

## Marriage and Singleness (2)

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[ 0 : 00 ] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 5th of December 1999. The preacher is Phil Muleman.

His sermon is entitled Marriage and Singleness, Part 2, and is from 1 Corinthians, Chapter 7, Verses 25 to 40.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father, help us to understand your word, help us to be obedient to it, and help us to be caring and supporting of one another, whether we are married or whether we are single.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. A lot of songs on the radio are songs about men and women trying to make the right decisions about their future.

And mainly they are about the person trying to find the right soulmate for the rest of their life together. That's how I sort of see it anyway. Or perhaps they are songs about couples or relationships that have broken up because one has been unfaithful within that relationship.

[ 1 : 12 ] And to be perfectly honest, you don't really hear any songs which express joy at being single and non-sexual, do you?

Similarly with movies. The hero in a movie is perhaps often single, that by the end of the movie, because it's usually a he, has solved the problems of the world and got his woman and both live happily ever after, except in James Bond because they've got to keep on making new movies every time, don't they?

But if the person at the end of the movie is still single or their partner has died, there's a deep sense of sadness for the viewer.

A couple of weeks ago, a number of us went and saw the movie The Sixth Sense. And without giving away the ending, there is an incredible sense of sadness when one of the lead roles is left without a partner.

Now you rarely, if ever, see movies which celebrate singleness. Unless, of course, we're talking about Playboy sorts of, you know, the Playboy sorts of movies.

[ 2 : 30 ] Why is this? Why? One reason, I'll give you a couple of reasons, one reason is that our world doesn't think that it is cool to be single and sexually inactive, if you like.

Mind you, it's increasingly uncool in our world to be married. Nowadays, more and more people are going for the try before you buy method.

I was at some people's place on Friday and they had been living together for six years before getting married because they wanted to make sure that they were compatible.

Six years. Another reason is that it's much easier to get a storyline from a marriage relationship because, as the Apostle Paul points out in this passage, which Paul Collier read to us, there's so many Pauls in this place, but there's the Apostle Paul, he points out in this passage, those who marry will experience distress in this life and I would spare you that.

For all human beings, life is about relationships, whether single or married. Problems abound within all relationships, but within marriage, the problems and distresses are magnified because it's focusing in on that couple, I guess.

[ 3 : 58 ] And so it's far easier to get a storyline for a song or for a movie out of that sort of relationship. You could make a really great story out of Babs and my relationship, I'm sure.

Well, is it cool to be unmarried? Is life dead for the single person? Is life, is living life without genital sex for the celibate Christian really worth living?

If you were to go by the many songs and movies and I've sort of introduced in that way that we are bombarded with, you would think that it wasn't and you would be pretty confused too, I think.

But the Bible has a lot to say about the single life and it holds it up in high esteem. So tonight, I want to try and glean a few things about singleness and put marriage in its right place as well.

Now, I'm mainly going to look at 1 Corinthians chapter 7 verses 25 to 35. I had gone way over my word limit by the time I got to the rest. But I think these verses are pretty important.

[ 5 : 13 ] And then I want to offer you two pastoral comments at the end. Well, let's begin by looking at verses 25 to 31.

And in these verses, I want to call it the present distress, the present distress. In these verses, Paul gives his opinion to the Corinthian Christians about marriage and singleness.

He has, as he says in this passage, no command of the Lord to give, but his opinion is worthwhile because as he says, he, by the Lord's mercy, is trustworthy.

Now, why is he trustworthy? Well, we've spent a lot of time talking about Paul, but I think he's trustworthy because, one, he's an apostle. Jesus has revealed himself to him and he has got that message to pass on.

Secondly, Paul is the one who founded the Corinthian church perhaps four or five years earlier before writing in this letter. And thirdly, why is he trustworthy?

[ 6 : 20 ] Because he believes in the gospel of Jesus Christ and that is the message that Paul proclaims. So Paul is trustworthy.

For us as Christians, we have to acknowledge that Paul is trustworthy. And his advice to the unmarried and the widows is to remain as you are.

Verses 27 and 28, it says, Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you do not sin.

And if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Remain as you are. That is his advice to the Corinthian church.

And he says in these verses, It is neither a sin for a Christian to marry, nor is it a sin for a Christian to remain single. And they were, I assume, some of the issues that were going on within Corinth because that is why he deals with this chapter.

[ 7 : 24 ] And Paul points out that far from solving all of our problems, marriage brings problems of its own. And this is a reminder which people concerned about marriage, and I think a lot of people are hung up about the idea, will I ever get married, that people who are concerned about marriage would do well to hear.

One of the most highly hurtful phrases in our English language is those words I said a few minutes ago. And all lived happily ever after.

