

Wisdom in Singleness

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Date: 03 June 2018

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[0 : 00] Just to say from the outset, there's going to be a time through the talk where I'm going to need to challenge us gently. But just to say from the outset, it's a really, really hard word today, I think. Because today we're going to be talking about singleness.

And you can see that from verse 25 of your Bibles. Do keep them open. You only need to have it open at that one page. Verse 25, Paul says now about virgins.

And for our purposes, he is talking, he means singleness. And people can be single for a lot of reasons. So firstly, because they've never married, but also because they're a widow or a widower. Maybe they're divorced. Maybe they're engaged. Maybe they're same-sex attracted and have chosen a life of celibacy. All these people are single as far as the Bible is concerned.

And in the last few weeks, as we travel to Corinth, Paul has corrected a lot of their wrong ideas about relationships. There was immorality in the church, sexual issues.

[1 : 04] Last week, marriage. And today, Paul tackles singleness. And we expect Paul to command everyone to go out and get married. Except that he doesn't.

Have a look at verse 38. The very bottom right-hand corner. Verse 38. So then he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better.

Paul says that singleness is better. And that is revolutionary thinking in a culture where girls aren't happily ever after until they've met Mr. Darcy.

That is revolutionary thinking anywhere that holds marriage and having a family as one of the highest ideals. And here in verse 38, Paul presents singleness as a better choice.

A deliberate life decision. A content situation. And this means today that we're going to need to think hard about staying single.

[2 : 10] And you can easily say, and this will be true, it's all very well for you. It's a bit rich for you. You're still married. Your wife is still with us. And that is fair.

And so I'm going to try really hard today to get out of the way of the passage and let Paul speak to all of us this morning. Please don't hear me lecturing you about singleness.

I want to be respectful of lots of the situations in the room today. Because this is a really, I think it's a really painful subject. It can be a really huge life decision. And a costly choice in this culture.

And so you're going to need to check that what I'm saying is true today. Okay. And just before all the married people switch off as well, today has as much to say to married people as it does to singles.

When we realize the extent of the implications, everyone is going to need to listen today. And so if you've got your handout, that's great. Do keep your Bibles open. Please chat about this when you have coffee.

[3 : 16] And please chat about this over lunch today. So point number one. Like Melbourne, ancient Corinth was in a mess when it came to relationships. They thought the grass was always greener on the other side.

They were never content in their situation. In chapter seven, the underlying issue is, if only I could change my worldly status, then I would be more spiritual.

Then I could really please God. And so last week, married people were pretending to be single again by not sleeping with their partners. Today, single people are anxious about getting married.

And in verse 17, which I've got as the first slide, verse 17 is actually the heart of chapter seven, the whole of chapter seven. And Paul says, Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them.

Thanks, Asher. And remaining content is the important piece of this puzzle. Because lots of people, especially in this room, lots of people don't choose singleness.

[4 : 30] It's not a deliberate life decision for them. For many reasons, life thrusts singleness upon people in really sad circumstances.

Paul says in verse 27, this idea of remaining content as well. He says, have a look at verse 27. Are you pledged to a woman?

Do not seek to be released. So remain. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. Remain, he says. He says, don't look over your shoulder as if the key to a better life, a more godly life, is just waiting for you around the corner or in the past.

See, marriage is a gift and we all say amen to that. But Paul says that singleness can be a gift as well. Have a look at slide two.

Thanks. This is verse seven across the page. You can look at your Bibles if you wish. Paul says, I wish that all of you were as I am. That is, single. But each of you has your own gift from God.

[5 : 34] One has this gift. Another has that. Thanks, Asha. And that, I think, is the harder pill to swallow today. Because if singleness is a gift, surely it's for those rare people who are totally happy on their own, who never get lonely, who've never fancied anyone, who've never wanted children or a family of their own.

Surely that is the gift of singleness. But to understand the gifting like that means that on one side of the church will be a few people enjoying the gift, totally happy.

On the other side, lots of people married, enjoying the gift, totally happy. And in the middle, lots and lots and lots of people who are unhappy with their singleness, who really want to be married or who really want to be married again.

