

Wisdom in Singleness

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[0 : 00] Last week was awkward, today is really difficult, because today we're going to say revolutionary things about singleness. People can be single because they've never married or they're divorced, maybe they're engaged.

People can be single because they're same-sex attracted and have chosen to remain celibate. Maybe they're widows or widowers as well. All these people are single as far as the Bible is concerned.

And to help us, we're going to travel again to ancient Corinth. That's where the Apostle Paul and God, they give their opinion on singleness. And it's in verse 38, the very bottom right of your handout, of your Bible, sorry.

Not handout. Verse 38. Paul says that singleness is better.

That is revolutionary thinking in a culture where Bridget Jones is not happily ever after until she's met her Mr. Darcy. That is revolutionary thinking in any culture where marriage and having a family is highly prized.

[1 : 16] Paul here presents singleness as a choice, a deliberate life decision. This means today we're going to need to think really hard about people being single or choosing to stay single.

And you might easily say, well, look, this is a bit rich for you because you're still married or your wife is still with us. And that is true. So I'm going to try very hard today to get out of the way of the passage and just let Paul speak.

Please don't hear me lecturing you about singleness. I want to be respectful. There's lots of single situations in the room today. It's a really painful subject.

We're aiming to take an honest look at the Bible to see how revolutionary relationships can be at singleness in particular. And so what we're going to do today is see four biblical reasons why people should think seriously about singleness.

So four biblical reasons why people should think seriously about singleness. And they are the four points on your handout. And if you're not a Christian here today, again, we're really thrilled that you've joined us.

[2 : 31] But if you're not a Christian here today, you're going to find some of these biblical reasons harder to accept. And so you'll need to ask yourself the bigger questions about whether your life is better off without Christ as far as singleness and relationships go.

And just before all the married people switch off, today has as much to say to married people as it does to singles. And when we hear the extent of the implications, everyone here needs to listen today.

So men, please let's chat about this over pizza at lunchtime. Ladies, please stay around here to chat about this as well. This is really important and difficult stuff.

And so point number one, singleness is a gift. Like Melbourne, ancient Corinth was in a mess about relationships. They thought the grass was always greener on the other side.

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

[3 : 40] Then I would be more godly. Then I would be more spiritual. So last week, married people were pretending to be single again. They stopped sleeping with their spouses.

This week in our reading, single people are anxious about whether to get married. And Paul says to all in our first slide. Thanks, Ryan. This is verse 17.

It's the heart of chapter seven. He says, Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. Paul says, Stop looking over your shoulder as if the secret to a better life is just around the corner.

And, thanks Ryan. And remaining content. Remaining content is the missing piece of this puzzle. Or it's the important piece.

Because lots of people don't choose singleness. For lots of people, singleness is thrust upon them by life in painful situations and painful circumstances.

[4 : 46] See, marriage is a gift. And we all say amen to that. But Paul says that singleness can be a gift too. So, the second slide.

This is from last week. Paul in verse 7, just over the page, if you've got your Bible there. I wish that all of you were as I am. That is, single. But each of you has your own gift from God.

One has this gift. Another has that. Thanks, Ryan. And that is the harder pill to swallow today. Because if singleness is a gift, surely it's for those really rare people who are totally happy alone. Who never get lonely. Who never fancy anyone from the opposite sex. Who never want any physical intimacy. Who never wanted children or a family of their own. Surely that is the singleness gift.

But to understand gifting like that, that means on one side of the church there will be a few people who are enjoying the gift of singleness, quite happy.

[5 : 48] On the other side, lots of people enjoying the gift of marriage, totally happy. And in the middle, lots and lots and lots of people unhappy. Because they're single, but they want to be married.

Or be married again. This isn't how Paul describes gifting. Remember, we're in a section about contentment. And therefore, the gifts of singleness and marriage, they aren't ones we're happy with all the time.

Otherwise, Paul wouldn't need to remind them to be content. Or to remain as they are. Now, when we were young, we were all single. And that time was a gift.

Full of advantages of its own. Then lots of us got married. And we received the gift of a spouse. And along with everything good about marriage. Sadly, some people got divorced or became widows.

And it's not as though those people are still gifted for marriage without the present of a spouse. Their singleness is given to them again as a gift.

[6 : 57] Verse 7 assumes that everyone is gifted by the situation they are presently in.

Whether they're married or single. Whether they feel it's a blessing or not. Whether they choose it or they don't. And apart from being revolutionary, I hope you find this another R word.

I hope you find this a relief. You see, what if my gifting was based on how I feel or what I wanted? That means my gifting would change many times a year.

Depending on what season I was in. It's a relief for me and for my family that my gift right now is not singleness. It's a relief that single people's gift isn't marriage right now.

