

Sex and Singleness

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on March the 14th 1999. The preacher is Olivia Moffat and her topic is sex and singleness.

Lord Jesus Christ. Well tonight, as you know, I've been asked to speak on sex and singleness.

I'd like to actually expand that title to sexuality and singleness, as I believe that the act of sex is just one small way in which we express our sexuality, which is a much bigger thing than that.

And although many people here might think, oh she's speaking to the single people tonight, that's true I am. But I'm also speaking on behalf of the single people tonight, and I'm also speaking to the entire church.

I say that because as we look at this passage in 1 Corinthians 7, and as Phil continues probably in 1 Corinthians 7 next week, what we will see as Christians is that most of our churches are not living out the teaching that is here.

[1 : 25] We are far too much like the world. And it would be so wrong for me just to put a burden on single people tonight, or something that would be heard as a burden.

What I want to do tonight is call the church to faithful and costly discipleship. And that means different things for different people here.

But I think it will mean something for everyone here tonight. But let me begin by telling you a little bit about what life is like as a long-term single.

I'm 33 years old, and having decided to be a woman in Christian ministry, I'm not sure if I will ever be married.

That's something that I have to take seriously, no matter how much I may wish to be married, which I do wish. And I speak as someone who may be single the rest of my life, and I also speak as someone who, probably since my mid-twenties, my singleness has been something which confronts me often, and I have to work through.

[2 : 35] So if you're probably in your early twenties, or you're a teenager, for you, you're probably thinking, well, I'll have a couple of really good relationships, and if I want to get married, then when I'm ready to get married, the right person will be there, and I've got so many options in life and so much time.

And you have, and that's fantastic. Enjoy it. But the way you feel about your singleness now is probably not how you'll feel about it in another ten years.

And if you're someone who got married in your mid-to-late twenties, then you also do not know what it is like to be an older person who is single. So let me start with a story.

Only ten days ago, I had someone in my office, I was 29, a lovely, lovely woman, and a woman who dresses well, and in every sense of the word is a woman of today.

And she was just in tears in my office, because she's so sick of being single. I said, you know the worst thing about it, I am treated as though I'm asexual.

- [3 : 42] I am not treated as a woman. The Christian community just can't seem to treat me in that way. I'm just treated as having no sexuality at all.
- That somehow she felt that the way that people talked to her and related to her, the topics they talked about, the way they included her in their lives, cut out a big chunk of her.
- That was her femininity. That's how she felt, and we talked for a long time about that. The long-term single person has very little physical touch from other people.
- Maybe no hugs. The long-term single guy especially doesn't get touched much by people. For us, there will never be that great moment when you wake up with someone next to you.
- There will never be the incredible highs of falling deeply in love with someone. There will never be that person that you can say, yes, now together we plan the future, and we have this shared life, and that decision's made, and I know I have someone with me now.
- [5 : 00] There will never be someone who shares all those years with us. We may always have good friends, but often they change. And there will never be someone who we express and live out the covenant in the way that married people are called to do.
- No, for us, there will always be that open question, will there be someone, until perhaps we decide, that's it, I'm not looking anymore. For us, there will be times of profound loneliness, of not being understood, of having to start all over again when your few close friends move away, or when other things happen and you think, I've got to start again now to avoid people in my life.
- For us, there is the subtle but pervasive message that we are the losers. We are the losers, you might know. The loser here. That's us.
- Society sends out this message all the time, doesn't it, that we're not normal. I live in the inner city and it's quite normal to go into a path by yourself. But one night, I was out in Heidelberg and everyone in the restaurant except me were either a couple or in groups that were even numbers and even numbers men and women.
- They were all couples out together. There weren't even any families in this particular restaurant. And as I sat there, you know, I felt waves of little, little loser coming towards me.
- [6 : 39] We often feel pity coming from people. We get incredibly sick of being asked all the time, is there someone?
- As though your anxiety for us is so incredible that if we can't find someone, uh-oh, uh-oh. I know it's just because people care for me and would like that for me, but it gets a bit much at times.
- Probably one of the worst expressions of this was at a really good friend's wedding and I just wanted to sit with all my friends that were also her friends. And do you know what she did?
- She put me on the table with all the single people that I didn't know. Just in case I met someone at her wedding! Yeah! And she could say she match-made us.
- Now, why was I going to her wedding? I was going to her wedding to celebrate her and her partner and to talk about her and her friendship with people I knew and loved.
- [7 : 45] I was not going to her wedding to pick up. She thought she was doing me a favour. Not good. I think the thing that is hardest though is over time we miss all those major milestones.
- No engagement party, no wedding celebration, no children and I know not all married people can or do have children but it means no baptismal celebrations of the kids, no kids' parties, none of that seeing children grow up.