Kids at an early age hear this phrase in the fairy tales that we read them. And we hear it in the movies. And it suggests to us that there is a stage in this life, usually following marriage, after which we can live in undisturbed bliss.

Paul here, though, contrasts the time in which he is writing by saying, those who marry will experience distress in this life. And in these words, I think Paul is referring to the whole of the time before Jesus Christ returns, where everyone will confess at that time when he returns that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Now, Paul's attitude here is expressed in a hymn which has these lines, a couple of the lines which come out of it. the world is very evil. The hour is waxing late.

[ 8 : 57 ] Now, it's sad but true that this attitude is foreign to most Western Christians. We've grown accustomed to the idea that life in general and the Christian life in particular can be one of growing security and prosperity.

I think because you're a Christian, you've made it. Sure, security and prosperity are part of the blessings of God's promises to his people and the Bible.

You see them in the Bible. But like the Corinthians back in Corinth, we have forgotten that these promises apply to the time after Christ's return.

Not necessarily before Christ returns but after Christ returns. So, it's okay for us to pray for peace. We should be doing those sorts of things. But true peace will only ever happen after Christ's return. The New Testament tells us until that time the world will go on the way it always has and that Christians will frequently suffer hardship.

[ 10 : 12 ] Now, we tend to think that the normal Christian life consists of a happy childhood, a dream wedding, a successful career and a cosy retirement.

And there are plenty of churches where the teaching quite falsely promises these things or where the social background of the congregation leads people to expect those sorts of things. But we need to realise that such an experience is abnormal. For most people I think life is pretty tough.

And for most Christians it's even tougher because on top of the usual problems of life they have particular problems that come from being a Christian. Now, in Australia we're fortunate that we don't suffer persecution for actually being a Christian.

Therefore, we're able to think of marriage, career and retirement as opportunities for Christians to enjoy. But if you were a Christian in an Islamic country the same opportunities that we have here are best available to you if you perhaps became a Muslim.

[11:28] Now, I'm not advocating that you should be a Muslim. Far from it. But to remain a Christian in some Islamic countries is to court discrimination and even death.

Now, the married person in such a situation faces greater strains and anxieties than the single. And this is part of what Paul means when he says those who marry will experience distress in this life. That's the sort of point I'm trying to bring out. So Paul's advice here is that we should sit tight to the things of the world. Sit light to the things of the world, sorry. And the married should live as unmarried.

Those with possessions as if they possessed nothing and so on. And all these things that we do have and all the blessings that we do have are only temporary blessings and cannot be the source of our final security.

Now the point that Paul is making here is not that we should never marry but that we should not set our sights on marriage.

[12:40] His advice parallels that given by Jesus in Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 6 Jesus says these words therefore do not worry saying what will we eat or what will we drink or what will we wear for it is the Gentiles who strives for all these things and indeed your heavenly father knows that you need all these things but he goes on he says strive for the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.

Strive for the kingdom of God is what Jesus says. Now on the principle that morally neutral circumstances are no hindrance to Christian living the Christian who is engaged to be married should perhaps not seek to break it off nor should those who are unattached seek marriage though of course if either marries it's not a sin as Paul points out within this passage.

What we should all seek is the kingdom of God and let other things follow on from that seek God's kingdom and let the other things fall into place and if in seeking the kingdom of God we have had no opportunity to marry we may be sure that this was for good reasons.

Equally if in the same process seeking the kingdom of God we find marriage coming our way we may be sure that this too is good and is God's will for us.

So Paul talks about the present distress. He says it's neither a sin to marry or to not be married and he says though to focus your sights on the kingdom of God.

[14:33] Sometimes they're hard things for us to hear but that's what we should be aiming at as Christians. The goal for us as Christians is heaven. Set your sights on the kingdom of God. Now let me talk to you about some marriage anxieties because Paul also counsels here in this passage against marriage because marriage itself brings problems which single people need to think about.

One person has said this, a woman is a great help to a man in all the problems a bachelor never has. there's certain wisdom in this.

Now the Bible is quite clear that the first duty of Christians in terms of good works is towards their family. In 1 Timothy chapter 5 verse 8 says this, whoever does not provide for relatives and especially family members has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

heavy responsibilities here. You've got to look after the family. Clearly the closer the family member, the greater the duty.

So Paul says that the married man or the woman cannot simply serve the Lord without anxiety.

Now if I could go on and summarize the verses 32 to 34 of chapter 7 here of 1 Corinthians, it would be this, the married man or the woman cannot simply serve the Lord without anxiety or distraction.

[16:13] They are concerned with pleasing the Lord, but they are also quite properly concerned with pleasing their wife or their husband. Significantly, Paul does not say that married people should spend less time on their families.

family life. That would be to undermine one of the key pillars of the church. And to be honest, this is one of the greatest struggles that I have in my married life.

