths to feed which could be difficult. But again as we saw with this principle last week so we see this week that it's not binding. They don't have to remain there. And so he goes on saying in verse 28 but if you do marry you have not sinned. And if a virgin marries she has not sinned.

But those who marry will face many troubles in this life and I want to spare you this. And so here's another reason to remain single. Marriage comes with trouble. For starters it's more expensive to set up a whole new house rather than to stay single and live at home which is what they did back then with mum and dad. And my kids are kind of experiencing that. In fact they're enjoying staying at home. I don't think we're ever going to get rid of them. And perhaps this is even more pertinent if the present crisis was a famine. You know trying to set up a whole new house as well as you know fighting for food which is scarce would be troublesome. But marriage itself also brings more fights and disagreements. Yes there are many joys, don't mishear me, but every married couple will disagree and argue from time to time. When Michelle and I first got married we fought over how to wash and dry the dishes. One thought that the tea towel was forgetting any bits of food that the washer missed. The other thought you should just wash the dishes properly.

[6:03] And now we thank God for dishwashers. Then there's also the trouble spelt K-I-D-S. We love them but for all the joy they bring comes a whole lot of hard work and sometimes even heartache. Parents know what I'm talking about.

But he also knows that like singleness marriage is a good gift from God and so he says we're free to choose. Now this first paragraph here where Paul mentions two reasons to remain single, the present crisis, marital trouble, but then also says we're free to marry. These three kind of points seem to be introductory which he then fleshes out in the rest of our passage because he expands to give two related but more significant reasons to remain single and then he also at the end expands on why and who to marry. And so the present crisis that might be famine leads Paul to remind us that the present world is fallen and fading away or passing away. So point to verse 29. What I mean brothers and sisters is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not.

Those who mourn as if they did not. Those who are happy as if they were not. Those who buy something as if it were not theirs to keep. Those who use the things of the world as if not engrossed in them. For because this world in its present form is passing away. Now when he says we're to live as those who do not have a spouse. He's not saying marriage should suddenly get divorced. He's already talked about that last week. Rather he's saying we're to live as those who don't cling to the things of this world. Because as we heard in our first reading there is a perfect world to come where there'll be no more death or tears or pain.

And everything in this world he says is passing away which actually includes marriage. Verse 29. Now again marriage is a great gift from God. It's meant to be a living picture that points to a greater reality which is the close relationship between Christ and the church. And so Ephesians 5 will say for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery but I am talking about Christ and the church he says. [8:38] And so just as a husband is united to the wife physically and the two become one flesh so Christ is united to the church spiritually and the two become one body the body of Christ.

Marriage you see is meant to be a signpost that points to the close relationship we have with Christ. But in the world to come the signposts of marriage will pass away because we'll get to enjoy perfectly what it pointed to. In fact the only marriage will be between Christ and the church where we'll get to enjoy close relationship with him. And so Jesus says in Matthew's gospel for example at the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage.

that will be like the angels which means single. And so singleness has deep significance. Like marriage it is also a living picture that points to a greater reality because it points to what we all will be in eternity single brothers and sisters in Christ. And so God has given singleness great dignity and worth. It remains a good gift regardless how we might feel about it at the time.

Just like marriage is a good gift regardless of how we might feel about it at the time. Of course our married people still have questions like well what about sex or what about my spouse who's passed away whom I still love and miss deeply. All I can say is that our sexual desire will be replaced by a relational joy that's even more fulfilling and lasting.

And our love and heartache for our spouse will be replaced by a more perfect love and closeness to Jesus and each other that will be more fulfilling and comforting than our marriage.

[10:28] I know it's all hard to imagine and perhaps for some hard to accept. I mean I'd like to think that I will still have a close relationship, a special relationship with my wife Michelle although she might be glad to get rid of me. I don't know.

But if God can create the world out of nothing then he can do all of this that he says he that he can make it so we'll enjoy close relationship that will be better than any relationship we have here. The point is though marriage is actually part of this world which will pass away along with the sorrows and joys of this world and the possessions of this world.

As they say you can't take it with you. And so we're not to cling to these things because they won't last. And by cling to I mean find our worth and meaning in these things or our purpose in these things.

Our joy and satisfaction in these things. You know it's kind of like a sports person who finds all their worth and purpose in being a great sports person. Finds all their joy and satisfaction in playing their game.

[11:40] But what happens when they lose that ability to be a great sports person? All their worth and meaning is gone as well along with their joy and satisfaction you see. And so they're not left with much.

As some of you know last Friday I was up in New South Wales at my brother's funeral. He passed away three weeks ago rather unexpectedly. And for a long time he was single and longed to be married.

