

'Singleness, Marriage & Eternity'

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[0:00] Well, a country boy decided to propose to his girlfriend, and because he's a country boy, he decided to use hay bales wrapped with the words marry me, complete with a tick the box Y for yes or N for no.

Though notice which side the spray can is on. That'll tell you which answer he was hoping to get. And so he took his girlfriend to the field and blindfolded her, then took her around, sat her on the back of the truck, took the blindfold off and proposed.

And that's her reaction there. And then here they are after she ticked the yes box. But here's the question. What if she ticked no? I wonder how you'd react if she actually said to him, I think you're great, but I've been thinking about becoming single for a while.

And I just didn't know how to tell you. Because I think singleness will actually help me to live for Jesus. And so I'm sorry, I can't marry you. How would you react to that if she said that?

Would you think that was a bit unfair of her? Would part of you go, oh, that's kind of nice because I know I'm supposed to put up Christian values. But I still think that's a bit crazy to say no.

[1:17] My point is we're so conditioned to see singleness as a kind of second class existence that we often just assume everyone will choose marriage.

And for some who would like to get married, but for whatever reason have unable to get married or to even remarry, they can also feel like as being a second class citizen.

Because again, we've been so conditioned by our world to assume everyone will get married or at least have a partner. But the truth is we actually 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 sadly 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 a gift.

For both provide opportunities to serve God, albeit different opportunities. And Paul himself and even Jesus, of course, were single. And by the end of the chapter, Paul says that singleness is even better.

[2:29] And so singleness is not actually, despite what our world may think or say, is not some weird state to be in. It really is of genuine worth.

But let me show you from the Bible where Paul begins with a principle we saw last week of remaining in the situation as Christian. Point one, verse 25. He says, Now about virgins, I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.

Now notice a couple of things here. First, what follows is not a command, but Paul's judgment or opinion. But it still carries weight because he is the Lord's apostle who is trustworthy.

And so he is to listen to it and feel the weight of it. Second, though, he's addressing those who are not yet married. The word virgins refers to those who are single, but at an age when they could marry.

In fact, for some, as we'll see, they're already engaged to be married. Either way, he goes on to say that they are to live or remain as a Christian in whatever situation they find themselves in.

[3:38] 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 or do not seek to be released?

Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. I hear he addresses the men in particular because they were usually the ones who proposed marriage and actually still largely are these days.

But his point is, if they're pledged to get married, then get married. But if they're free from such a commitment, then remain free. It's like that principle we saw last week in verse 17.

Each person should live as a believer, as a Christian, in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. And in our passage, he gives a reason.

Because of the present crisis. The only problem is we're not one's sure exactly 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.

[4 : 46] And so perhaps marriage and the children that usually would follow means more mouths to feed, which would be difficult. But again, as we saw last week, the principle here is not binding.

Because he goes on to say in verse 28, But if you do marry, you have not sinned. And if a virgin married, 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 troubles. For starters, it's more expensive to set up a whole new house rather than to stay single and live at home with mum and dad, which they did back then.

In fact, even my kids have worked out it's cheaper to stay at home and I'm not sure we're ever going to get rid of them. And this is perhaps even more pertinent if the present crisis was a famine. You know, trying to set up a whole new household with little food at the same time would be troublesome.

Marriage also means, though, more occasional fights or disagreements. Yes, there are joys. But every married couple will disagree and argue from time to time.

[5 : 58] When Michelle and I first got married, we fought over how to do the dishes. One of us thought that the tea towel was for getting any dirty bits off the dishes that the washer-up missed. The other person thought that the person washing the dishes should just do a proper job to start with.

And now we thank God for dishwashers. And then there's also trouble, spelled K-I-D-S. We love them, but for all the joy they bring comes a whole lot of hard work and sometimes heartache.

Every parent and grandparent even knows what I'm talking about. And Paul wants to spare people these kinds of troubles. But he also knows that like singleness, marriage too is a good gift from God.

And so he says we're free to choose. Now this paragraph here where Paul mentions the present crisis and marital trouble as two reasons to remain single, but then says we're free to marry, those kind of three points, is like an introductory paragraph where he expands on each of those three points.

And to give two related but more significant reasons to remain single and also to give a principle on how to decide if to marry or not.

[7 : 15] And so for example, the present crisis that might be famine leads Paul to remind us that the present world is passing away. So point to verse 29.

He goes on to say, What I mean, brothers and sisters, is this. 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 this world as if not engrossed in them. For the world in its present form is passing away.

Okay. Now when he says we're not those who are married to live as those who are not married, who don't have a spouse, he's not saying that we should, who are married, suddenly divorce.

Though he's already spoken about that last week.