It being on the outside of all that. The one celebration merely that's left to us is our birthday. So remember that when a single person has a birthday make them feel special.

I think if marriage is about some fantastic highs and some incredible lows and some great difficulty in that way so married life can be a bit like that I think single life just feels like that.

It just gets harder and harder and harder and the loneliness gets greater and the parts of yourself which shut down that people relate to or don't relate to and the parts of you, your hope and your joy and things that get squashed get greater and that's a hard thing.

[9 : 15] So I hope just in painting that picture it helps to understand what it's like to be a single person in this society and sadly also in most churches I haven't really noticed that we are treated differently.

And so what does 1 Corinthians 7 have to say to us have to say to people like me and people like the picture I've outlined the poor woman in my office who just feels that she's some kind of third asexual being that has no place.

Well if you could turn it up if you haven't that would be great it's page 929 in your Bibles. Now Paul is replying to some particular teaching about a particular understanding that I don't wish to go into but it's important that he is not writing into our issues exactly.

We have to understand that. But nevertheless we can learn from what he's saying. And he's speaking to both the never married and the people who are now unmarried again through perhaps becoming widows and he's also speaking to the married in this passage.

He's speaking to people of all status in this passage. And overall he has two things to say two very important things to say.

[10 : 48] He wants us to pursue contentment he wants the Corinthians to pursue contentment and he wants them to understand the Lordship of Christ and what it means about the Christian community what it means to follow Jesus.

So we need to bear those things in mind. I'm going to start at verse 7 where Paul has picked up something that they've written to him and answered it initially in a relationship between a husband and a wife and we may come back to that.

And at verse 7 he says I wish that all were as I myself am but each has a particular gift from God one having one kind and another a different kind.

Now the church has often taken that to mean that I wish that all were single. That's what Paul's saying. Now by the end of the chapter, verse 40 where he finishes, you'll see that he is saying that to single people he does think, or to someone who's been married and is now a widow, he does think that that woman is more blessed if she does now remain single.

He does think that. But that's probably not quite what he's saying here. Usually when Paul says, I wish that all were as I myself am, what he is saying is, I wish that all rejoice in the liberty and freedom that Christ gives.

[12 : 18] I wish that all knew that to be the servant and the slave of God is perfect freedom. I wish that you all knew that fully.

I wish that you rejoiced in that wholeheartedly and weren't getting caught up on other things. And that we also understood that God gives differently to each person.

That's what he's saying in the second half of that verse. There are different gifts to each person. Paul was single and that was part of God's gift to him.

Others have the gift of marriage. And as you know, there's a whole heap of other gifts, parisms, graces that God wants to give us. And the primary thing he's wanting to say here is we're not all the same.

God does not want to give us everything the same and we're all equal, all married or all single. But be like Paul. He wishes us to be like him, content with the gifts that God has given him, rejoicing in your liberty.

[13 : 27] So he goes on to verse 8, saying to the unmarried and the widows, I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. So he says, yeah, be like me in this.

You have the same opportunity and the same gift at this point. Now, as he goes on to say the rest of the chapter, you can seek marriage and not sin. That's fine.

Go ahead and do that. So he's not saying you have to remain single, but he is saying don't seek change, don't seek to be in a different state, above seeking, living with what you have now.

Live out the gift God has given you now. I don't know if I'll be single forever, but I would be stupid and ungodly and not trusting God to put more energy into seeking to find a partner than I'm putting into living for God now.

That's what he's saying, put more energy into that. Now, that is so against the world. Let's just stop for a minute and think, okay? The now is important. Jesus told us to live each day as it comes.