He pinned all his hopes and dreams and satisfaction on getting married. And he finally did. But then she left him in the first year and it devastated him.

It took him a long time to get over it. And then he died suddenly of a heart attack. And as much as I love him and sadly miss him, he also missed out on the knowledge of real worth and purpose.

Of knowing real joy and satisfaction in Jesus because he pinned it all on getting married. Now I think he had a faith. I'm pretty sure he had a faith. A simple faith.

[12:43] And so I know that he'll get to enjoy something even better in terms of relationship in heaven and the new creation. But the point is we're to find our true worth and purpose in serving Jesus which will never pass away.

We're to find our ultimate joy and satisfaction in being deeply loved by God. Being part of his people with life eternal. That will never pass. I mean it's eternal. It will never pass away.

Now of course we're to enjoy all the good things God gives us in this world. Absolutely. Marriage included. But we're not to cling to them too tightly as though they're all that there is.

Because they too will pass away. And so perhaps it's worth asking yourself, am I ready to leave this world if God calls me home tonight? Or is there anything or anyone that I could not leave if Jesus calls me home tonight?

Now of course there are people we naturally want to make sure are okay and naturally will miss.

But if there is anyone or anything you could not leave for Jesus then perhaps we're clinging too tightly to that thing or person.

[13:55] And so singleness is good. Because it helps us not to cling too tightly to the things of this world like marriage which will pass away. It's why even those who are married are to live like those who are single in that particular sense.

They're not getting divorced but in terms of not clinging too tightly to the things of this world. Even to marriage. Because we can then put them ahead of Jesus which we're not meant to. Point 3 verse 32.

I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs, how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world, how he can please his spouse or wife.

And he, literally, he is divided. Then it flips from men to the women. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs, who aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world, how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may all live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

[15:00] Paul begins here in verse 32 by saying he wants them to be free from concern. Not concern about pleasing Jesus with undivided devotion, which he wants us all to do, which we all ought to do, but additional concerns that might distract us or prevent us from that devotion.

And any married person will tell you a spouse does bring a whole new set of concerns. And at one level, these are right concerns. You know, to love them and care for them.

A spouse should seek to please the other spouse. Just like we saw last week, even in sex, it's about being other person-centered. And elsewhere we see husbands are that lay down their lives for the good of their wives.

And parents are to fulfill their responsibilities in raising their kids. In fact, part of our undivided devotion to Jesus is being a godly husband or wife or parent.

It's just that sometimes in our effort to please the other, it can lead us to being divided towards Jesus. For example, one spouse says, you know, let's have a nice quiet Sunday morning at home and skip church.

[16:13] Or they say, well, look, I really think, you know, little Johnny or whoever should be able to sign up for sport, even though it's on a Sunday morning and they'll keep missing church when kids actually need to hear the gospel just as much as we do.

And then to please the spouse, the other one says, yeah, okay, we'll do that. But in so doing, they end up putting their spouse above Jesus. And so divide their devotion to Jesus, you see.

And so in our passage, it's all very symmetrical until you kind of get to the verse 34. You know, so verse 32, free from concern, how to please.

Verse 33, concern, how to please. And then verse 34, it stands out. And he is divided when actually in verse 35, we're all to live in undivided devotion to Jesus.

That's the issue. Now, yes, of course, single people also can have divided devotion by putting things in their life above Jesus, whether work or money, their extended family or friends.

[17:20] And don't mishear me, I want to acknowledge that singleness comes with its own struggles as well. I mean, there's no one to share the bills with. No one to share the cooking or cleaning with. No one who's always there to have a hug from or give a hug to.

But Paul's point is that having a spouse means a whole new person, which brings a whole new set of other concerns. Concerns that are right, yes, but concerns that are easy to put above Jesus so that they distract us or divide us in our devotion to Jesus.

So while singleness, there is no other person which frees us from that whole set of concerns. As Paul said, he would like you to be free from concern.

And he's saying it for our own good, but not to restrict us, but so that all of us may live in undivided devotion to Jesus. And so here's another reason why singleness is good.

But either way, we're all to live in undivided devotion to Jesus because he died for us, didn't he? At the cross, he paid for our sins so that everyone who believes in him can be forgiven and given life with him now in this world, where we have his help and belong to a family, plus the guarantee of life in the world to come.

[18:44] That's something that really hits home when you lose a loved one. And so do we live in undivided devotion to him who died for us? That's the question at this point. Or are there things in your life or people in your life you put ahead of Jesus, like work or sport or health or money or family?

The question is, to whom are we actually most devoted to in our life? Singleness is good because more than marriage, it helps us not cling too tightly to the things of this world that are passing away, but instead helps us to live in undivided devotion to Jesus.