Rather, he's saying that we're to live as those who don't cling to the things of this world. Because there is a perfect world to come, as we heard in our first reading, and the things of this present world are passing away.

[8 : 23] Including even marriage. Now again, marriage is a great gift from God. And it's meant to be a living picture that points to a greater reality. Which is the close relationship between Christ and the church.

As Paul says in Ephesians 5, For this reason a man will leave his father and mother, 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.

Just as the 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 is meant to be a signpost that points to this close relationship between Christ and the church, us. But in the world to come, that signpost of marriage will pass away because we'll get to enjoy perfectly what it pointed to.

That close relationship with Christ. And so Jesus himself says in Matthew's Gospel, At the resurrection, people will neither marry nor be given in marriage. They will be like the angels in heaven.

[9 : 34] They will be single. Which means singleness has deep significance. Just like marriage, it also is a living picture that points to a greater reality.

At this time, it points to what we will all be like, single brothers and sisters in Christ. And so God has given singleness great dignity and worth.

It remains a good gift, regardless of how we might feel about it. Just like marriage is a good gift, regardless of how we might feel about it.

Of course, married people have questions like, well, what about sex? Or what about my spouse who has passed away, whom I still love and miss deeply? And 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 : 39] I know it's hard to imagine. I don't know how I would cope if I lost Michelle. But if God can create this world out of nothing, then he can do these things, can't he?

And so we can trust that he will. The point is, 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 all our worth and meaning in them or find all our joy and satisfaction from them.

It's like a sports person who finds all their worth and meaning in playing their sport or their joy and satisfaction from winning their games. But once they lose their sporting ability, what have they got left?

Nothing. Nothing. Because they poured it all into their sports career. Last Friday, I was up in New South Wales at my brother's funeral. As some of you might know, he passed away three weeks ago rather unexpectedly.

[11 : 52] And for a long time, he was single. And he longed to be married. He pinned all his hopes, worth, purpose, joy, satisfaction on getting married. And he finally did.

But then she left him in the first year of their marriage and it devastated him. It took him a long time to get over it, which he did. And then he died suddenly of a heart attack. He had a heart condition that none of us knew about.

Now, I think he had a simple faith. And as much as I loved him, he sadly missed out on knowing the real worth and purpose. You know, the great joy and satisfaction he could have in Jesus because he pinned it all on getting married.

Which, although is good, marriage is good, it simply doesn't last one way or another. You see, 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 with life eternal, which will never pass. It's eternal, right? It will never pass away. Now, of course, we're all to enjoy all the good things God gives us in this world.

[13 : 01] Absolutely. But we're not to cling to them too tightly as though this is all there is because they won't last. And so perhaps it's worth asking yourself, am I ready to leave this world if God calls me home tonight?

Or is there something I could not leave or someone I could not leave if Jesus calls me home tonight? Now, of course, there are people we naturally want to make sure that will be okay once we're gone, people we will naturally miss.

But if there is something or someone that we can't leave if Jesus called us home tonight, then perhaps we're clinging too tightly to those things.

And so singleness is good because it helps us not to cling too tightly to the things of this world.

Even 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.

Not getting divorced, but in terms of not clinging too tightly to the things of this world such that we put them ahead of Jesus. Which brings us to point three in verse 32.

[14:12] He goes on to say, 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 wife.

And his interests are divided. Literally, he is divided. And then he flicks to women. And unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs. Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit.

But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of the world, how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you all may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord Jesus.

Here Paul begins by saying he actually wants them to be free from concern. And not concern about pleasing Jesus with an undivided devotion, which he wants us all to do, but free from additional concerns that might distract us or prevent us from that devotion.

And any married person will too that a spouse brings a whole new set of concerns. Now at one level, these are right concerns. Spouses should seek to please the other spouse.

[15:25] Like we saw last week, even sex is about being other person-centered. And elsewhere in the Bible, husbands are to lay down their lives for 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, parent or grandparent, if you like. 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, oh look, let's sleep in Sunday morning, have a quiet day, we'll skip church. Or often, what happens these days is, oh let's, you know, let the kid play sport on Sunday morning and we can just skip church.

And then the other spouse, in order to please them, says, okay. But in doing so, they've ended up putting their spouse and their desires above Jesus and his desires, you see.

And so they divide their devotion to Jesus. And so in our passage, verse 32 to 34 is all very symmetrical in terms of being concerned and pleasing and then being concerned and pleasing.

[16:42] The difference comes in verse 34. His interests are divided. Literally, he is divided. That's the issue. Because at the end of verse 35, we're all to live in undivided devotion to the Lord.

Now, of course, single people can also have divided devotion to Jesus by putting other things in their life above Jesus, whether work or money, their extended family or friends.