[14 : 45] And that's so important for us to hear because our world says tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow and mortgage today for better tomorrow and look around for your partner today so that you're not lonely tomorrow and you've got security.

But Jesus says, tomorrow's got enough worries for itself. Live today. Don't waste today seeking to change something which you can't change.

Live out fully under God. Jesus also taught us to be content with what we have and to know and trust that the Father wants to give us good things that are so against the world.

The people who don't know God mock us because they think we are fools to trust God and to trust His goodness. And they will always think that. And they are wrong.

We are called to trust God and not believe the world when it says accumulate more wealth. Greed is good. No, we are called to contentment.

[15 : 54] Now verse 9 has some very, very good advice to the unmarried. To men and women he is saying this by the way, if they are not practicing self-control they should marry for it is better to marry them to be aflame with passion.

Well, it's not just men who need to practice sexual self-control although that is something we often hear far too often in the church I'm afraid. Don't kid yourself.

If you are married or single you need to practice self-control in this part of your life. That's what he's just been saying to the marriage in the verse above. Okay, Phil might speak more about that.

Now, we know that self-control is fruit of the Spirit. Okay, that means it grows in us as we work with God. It's fruit.

It grows. We must nurture ourselves for it to grow. It just doesn't, oh, one noun, self-control. Day before, can't control myself.

[17 : 01] Ah, the next day God has just given to me. No, it does not work like that. We must grow it. we must work with the Holy Spirit. So let me ask you, what spiritual disciplines are you practicing so that you are confident that you have self-control in your sexuality and your sex life?

Where does it come up in your prayer life? Do you practice fasting so that you learn to control your bodily appetites?

Fasting is a very good one. And as we learn self-control over our physical appetite of eating, we learn self-control over our other lusts and appetites.

Is care for yourself a spiritual discipline? Yes, it is. We all know that when we don't exercise, when we don't eat properly, when we don't sleep well, we compensate in other areas.

And usually our sex drive goes up. And then to be, to have fidelity and to be chaste is impossible. So don't put yourself in that situation.

[18 : 11] Be disciplined. Is it a spiritual discipline to learn to understand our sexuality and to seek appropriate intimacy and good friends and build up the safe places for ourselves as single people so that some of our intimacy needs are met and we're not craving that.

Yes, it is. Practice self-control. Now, I can tell you from first-hand experience, if you're not doing this sooner or later, you will fail.

The say is both to married people and single people. The only people I trust on this issue is people who have actually worked this through and know and understand their sexuality, know and understand what arouses them, what situations are dangerous for them, what kind of friendships and intimacy they need to help them feel connected to others and loved and appreciated.

People who take seriously looking after their bodies. People who fast. They're pretty much the only people I trust. Now, for me, this became real the last time, a number of years ago, that I ended up in a relationship I shouldn't have been in.

And I realized that this would just keep happening to me if I didn't take the teaching of God seriously and if I didn't believe that His transforming power could actually change me if I worked hard with Him.

[19 : 52] Now, that was incredibly difficult, but it was only at that time that I took it seriously and in the months after that, that I saw change, lasting change in my life. I commend the same to you, don't give yourself.

Okay, let's skip over to the second section, verse 25 to 35. Now, concerning virgins, he says in verse 25, he does not mean women who have never had sex.

He means men and women who have not had sex and by that in his community he means the people who have not yet married. Here he's given his opinion as someone who understands the nature of the kingdom and knows the heart of God.

Let us take this seriously. Verse 26, I think that in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are. Now that can be translated the impending or the present crisis.

And we're pretty sure what he means is, in view of the fact that we're living in the days between when Jesus has ascended into the heavens at the right hand of God and prior to the day in which he returns in glory.

[21 : 12] That's what he means, that interval. That's the crisis. Where are we living as Christians, as a church? We are living in the present crisis.

He wrote this 2,000 years ago but we're still in it. So what he wants to write to these people we need to take seriously. You know, when was the last time that in your heart you cried out, come Lord Jesus, when you said, please God, please Jesus return.

The evil in this world is too much. The brokenness. I don't want to live anymore without you fully here. Come and take charge, Lord.