This is not how Paul describes gifting. Remember, we're in a section about contentment. Therefore, the gifts of singleness and of marriage aren't necessarily ones that we're always happy with all the time.

They're not necessarily ones we want all the time. Otherwise, Paul wouldn't need to remind them to remain and be content. And so when we were all young, we were all single.

[7 : 00] And that time was a gift full of advantages. Some of us, or lots of us got married. We received the gift, that is, of a spouse. And along with everything good about marriage.

Sadly, some people became widows or widowers. Sadly, some people got divorced. And it's not as though they're still gifted for marriage without the present, the spouse.

They're given the gift of singleness again. See, verse 7 assumes that everyone is gifted by the present state they're in. Whether they're married or single.

Whether they feel it's a blessing or not. Whether they are content or not. Whether they choose it or not. But for singleness and for single people, Paul has some really big reasons to stay single and be content.

And this is where we'll spend the rest of our time. So, point number two. Point number two is the first reason why singleness is a gift. And it relates to time. Have a look on the screen.

[8 : 09] So, verse 26 is the reason. And Paul expands it in verses 29 to 31. So, verse 26. Because of the present crisis, I think it's good for a man to remain single as he is.

He expands it in the next two verses. What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. And then the end of verse 31.

For this world in its present form is passing away. Paul says there is a present crisis in Corinth. And it's not an earthquake. And it's not a famine. And it's not war.

It is the larger crisis that this world in its present form is passing away. In 2018, we are still in the same phase of salvation history.

And that means everything in the world has a use-by date on it. And so, how should we live?

Halfway through verse 29. Halfway through verse 29.

[9 : 07] From now on, those who have wives should live as if they do not. Paul says live as if your marriage was not the most important thing. Not the biggest thing in this world.

Verse 30. Those who mourn as if they did not. Those who are happy as if they were not. He says treat your funerals and your parties as though they're temporary things of this world.

Our time here is short. Again in verse 30. 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.

Paul says that worldly stuff. So, businesses, houses, money, cars. They all look great. They're all successful. But they're passing away. And likewise, Paul says you can use this life in singleness and service of the Lord because you have another life to come.

You can use this life in service of the Lord because you have another life to come. And in many ways, this is what the entire book of 1 Corinthians is about. Give up your rights now. Use this life now.

[10:16] You have another life to come. And this is really important because not everyone will get married or stay married. Our final relationship to Jesus.

That's the big M that everyone was made for. That was our second reading. It relegates earthly marriage to being just a little M.

Single, widowed, divorced, same-sex attracted, married, young. All people were made for this relationship with Jesus.

That final wedding banquet in heaven which Gwyneth read for us, that is the Christian hope. It is revolutionary to be content and remain single because you know that this world is passing away. That is reason two. Reason, sorry, that was reason one. Reason two, which is actually point three. Because singleness means more freedom. And Paul gives his reason there.

[11:20] Have a look at the fourth slide. There you go. The next slide, yeah. End of verse 28, Paul gives us a perspective on what it's like to be married. Excuse me.

He says, But those who marry will face many troubles in this life. And I want to spare you of this. He expands this in verses 32 to 35. And I've just got a couple of those verses there.

I'd 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. Paul says that singleness can be better because it allows undivided devotion to the Lord.

Now we don't want to undo all the good benefits of being married. But married people simply do not have the time and freedom of single people. The key contrast is that their interests are divided.

[12:17] So let me illustrate. So single people decide what to do and then just do it. Married people form a subcommittee. And then the back and forward starts.

And eventually the husband decides how long he wants to be in the doghouse for. And then he lets his wife win. When single people want to leave the house, they just leave the house.

When people with children leave the house, that's an Olympic event. This is another good one.

When single people want to watch TV, they just go like this. It's remarkable. They just go click.

When married people want to watch TV, they have to endure midsummer murders instead of the footy. Good morning to Joyce and Rupert. Thanks, guys.

Where you go, what you do, how you spend your money, where to go on holidays, which way to drive, how to drive. Let alone every big decision to do with children and Christianity.