And their life comes with its own struggles. I mean, there is no one to share the bills with. No one to share the cooking and cleaning with. And no one who's always there to just give a hug.

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

While singleness, there is no other person and so there is no other whole set of concerns, you see.

As Paul said, he's trying to free us from more concerns, but for our good, not to restrict us, but that we all may live in undivided devotion to Jesus.

[18:05] Here's another reason why singleness is good. 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 we who believe in him can be forgiven and given life with him now and the guarantee of life in the world to come.

It's something that really hits home when you lose a loved one, doesn't it? And so, do we live in undivided devotion to Jesus now? Or are there things that we put or people that we put ahead of Jesus?

whether it's work or health or money or family? The question is, to whom are we actually most devoted to in life?

Is it Jesus? And so singleness is good because more than marriage, it helps us not cling too tightly to the things of this world that are passing away, including marriage itself, but instead live in undivided devotion to Jesus.

[19:09] And yet, as Paul said before in that introductory paragraph, we're still free to marry. Point four, verse 36. But if anyone is worried that he might not be acting honourably towards the virgin he

is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, 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 or obligation, but is in control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin, this man also does the right thing.

Here Paul again speaks directly to the men since again they were the ones traditionally who proposed, but of course that applies to both men and women. We're all free to marry.

But this time Paul expands giving a principle about how to decide whether to marry. And that principle seems to be whether we're acting honourably, verse 36.

But it's hard to know what kind of honour he is talking about. Whether he's talking about not leaving the fiancée stranded, especially in those days when women were expected to marry and be cared for since they often didn't have their own careers, or whether the honour refers to how they're behaving physically, whether they've already started going too far.

[20:30] Either way, if he feels he's not acting honourably towards her, then they should marry, especially if they're already living together. But if he's not under any compulsion or obligation, that is, if he won't leave the girl stranded, and if he has control over his will, that he's not struggling with their sexual desires, then he doesn't have to marry, which is right too.

In fact, Paul says in verse 38, so then he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better. Better because of the two reasons we've just seen, that more than marriage, singleness helps us not cling to the things of this world, but helps us live in undivided devotion to Jesus.

And so Paul applies this now to widows and widowers, verse 39. This time he addresses women directly because women often outlive men, which is still the case today, I think.

A woman is bound to a husband as long as he lives, but if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. In my judgment, she's happy if she stays as she is, and I think that I too have the spirit of God.

Now again, this applies to both widows and widowers. As I said, it's just that traditionally women live longer, but not always. But the point is, they're both free to marry.

[21:52] Though this time, Paul adds a who to marry. They must belong to the Lord, end of verse 39. They must be a Christian. And I've seen people in our church do this.

They've sadly lost their spouse and they've remarried. In fact, I've conducted some of those weddings. But I've also seen some in our church prefer to stay single.

For singleness is a better opportunity to serve Jesus since it helps more than marriage. Again, not cling to this world and have additional concerns that might divide our devotion to Jesus.

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 us an opportunity to serve God.

And that situation may even change during our lifetime a few times. Of course, some who are single don't necessarily choose to be so themselves.

[22:54] It's just the situation God has assigned to them at the moment. And yet the question for us all is, do we see the genuine worth of singleness, whether we are or not?

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

Or perhaps because we've not realised it points us to how we will all live in eternity. And so for those who are married, we're 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 turn to each other and greet one another and give each other a kiss on the cheek and then sit down and ignore everyone else because all that was important to them was their marriage.

Yet we're all going to 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 to include those who are married by getting to know them.

[24:11] We're to include each other in each other's lives. And one easy way to do that is after church rather than the marriage sticking together with their spouse going off and talking to others.

And the singles not letting their singleness prevent them to going up and talking to a married couple. And by both practicing hospitality with a mix of those who are single or couple. And can I say it's been so encouraging to see that happen here at Holy Trinity. It's great. You do try and work hard at including everyone as fellow brothers and sisters. Singleness is of genuine worth. And so the girl at the start would not actually be crazy to say no for those reasons. Even if the world said she was. For not only do we start off as single but we'll all spend eternity as single brothers and sisters in Christ.

Enjoying relationships in a more fulfilling way then than any relationship we have in this world now. But until that day we're all not to cling to the things of this world but live in undivided devotion to Jesus.

[25 : 24] And so let's pray that God would help us. Let's pray. Our gracious Father we thank you for the gifts of both singleness and marriage and we pray that whatever situation we are currently in that you would help us all not to cling to the things of this world too tightly but to live in undivided devotion to him who died for us.

Help us we pray to have the Lord Jesus as supreme in our heart. We ask it in his name. Amen.