

Marriage and Singleness (1)

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 28th of November 1999. The preacher is Mavis Payne and her sermon is entitled Marriage and Singleness and is from 1 Corinthians chapter 7 verses 1 to 24.

Paul phoned me up and asked me if I would come tonight and I looked at my diary and it looked pretty free and then when I started looking at the text I thought I've really drawn the short straw because this is actually quite a difficult topic to talk about even though it's one that's really important for us all.

Perhaps before I start I could tell you a little bit more about myself. I was brought up in a Christian home on a farm, on a dairy farm with a few hundred cows and as a child I used to be out in the paddocks watching calves being born and watching bulls mate with cows and so for me sex was a natural part of life.

My parents as Christians were very restrained in the way they talked with us about our sexuality and they, well we knew the facts but as Christians they kept the lid on it when it came to people. I wonder where your views of sexuality come from. When you think of being a Christian, do you think of Christians as being sexy people or is that just doesn't go together?

[2 : 16] Where does your view of sexual morality come from? I think from my parents and my background I learned that sex was okay in marriage but it's not really where Christians are at.

You know, if they're really mature Christians they're into spiritual growth. You don't talk about sex much. You keep it under lock and key. At the same time our culture that we live in probably gives us the view of sexual morality that sex is okay so long as it's in a loving relationship and so long as it's safe.

The last film I went to see in a movie theatre was Strange Planet. I don't know if anybody's seen it. But it's about six single people.

No, they're not all single. One of them's married. But six adults, three males and three females. And in the space of two hours they've all moved on from one relationship to another and they're all sexually active.

That pervading view of sexuality is there as background radiation for everything that we see, films that we see, books that we read, conversations that we have, friends that we have.

[3 : 48] So where do we have our view, where does our view of sexuality come from? I think it's a mixture of what comes from our home, what comes from the culture around us, what comes from what we'll call Christian culture.

What I want to look at tonight is to try and see what the Bible says about it and to see whether it actually is what we think, even in our Christian culture.

Paul's writing to the Corinthians, and they too, like us, I think, have picked up their view of sexuality from their culture and mixed it with Christianity.

The pervading view of people, of how we are made up in the Greek culture when Paul wrote to Corinth was that our bodies and our spirits are two different things.

That our bodies are basically evil. Our spirit is basically good. When you become a Christian, your spirit is what is being remoulded, transformed to become more like Christ.

[5 : 21] And where does sex fit into that? Well, it belongs in the body category, and it's not good. So, tonight, we want to have a look at what Paul says to the Corinthians into that context and see how it parallels for us.

We're looking at, firstly, chapter 7, verses 1 to 7. In these first verses, Paul addresses the question, I think, of sex and marriage.

Now, the Corinthians have written a letter to Paul, and they've asked him this question, is it a good thing to have sex?

That's basically what first one is. Is it a good thing to have sex? Because for them, to grow as Christians means to deny their body, not to have sex.

There's an overhead that will hopefully give us that. If you're going to be a mature Christian couple, then you keep sex out of it.

[6 : 42] That's really what they were coming to. That was their question to Paul. Is it really okay to have sex if you're growing a mature Christian? And Paul, I think, in this chapter, is saying just the opposite.

He's saying, it's okay. And if you can find the second overhead, it'll come on there. Paul's saying, it's okay.

Why is he saying that actually having an active sexual life in a marriage is a good thing for Christians?

He bases it on what God has given. So let's look at what God's view is of sex. I just want to run through some quick points here.

Firstly, God made everything. Everything that God's made is good. Sex is good. Secondly, when Adam and Eve sinned, when they rebelled against God, sex wasn't the sin.

[7 : 52] Their rebellion against God, a broken relationship, was what the problem was. Sin involves all of us. It permeates every part of us.

So our spiritual life is affected by sin. Our bodies are affected by sin. Every part of us is affected by sin, including our sexuality.

But sin is not about sex. Salvation, when God comes to rescue us, is about God transforming all of us, our bodies and our spirits.

He's wanting us to become new people, made in the image of God, to be more like him, involving our bodies and our spirits. And when Jesus comes again, and rescues us, takes us to heaven, and we are resurrected, we're going to have a bodily resurrection, and that's going to include our spirit as well.