That is spending appropriate time with my family. This sums me up pretty well. I'm sorry to leave you for the weekend, Bob, but it's essential I attend this conference on the breakdown of family life. We get so hell-bent about going to conferences and stuff like that about family issues, if you like, that you actually neglect the family. You can translate that into all sorts of situations, but I think that that's one of the main marriage anxieties that many of us go through.

Thanks. Many church families, particularly those of full-time ministers, see too little of one another because of church activities.

[17:30] But the unmarried simply don't have this problem. They don't have to worry about their spouse and their children and all those sorts of things.

So that's one sort of aspect of marriage anxiety. Let me bring you a few others. And marriage does bring other anxieties and even sorrows.

For example, family members have accidents or fall ill. Children require, if you have children in your marriage, children require constant attention or fall ill as well.

Last Friday night we went all the way over to Leviton with our three children and we had dinner with some friends. At eight o'clock two of them were starting to think about throwing up.

We were very anxious because it was a new home, didn't want the carpet or the lounge to be vomited on. And Laura was walking around with a bucket.

[18:38] But we had to leave early. Five minutes after being in the car they were bouncing. They were fine again. Now they were genuinely feeling unwell but these sorts of things we go through.

We bought our kids some guinea pigs a few six or seven weeks ago and we sat down with them and we talked with them about the rules and the responsibilities of looking after animals and you're going to clean the cage every Saturday and you're going to check their food day and night and so on.

This afternoon after having been at three jolly services I had to go home and clean out the guinea pig cage because they hadn't done it. Marriage brings anxieties amongst us.

And fatherhood. Thank you very much. Another anxiety that marriage and fatherhood brings is that the cost of living goes up with each new mouth to feed.

We've got three children and that's it. But the cost of living does go up and when petrol prices go up and you think how am I going to pay for the food and the petrol? It is an anxiety that if you're a parent you would know about.

[19:51] Again, how many Christians thinking of marriage consider what they would do if, as is quite possible, one of their children were to be born mentally or physically handicapped?

Do we think about those things? And of course, no one lives happily ever after. Why? Because death always intervenes.

And I don't recall having met someone who's lost a spouse at whatever age been happy about it. Now, I have no complaints about my marriage whatsoever.

I love being married and I'm very thankful to God for Barb, for the joy that she has brought to me and for the joy that my family brings me, my three kids and my extended family as well, for that matter.

But it is hard work. It is not easy. It is exhausting. Often, we don't see the bed till midnight because you've got washing to fold, things to do and so on.

[21:03] And it's not just for yourself that you're doing these things. It's not easy. And within a marriage relationship, you have to make some difficult choices about the things that you do or that you don't do, whether you go in this conference or whether you spend time with the family and those sorts of things.

And within 12 years of marriage for me, there have been some painful episodes and no doubt there will be some more painful episodes to come. That's reality. That's life. But for those who are considering marriage, it's important to ask whether this person is one with whom you would be wise to face these difficulties with.

And this is the kind of consideration that Paul calls us to as we weigh the advantages and the disadvantages of singleness.

So I've highlighted a few marriage anxieties and I'm sure you can think of other issues within your own life if you're a married person. Let me talk a little bit about esteeming singleness, which is what

I started off with.

Unfortunately, although family services have done much to establish the idea that children are as much part of God's people as adults, they have also tended to overemphasize family life at the expense of those who don't fit the pattern.

[ 22 : 30 ] Last year, a few months after I was here, we had a family consultation here to talk about family ministry. And we asked what was the definition of family, family, and all those sorts of things.

And one of the things which I really hadn't considered was what about the single people within the life of the parish? We hadn't really thought about it. Within evangelical churches in particular, I think, we also tend to show a strong preference for married ministers over against single ministers.

Now, in recent months, I've had several churches contact me about jobs. And I'm not trying to put myself up on a pedestal here, but one of the attractions to me, or for me, is that I am married with young children.

These are evangelicals, evangelical churches. They're looking for young married ministers with young children and so on. And I'm never sure why this is, because of three reasons.

Firstly, is it because they like the married image? Secondly, is it because they think of my wife as a free curate and a token Sunday school with the three kids that go along?

[ 23 : 48 ] Or thirdly, is it because they are afraid that single clergy might just be gay? whatever the reason is, it clearly ignores the teaching of the Bible.

Of course ministers should be free to marry, but for sheer value for money, the single are far to be preferred than the married. There's serious need for the churches to esteem singleness as highly as the Bible does here.

And we're fortunate here at Holy Trinity, that we have both models. Paul is single, although sometimes he does talk about a wife in the cupboard.

We've never found it, but he does talk about that. But Paul is first.