And yet, as Paul said before in that introductory paragraph, we are still free to marry, point four, verse 36. If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably towards the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, then he should do as he wants.

He is not sinning. They should get married. But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin, well, this man also does the right thing.

Paul again speaks directly to men, since they were traditionally the ones who proposed marriage, as I said. Although it applies to both men and women, we are free to marry. But this time, Paul expands, giving a principle about how to decide whether to marry.

[20:08] And that principle seems to be honor, verse 36, acting honorably. But it's hard to know what kind of honor he's talking about here. Whether it's honoring the fiancée but not leaving her stranded, especially in those days when women were expected to marry and be cared for because they didn't have their own careers.

Or whether it refers to how they're acting in terms of, you know, perhaps they've already started going too far physically. And certainly, if the couple is living together, they should get married. Either way, if he feels he's not acting honorably towards her, then they should marry. But he's not under any compulsion or obligation. That is, if he doesn't think he'll leave the girl stranded, and if he controls his will, not struggling with sexual desire, then he doesn't have to marry, which is right too. In fact, Paul goes one step further in verse 38 and says, So then he who marries a virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better. Better in the sense that singleness more than marriage helps us not cling to the things of this world, but helps us to live in undivided devotion to Jesus. And so Paul applies this to widows in verse 39. A woman is not bound to her husband as long, sorry, is bound. A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives.

[21:31] Don't tell the archbishop. But if her husband dies, she's free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. In my judgment, she's happier if she stays single, happier, better.

And I think that I too have the spirit of God. This time, Paul speaks directly to women, because generally speaking, not always, but generally women outlive men.

But it applies to both men and women. And so there is freedom for the widow or the widower, women or men, to remarry. Although the who here is that they must belong to the Lord.

That is, they must be a Christian. And I've seen this happen in our church, where two, a widow and a widower, have remarried. In fact, I've conducted some of those weddings.

But again, in Paul's weighty opinion, he thinks they'll be happier or better if they stay single. And I've also seen that in our church too, where people prefer to stay single. For singleness is a better opportunity to serve Jesus, in the sense that more than marriage, it helps us not cling to the things of this world, or have additional concerns that might divide our devotion to Jesus.

[22:48] But in the end, as Paul said back in verse 7, each of us have our own gift from God, whether singleness or marriage, which provides an opportunity to serve God.

And that situation may change a couple of times, a few times during our life. Now, of course, some who are single don't necessarily choose to be so themselves. It's just the situation that God has assigned to them at the moment.

And yet the question for all of us is, do we see singleness of genuine worth? Or have we bought the world's lie that everyone should just get married?

That's better. Whether we are single or not, do we see it as genuine worth? Whether it feels like it or not, do we still see it as genuine worth?

That it really can help us to live more Christianly. And if we don't see the worth of it, then could it be because living Christianly is not as high a priority as it perhaps should be?

[23:48] Or perhaps because we've not realized it points to how we'll all live in eternity. And so for us who are married or those who are married, we are not to make our marriage the be-all and end-all because it will pass.

I remember a single Christian saying how she was at church one time and they had a greeting time and she saw her husband and wife, a few rows in front of her, turn and greet each other and then give each other a kiss on the cheek, which was quite cute.

But then they just sat down and ignored everyone else. It was just their marriage. That's all that mattered to them. You see, we'll all end up as single brothers and sisters in eternity.

And so again, those who are married are to include those who are single now by getting to know them. And those who are single are by getting to know those who are married. We're to include each other in each other's lives.

And one easy way to do this is after church. For those who are married, rather than just sticking with your spouse, splitting off and talking to other people. And for those who are single, not letting your singleness prevent you from going up to a married couple and talking to them.

[24:56] And by both practicing hospitality with a mix of those who are single or a couple. And can I say that I've seen this happen here, which is really encouraging. People don't generally tend to stick with their spouse, but you do mingle pretty well.

We need to keep doing that. Singleness is of genuine worth. And so that girl at the start would not be crazy if she said no for that reason. For we not only all start off as single in life, but we will all spend eternity as single brothers and sisters with Christ, enjoying relationships in a more fulfilling way then, than any relationship that we might have now.

But until that day, we're all not to cling to the things of this world, but live in undivided devotion to Christ who died for us. So let's pray for God's help to do that.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, we thank you for both the gifts of marriage and singleness. And we thank you particularly that singleness might help us to not cling to the things of this world, but live in undivided devotion to Jesus.

But regardless of what situation we're in, we pray that you would help us all to do that, to not cling to the things of this world that are passing away, but to keep living in undivided devotion to the Lord who died for us.

[26 : 25] We ask it in his name. Amen. Amen.