[13:22] Paul is not trying to create discontent in marriage, but merely giving us a realistic angle on why singleness can be better. And I spoke to lots of single people in preparation for this talk.

And they said, at this point, they said, yeah, but being single isn't the freedom with decisions that Paul mentions here. They said, often we want to share a big decision with someone special.

And I think that's fair. And so Paul gives other reasons why in verses 32 to 35. And I'm going to illustrate. I wonder if you've ever been to the Christian bookshop, Courong, in Blackburn.

I go there quite often. Usually I'm just going to buy more Bibles. You can never have too many Bibles. But when you walk into Courong, they've got these displays of the latest Christian bestsellers.

And as soon as you walk through the doors, they're right there for you. But imagine if there was one book that helped us to be free from concern, verse 33, that taught us how to be devoted to the Lord in body and spirit, verse 33, that taught us how to have a good order of priorities in life, verse 35, that taught us how to have an undivided devotion to the Lord, verse 35.

[14:43] Now, this is not to say that married people have a limit to how godly they can be, because they've got to please their spouses.

That is the godly situation that married people were called. Pleasing my wife is part of serving the Lord where he has situated me. But if finding someone and starting a family is how you orient your life, then yes, getting married, remaining married, that is clearly better.

Maybe you see that, if you're a Christian, maybe you see that as our mission from Genesis through the first Adam. Remember to fill the earth, to go forth and multiply.

But as Christians, we're in the era of the second Adam, Jesus. And there's a very strong argument to say that we're not here to fill the earth anymore, but to build the church instead.

Go and make disciples of all nations. Speak the truth in love until you build the church in maturity. You see, that is where all of history is headed, the church.

[16:01] The church is the bride in that final wedding picture we saw. Singleness is better because you can focus on building a church with undivided interests.

I wonder how many Christian heroes have you got who've played a really significant role in your life who were single? I thought about this this week and I named at least 10 for me.

And it must be at least 10 for you as well. Jesus himself, the Apostle Paul, Paul Barker. He was a minister here at this church. The good effects of his ministry are still continuing to this day.

Here at HCD, there are so many single people serving away in ways that lots of us don't know. I wanted to start naming them, but I realized that I would forget some and I didn't want to upset people, so I left them off.

But loads of single people are here serving at HCD. HCD is better and more built up because of their service to us.

[17:06] Peter Adam, lots of us know Peter Adam. He's the godfather of the Melbourne church scene. He's always traveling to preach here and there. No family of his own, but a huge spiritual family.

Peter's always checking up on the ministers in Melbourne. His diary is full. No children of his own, but dozens and dozens and dozens of spiritual sons and daughters.

He would not have been able to serve half as much if he were married. Loads of Australians this past year, loads of Australians have been fighting for marriage in one way or another.

Marriage is good. Marriage is godly. But maybe we've said that so strongly that we have stopped wondering if singleness is good too or a better option.

Because singleness brings countless opportunities to serve the gospel, to build the church.

Because you don't have to share HTD with a spouse.

[18:11] See, it's revolutionary to be content in singleness. Because you know this world is passing away. That's reason one.

And because singleness means undivided devotion to the Lord. That's reason two. And so we come to our last point. When it comes to big decisions in life, we often just want people to tell us what to do.

That's what lots of Christians want from the Bible. Just tell me what to do, Lord, and I'll do it. But in all the verses about singleness, Paul leaves it up to the people to decide.

So here's a slide. These are a lot of the verses about singleness. And I've highlighted where the decision power lies. So verse 8, it is good for people to do so, to remain single.

That's Paul's opinion. He's not forcing that on anyone. Verse 25, now about virgins and single people, I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment or an opinion as one who is by the Lord's mercy trustworthy.

[19:19] End of verse 36, if he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. Verse 37, the man who's settled the matter in his own mind, who's under no compulsion, but has control over his will, and who's made up his own mind not to marry the virgin.

See, lots of biblical wisdom works like that. And choosing singleness is wisdom territory. It's a massive life choice.