But we're going to be resurrected as whole people. So while we're living here on earth, God's in the process of transforming us totally wholly. So Paul's saying, sex is good.

[9 : 10] It's part of God's creation. So it is good for married couples to have sex. Not only that, in verses 3 to 4, he says it's actually vital.

It's a necessary part of a married relationship. A healthy relationship will be sexual. Sex is not only, in marriage, is not a right that you have, but it's something that you give, offer.

It's a way of giving pleasure to your spouse. So for Paul, he's saying, giving up having sex in your marriage, even to pray, he kind of says, oh, you know, as a concession, you know, you can stop having sex to pray, but, don't do it.

Don't give up having sex. Sex is not all there is to marriage. There's a whole heap more to marriage than just a sexual relationship.

But what he's saying, sex is important. Then in verses 5 to 6, he's saying, that it's actually, sexual absence, not only does it not help you necessarily grow as a Christian, but it can actually lead to temptation.

[10 : 34] So rather than saying, stop having sex, he's saying, stop abstaining. Then in verse 7, he says, he wishes that we all were as he is.

Now some people think that Paul's saying that he wishes all people were single. Well, he can't mean that because he's actually encouraging people to be married. So he's not wishing that all people were single.

So what is he saying? He's wishing that all people were as he is, free from the wrong thinking of dividing our bodies and our spirits.

thinking that our bodies are evil and only our spirit is what God is redeeming. He wants everybody to be free at home with their bodies, integrated.

He wants everybody to be free, to be themselves and as a total person under Christ. Then in the last part of that same verse, 7b, he says, each person has a particular gift from God.

[11 : 55] One has one kind, another has another. Now for a long time I thought and people have taught me that this means that some people have a gift of singleness and some people have a gift for marriage.

But I don't think that's what Paul's actually saying here. In the context, how can a person who is married say, well, I may not have the gift of marriage?

As this cartoon shows, when things get tough, when you haven't had any sleep because you've got children waking up all night for years, when things are tough and you look at someone else outside of your marriage and think they look very attractive, you might think, oh, maybe I don't have the gift of marriage after all.

And that's what Paul's not saying that at all. On the contrary, he confirms that marriage is for life with one person. So what is he saying?

What is the gift that he's talking about? I think in this context, the whole of this part that we've looked at, he's really wanting us to say the gift that God has given you is who you are.

[13:21] God has made us all different. We are each unique. We have our own history, we have our own personality, we have our own damaged emotions, we have our own needs, we have our own circumstances.

Some people are married, some people are single, some people have children, some don't, some are 20, some are 15, some are 45, some are 80.

Your total package includes your community, who your friends are, the opportunities that you've had. And throughout your life, these change.

So who you are is God's gift to you. Some are like this, some are like that. What Paul wants to say here is that whatever your position, live it under Christ, trust and serve him there so you can grow and be more like him.

But what if you're not enjoying your circumstances? What if you're single and not enjoying it? What if you're married and not enjoying it? How can you trust and serve Christ there?

[14:48] I've got a list of a few pastoral things that I think might be helpful. First one, first of all admit that that's where you are and admit it to God.

Talk with him about it. God knows you even more than you know yourself and he cares about you more than anyone else. Secondly, we live in a fallen world.

None of us are emotionally whole or perfect. We all are in a position of being damaged by our backgrounds.

Every relationship that we're involved in is tainted with sin. The world is not perfect and God knows that.

Thirdly, share your concerns with someone else. God has put us in community. We don't have to live our lives on our own. Fourthly, value the friendships that God has given you.

[16:14] If you feel lonely, see if you can form some friendships. Pray for strength to live in your place.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control.

This is something that you can change. If you're single, maybe you could meet with some other single people, plan a holiday with some friends.

If you're married, maybe you need to see a counsellor. Deal with the temptation in your life.

One of the temptations might be to deny that this is your circumstances. Deal with sexual temptation. Don't deny it, don't give in, but exercise self-control.

[17:45] So Paul says that we each have a gift. It's who we are, where we are now. Trust God where you are. And if it's hard, fall on your knees.