You know, it is a great tragedy of the Western Church, but we don't say that very often as individuals and we don't feel that sense amongst us that we are living in the last days and that there is a world to be one.

No. We think about our careers, we think about our own security, we think about our own love and so of course as single people we feel our singleness because we've taken on the world's whole agenda.

[22 : 27] How are we not going to feel loveless and stupid? So this is something for the whole Church. We've got to chuck that agenda out, lock, stock and barrel. We've got to find a way of living as communities who say honestly and live honestly that we are living in an impending crisis.

We are living in a present crisis. And so our status takes on a whole new meaning. In verses 26 to 31, basically he's saying, travel lightly.

Have no security in this world. Find no meaning from this world. Get no hope from this world. Have no expectation from this world.

That's what he's saying there. Wow, we have got a lot of change in towards us then. And as we do that, some of this teaching then about marriage and singleness might come more sharply into perspective.

You see, verse 31, the present form of this world is passing away. He talks about this in 2nd Corinthians as well because this church in Corinth is so into the world as it was then, just like the Western church today.

[23 : 51] We are so comfortable. But all the things that we are investing our lives in and our sweat and our anxiety and our toil, it's fading away. It's not going to be there.

You know what they say, there are no pockets in this route. But you know what Jesus said, store up treasure in heaven where it's not going to rust and where moths can't get at it.

You can't carry it through yourself, but you can store it up there. Everything around us is fading away. Only the kingdom will be real.

Now the corollary to that, as the world fades away, the New Testament picture is really clear that the kingdom is breaking in. Ever since Jesus walked around, his kingdom has been breaking in more and more and it's breaking into the world through us.

And as it breaks in, we need to take seriously its priorities and its views. Now Jesus himself was single, but he also said that there would be no marriage in heaven.

[25 : 01] Somehow our love and our intimacy is going to be different now. Now what I want to say to this church, whether you're married or single, is we need to grab as much of the kingdom as we can and pull it into our lives and pull it into this reality.

It's not all for when we die. It's breaking in now. We have the spirit now. God is at work amongst us now. And on this issue of singleness it means we must learn to live differently.

We must learn to live as true brothers and sisters. Let me take another story about a friend of mine who became a Christian in her late twenties.

She had a very poor upbringing and had a lot of needs. And as an adult for her, any time she had any kind of intimacy with a man, any kind of conversation, love, fun, jokes, anything, it ended up in there.

Because her only understanding of masculine and feminine relating went all the way through to sex. She had no big picture of sexuality. Sex equals sexuality.

[26 : 11] So whenever her femininity connected with the masculinity in a man, the only place it could go was all the way to sex. sex. Now I think most of us are the same.

And because as Christians we know that it can't end up in the bedroom, we step way back and we relate nice little polite ways with each other to make it nice and safe.

Now if you're not practicing self-control and if you're not working through your own sexuality, well you have no choice but to do that. you have no choice but to build a really big fence.

Because sexual sin is as serious a sin as any other sin and we must take it seriously. But I believe that sexuality is much more than just the act of sex.

And I enjoy excellent relationships with a handful of men. Men who are secure in who they are. Men who can hug me and affirm me and relate to me as a whole person including the fact that I'm a woman, without it being a threat.

[27 : 24] And if they're married, without it threatening their marriage because they have a good marriage. I just ask the question, how are you going as a church community?

And these questions are not easy to answer. How do you move, if you're at the polite end of the spectrum, how do you move to some kind of more meaningful friendships and love?

For the people who are single here, if you get to know someone of the opposite sex, does it then hit that awkward point where you both go, well, is this actually going to be something more?

And if it's not, then, well, it's just got a bit awkward, so I don't talk to them anymore. That's sad. You've lost the chance to be brother and sister together.

But if you can't honour being brother and sister and working through that awkwardness and continuing to treat each other well and grow in an appropriate kind of intimacy and friendship, then you have no choice but to get to that awkward point and move away.

[28 : 30] You know the film When Harry Met Sally? The big question, can a man and a woman just be friends? What does the film answer? Good old Hollywood. No. That's the end of sex.

What do we say as a church community? Yes, of course. We offer family status here. Come and find something you won't find anywhere else.