It can't be, I've chosen to remain single because I was told to. Just like marriage, remaining single is a decision one has to own for themselves.

And again, not everyone chooses singleness. We said that. And so their decision, their choice will be to choose contentment or not. And therefore, as we move to application, one of the key applications for today, and please may I gently prod us today, let's give single people a break.

Let's give single people a break. Let's not put pressure on people to remain single because it seems more godly, nor to get married because lots of us are.

[20:36] Ultimately, people have to own this decision for themselves. Singleness has a great cost in our culture. Not many people will recognize you're single to devote time to the Lord.

They will assume a lot of unkind things. There's a cost to singleness, the cost of loneliness, the cost of no physical intimacy, the cost of not having children.

It's up to the rest of the church to reduce that cost. We need to make singleness a realistic option, a plausible life decision.

One of the ways we can do that is to increase the importance of friendship. The church should be a place of deep community where we all share our possessions and lives together.

That's the picture you get at the early part of Acts. I know there are specific singles lunches organized. I think there are other lunches organized by Nancy and Neville as well.

[21 : 36] These are terrific. A place where people can build deep community together. There are loads of Bible groups and prayer groups that meet here.

I ran into Jill Wilson's group the other day. These places are of deep community where people gather around God's word. They're fantastic. In my circles, I don't know if it's the same in your circles, but in my circles, married people tend to disappear into married cliques.

Or worse still, sort of introverted, inward-looking huddles of just husband and wife. May I gently challenge you, if you're married, why not invite a single person on holiday with you?

You'll get other holidays. Why not invite them on a holiday? Why not invite them to come to dinner, to bring them into your family somewhat? One of my teachers at Ridley College is Rhys Bezzant.

Rhys is a single fella in his 50s, and I asked him about this. And he said he loves it when married friends invite him over to do Bible time with the kids and the grandkids.

[22 : 47] He said, I love going for bushwalks and activities with married male buddies. Another important application, therefore, is let's stop assuming that every single person is plotting to get married.

Let's give them space to remain single and be content. And so, and I think this is a challenging one, can we please stop setting people up?

I don't know that that happens, I haven't seen it at HCD, but it might be happening in family circles.

Can we please stop setting people up? Because it assumes that everyone wants to get married.

It assumes that marriage is somehow some utopia, a better state of life. Speaking of marriage and children, I've always been praying for my son and now my daughter to find a godly husband or wife.

And I know loads of you do that for your children and your grandchildren. But it's not till this week that I realised I should be praying for them to choose singleness as an equally good life decision.

[23 : 57] I don't know how you would feel, I don't know how I, how would we feel if our children or our grandchildren said, I'm choosing to be single so I can devote my life fully to a full-time paid gospel ministry, to service of the Lord.

Maybe they would have to give up a glittering career and financial security. Maybe they will never own a house. Would we be pleased with that?

Or would we tell them to stop talking nonsense? Statistically speaking, statistically speaking, and particularly if you come to the 1030 service with the children, you'll know this to be true, there just aren't enough Christian boys.

There just aren't enough. To always talk about finding godly husbands for our daughters and our granddaughters, it might be loading them with a crushing expectation.

That statistically speaking, will never be met or may never be met. You see, if we believe this chapter, then single people are not odd people with some strange gift.

[25 : 08] They're Christians who have chosen undivided days and spiritual families because they know that this world is passing away.

Please don't think of singleness as anything other than a gift. Please be content in your singleness. The grass is not always greener.

Please start loving the advantages of the gift God has given you. Amen. Let me pray. Father God, we thank you that you tell us tough things.

Tough things about relationships that strike the very fabric of how we are wired. And Father, we pray for single people in our congregation.

We pray that you would help them if they're sad. We pray that they would be content and use the extra time you've given them.

[26 : 08] And please, for married people here, help us to support single people. Help us to reduce the cost of singleness to them. We pray, Father, that HTD would be one community where we're all sharing our lives together, where we're all pointing each other to that final marriage that we were all made for.

That is our hope, Father. We look with our eyes fixed on heaven. In Jesus' name. Amen.