But don't give up. Paul is affirming marriage.

He's affirming our sexuality. He's affirming it because God has given us who we are. He's given us our bodies.

He's given us our spirit. He's given us our personalities, our relationships. In this section that we have, Paul addresses a few groups of people.

Generally, he's talking in this first seven verses about marriage and sexuality. Now he goes on to talk about people who are widows or widowers.

[18:58] Verses eight to nine. In the translation that was read tonight, he says to the unmarried and the widows.

But I think the unmarried that he's referring to here, really the word ought to be widowers. So he's talking about people who have been married and are now single. Now Paul's saying, okay, there are people who've been married, their spouses died, it's probably good for them to remain unmarried.

However, if you've met someone that you want to marry, and not only that, but you've already started having a sexual relationship with them, then you ought to get married.

Because he says it's better to get married than to be shamed by sin. the implication is that sex is a good thing in a marriage relationship.

If it's not in a marriage relationship, then it's not an expression of God's total commitment to us. He wants us to be in a relationship of total commitment, which is where our sexuality is expressed.

[20 : 18] So we've got some widows and widowers who formed relationships and they've got an active sexual life, but they're not married. I wonder why they're not married.

It could be because their families put pressure on them not to. It could be for monetary reasons. It could be for cultural reasons that they're still supposed to be grieving, therefore you can't move on to the next partner.

But what Paul's saying, don't let insignificant things like that get in their way or stand in your way for being married. It's better to be married than to be not married and having a sexual relationship with someone.

I wonder whether that sort of thing happens in our society because people will let insignificant things get in the way of them getting married, like needing to have a deposit for a house before you can get married.

Or maybe you need to book a reception place and it'll take a year to get somewhere. Or maybe you think, oh, I'd like to travel overseas before I get married and settle down.

[21 : 38] Paul would say they're all insignificant reasons for not getting married. If you're going to have a sexual relationship with someone, then get married. However, having sex with someone is not the guide by which you decide whether this is the right person to marry.

I mean, they might be married to somebody else already. They may not be a Christian and Paul and Paul advises later on in the chapter that we should seek to marry a Christian.

This person that you're passionately sexually involved with now may in fact, given the longer view, not be someone that you could live with for the rest of your life.

There's much more to marriage than sex. So what is Paul saying? Be cautious.

Take marriage seriously. Seriously. What if you are having a sexual relationship with someone that you're not married to or you have in the past?

[22 : 49] what do you do? Firstly, I would advise you get God's view of how he is committed to us and pray that he will give you that view of relationships, of commitment.

Secondly, say sorry to God that you've had such a low view of relationships. and ask him to forgive you and receive and accept that forgiveness.

Learn from your mistakes. I think it's Philip Yancy who said, had this phrase, there's nothing that we can do that will make God love us less.

So even having a sexual relationship outside of marriage doesn't mean that you're outside of God's care. He will forgive.

And you can take that godly wisdom into your future. And I'd suggest that you, somewhere in the long line, do that business with a mature Christian who's able to affirm for you that yes, you are making the right decision and that yes, you are forgiven.

[24 : 28] So, marriage is serious. Sex is good. And they go together. Paul moves on now to covering the next, the next basis, dealing with people who might want to get divorced.

Christian couples. What does he say? Basically, don't do it. Paul refers to Jesus' teaching here because he says, not I, but the Lord.

He's referring back to Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce. And Jesus says something like this, marriage is part of God's creation.

Eminence in marriage is God's design. Marriage reflects God's covenant relationship with us. God is faithful.

God is totally committed to us exclusively till death. And he wants us to mirror that, those characteristics in our most intimate relationship of marriage to be faithful, exclusive, till death.

[25 : 53] God does not divorce us. He does not want us to divorce one another. but, Jesus says, divorce is a concession to limit the damage of sin in relationships.

We do live in a fallen world. We do hurt each other and damage each other. divorce is to accept that divorce is normal is to contradict God's view of us and his commitment to us.

In our society, I think we've got to the point now where divorce is considered to be normal. And Paul and Jesus want to say to us, divorce is an exception because of our sinfulness.