I really hope Holy Trinity Doncaster can say that. That is a great thing to offer the who's and well. Now, let me just skip back to verse 28 for a minute because you wouldn't believe what is there.

Paul, he doesn't have tongue in teeth when he says this. If you marry, you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that.

And the married people all say, Amen. Amen. As single people, let's not turn marriage into some kind of Hollywood lie.

[29 : 43] Married people, the more you can be transparent about what it's really like, the more you will help single people. I have a tremendous, two, two families who are so good to me.

They love me, and they care for me, and they fight in front of me, and they tell me the good things as well as the bad things, and they lend me their three children to babysit over a weekend, and that helps me.

Because after the three kids under seven have trashed my house for the weekend, and I wake up alone in my bed the next morning, I go, thank you, Lord. I also love those children dearly, and it helps my loneliness so much when they see me and yell out, Ollie!

And run to me and give me a big hug. See, it's both things, of course. But I have a very realistic picture of how hard marriage is. I mean, a lot of married people would say the only thing harder than being single is being married.

And a lot of single people would say the only thing harder than being married is being single. Well, we'll just have to continue to debate that. But let's be realistic. To be married to one person for as many days as you live is her.

[31 : 04] And you need God's transforming power in that as much as you need it as a single person. So grab hold of God. Grab hold of God. That's what we all need to hear.

God's idealizing marriage. Then that's something that this church needs to work on as well. It's not just individuals that need to be realistic.

It's church communities that need to be realistic and truthful. Finally, verses 32 to 35. I want you to be free from anxieties, Paul says.

I want you to be free from anxieties. I want you to just enjoy what God has for you so much. I want you to have a great vision of heaven. I want you to know truly what it is to have God's presence and power in your life and to live for eternity and to have a meaning and hope and vision for your life that is caught up with eternity and caught up with our love and lips of God.

That's what he wants for us. When we complain as single people, you know, our sights are too low. Play too low. He wants us to serve God.

[32 : 20] Now, is this the booby prize? If that's what you're thinking as a single person, to serve God and to be freed up to do that is the booby prize. You need to be honest with that and take that to God.

And until you're convinced that you haven't got the booby prize, you won't move on to embrace what God has for you. The picture that I'm praying about, and I go back to pray about all the time, is sort of like me as a little kid under the Christmas tree, unwrapping a present.

And as I unwrap the present, I'm actually busy looking at what my sister wrote in the bed. And I unwrap my present and go, I don't want that. And I see what she's unwrapping and go, I want that!

I want her present! And I realise so often when I am complaining to God about my sinfulness, that that is what I'm doing.

I am so busy, glad in this other present of my sister that I can't have, that I haven't even looked at what God has given me, and I haven't taken seriously that God is a give-er of good gifts, and that I'm hurting my father's heart.

[33 : 26] love. So, my prayer for myself, and my prayer for all Christians who are single, is that if we remain single, that at 70 or however many years God gives us, we look back over our lives and say, what a wonderful gift my father has given me, how good he is, how blessed I am, and to show it from our heart and to know it's true.

That is a difficult path, that is a path of pain, but it is a path of great joy, it is a path of great reward, and it is the path to eternal life.

So, let us follow Jesus in this. Amen. Let me just close with a short prayer. Father, I pray for this community of Holy Trinity.

I pray that they would live out more and more your kingdom. Lord Jesus, I pray that there would be true love, there would be true intimacy between married and singles, and between two people who are single.

I pray that there would be contentment and lordship over all. I pray that people would have a great hope in you, and that would enable them to bring their pain to you, and to trust in you, and to accept the gifts you give, and to go on.

[35 : 13] I pray that people wouldn't put their lives on hold. I pray that goodness wouldn't grow in any heart. I pray that this church would be a great refuge of your love and your hope and your kingdom priorities and of true holiness.

Father, give this community and these gifts beyond place. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Now I'd love to talk with our people afterwards.

I'll be down the back. Please come and talk to me. And also I've brought a couple of books that are in the corner. Just have a look at them, and if you would like to read one of those, then write it down and Paul will make sure the library gets in you.

I pray you haven't got it to you. Amen.