It's not normal. Paul wants to encourage unhappily married Christian couples not to separate but to make their goal reconciliation.

But if this is not possible, they can separate but not to remarry. So here's another reason to think carefully, very carefully about who you marry before you do.

[27 : 34] Because it's for life. And if you are married, to think carefully about your own marriage. And not to be sucked in by the popular view that divorce is normal.

Paul now moves on to people who are married to non-Christians. For Paul, for the Corinthians, there were a number of people who became Christians after they were married.

I have a friend at Swinburne, a staff member, who's in that position. And it's a very hard place to be as a growing young Christian.

Christian. The question that the Corinthians had was something like this. If you're a Christian in a non-Christian relationship married to a non-Christian, is the Christian going to be tainted by the non-Christian?

Are they going to somehow have their faith diluted? And Paul wants to say, no. On the contrary, the non-Christian partner in this marriage is now being introduced to a Christian.

[29 : 03] And there's an opportunity here for you to perhaps introduce your partner to Christ. But marriages between Christians and non-Christians are difficult.

There's a man I know whose wife became a Christian and he said it was something like having another man move into their marriage because his wife now consulted someone else.

She talked with someone else. So they are difficult. But Paul's want to encourage people who are married to non-Christians to stay there if possible because there is the possibility of your partner becoming a Christian, of there being peace, forgiveness and reconciliation.

So Paul's dealt with marriage and sex generally. He's talked about marriage and divorce. He's talked about relationships, having sexual relationships before you're married.

Marriage is between non-Christians and Christians. Do you get the feeling that what is underlying all this, Paul's saying life is actually messy?

[30 : 39] It's not straightforward. We do have bodies and our bodies often go off in different directions to where our spirit or our mind might want them to go.

But he covers all these different bases because God is there in all of them, in every relationship, relationship, in our sexuality. So don't try and hop out of where you are.

Accept the gift of who you are and your circumstances and trust God there. That's what he's basically saying in the last verses, 17 to 24.

He says, be what you are. He's using an example from the social world of circumcision and of slavery, I think to give an example here for marriage and singleness.

As a Christian, your external circumstances are not what's most important. What's most important is who you are before God. He's saying, are you married?

[31 : 54] Well, stay married. Are you single? Well, don't worry about it. Stay single. He's not saying that nothing will ever change because things do change.

Our circumstances change. Change is inevitable. Change is possible. If you're single, you may marry. If you're married, your husband or your wife may die.

You may have children. We all grow old. One of your partners in the marriage might become very seriously ill. Circumstances change.

But trust God there. Remember this, that God is in control of your life, especially when you think things are out of control. Change is possible also in what God is doing with us, in changing us, in our becoming more like him, in us exhibiting the fruit of the spirit, of being faithful and loving, of inflicting less pain on other people, of actually becoming less selfish.

Change is possible. God is at work and he wants us to make us more whole, bodily and spiritually.

[33 : 28] He wants to do a gentle work of remoulding our thinking about ourselves, about our sexuality, about our relationships, so that the whole of us more fully reflect his character.

nature. So wherever we are now, wherever you are, can I ask you tonight to think about whether your view of your sexuality, your view of your relationships, whether you're single or married, whether they are being shaped more by God's view than by our culture around us, whether they're actually being shaped by God's truth or even by our Christian culture.

Let's pray that that will be the case. Let's pray together. Our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have made us as whole people, with bodies and spirits and that you want every part of us to be under your lordship, even the very secret parts, our thoughts, our shame.

Lord, tonight we want to give ourselves to you for you to remould us and make us more like yourself.

We ask that you will shine your light and your truth on our lives so that we can see where we are not living according to your view of our relationships, relationships, of our sexuality.

[35 : 38] Lord, we want to say sorry to you tonight for the places, the times when we have consciously and unconsciously not lived the way that you want us to in our relationships, in our sexuality.

we ask that you will forgive us and that you will do that work of change in us. We pray tonight for those of us here who are married and those of us who are single, that you will protect us from temptation, temptation, that you will grow us in godly relationships, that we will be people who are growing totally under you, so that your name may be honoured and glorified through us.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.