Otherwise, they would rightly be discontent. They could rightly point the finger of blame at God and say, You are limiting my true calling. And this is revolutionary thinking in a culture that champions feelings.

[8 : 03] If you don't feel happy where you are, go out and change your circumstances. And then you'll be a well-being. But that is awful advice if you really feel like marriage is your calling.

But you're stuck in a situation where all the available men still think they're boys. Or an awful advice when nothing will bring your wife back home.

See, if you're single, that is God's gift. Because that is where he wants you today. And it's full of unique advantages to you right now. And so let's keep looking at them.

This is point two. Singleness is temporary. And obviously, this gift relates to time. And so, Ryan, can I have a slide, please? So verse 26 is the reason.

And verses 29 to 31 flesh it out a bit more. But I've highlighted or underlined in the verses so you can see that. Because of this present crisis, I think it's good for a man to remain as he is.

[9 : 03] And verse 29, what I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. 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 famine and it's not war and it's not an earthquake. It's the larger crisis that this world in its present form is passing away.

Here in 2018, we're still in the same phase of salvation history. And as such, that means everything in the world, everything in the world, including marriage and singleness, has a use-by date on it.

And therefore, halfway through verse 29, Paul says, From now on, those who have wives should live as if they do not. He says, live as if your marriage is not the biggest thing in the world.

Verse 30, those who mourn as if they do not. Those who are happy as if they were not. He says, treat your funerals and your parties as temporary things.

[10:04] Our time here is short. He goes on, those who buy something as if it were not theirs to keep. Those who use the things of the world as if not engrossing them. Paul says that worldly stuff, so your businesses, your houses, your cars, your money, they all look great, they may all be successful, but they are passing away.

And likewise, Paul says, you can live this life in singleness and service of the Lord because you have another life to come.

You can give this life in service of the Lord because you have another life to come. And I'll give you the tip, that's what the whole of the book of Corinthians is about. Give this life now because you've got another life, a better life to come.

And if you're not a Christian here, you might completely reject the Bible's claim that this world is ending, that there's another world to come.

You might completely reject that. And that's up to you. That's your decision. But that means you're in a much, much worse place because that means this world is all you have.

[11:14] That means your current issues, problems in life, baggage that you've got, they're not guaranteed to resolve themselves in this life. You don't have to believe in God to believe that happily ever after isn't for everyone.

And the Christian claim, one of our key Christian claims, is that Jesus will gather up his people to be with him in a perfect relationship at the end of time, a heavenly banquet.

That was the picture from our second reading. And this is really important because not everyone, not everyone will be married or stay married.

Our final relationship to Jesus is the big M, the capital M that we were all made for. It was the hope in Revelation 19.

And it relegates, it relegates earthly marriage to being just a lowercase or a little M. See, single, widowed, divorced, same-sex attracted, married, all people, all people were made to be in a big M, a big marriage, a big relationship with Jesus.

[12:31] It is perfectly wise for you to become a Christian because you want to be with Jesus forever. That is perfectly wise and good. It's perfectly valid to become a Christian because you don't want to be alone in the universe.

It's revolutionary to be content in singleness. That's reason one because you know this world is passing away. That's reason two. Let's look at reason three.

Singleness is freedom. And at the end of verse 28 is Paul's perspective on marriage. And I've put it there as a slide on the screen. End of verse 28.

But those who marry will face many troubles in this life and I want to spare you this. He expands that reason in 32 to 35 and I give it just a couple of verses there.

He says, 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.

[13:35] Paul says that singleness is better because it allows undivided devotion to the Lord. That's what the end of verse 35 says. Now, he doesn't want to undo all the good benefits of marriage, but married people simply don't have the time or the freedom of single people.

And let me just illustrate. So, single people, they decide what they want to do and they just do it.

Married people form a subcommittee. And then, the back and forward starts and then, the husband decides how long he wants to be in the doghouse for and he lets his wife win.

Simple things like leaving a house. When you're single, you just leave the house. If you've got children, leaving the house is an Olympic event. Michael McIntyre has a really good joke about that. Do watch it on YouTube. When single people want to watch TV, it's remarkable. This is how it goes. It goes, click. When married people want to watch TV, they have to endure the block or Midsummer Murders instead of footy.

Maybe that's just me. I don't know. But, where you go, what you do, how you spend your money, which way to drive, how to drive, where to go on holidays, let alone every huge decision to do with children.

[15:04] Paul's not trying to create discontent in marriage, but he's just giving us a realistic angle, just an angle, on why singleness can be better. And, speaking to single friends in preparation for

today, one of my single friends made a really good point, that lots of single people would love someone to share a decision with.

Sometimes, decision making isn't always freedom for them. They'd love to get some help from a special someone about making decisions. That's, I think that's right and valid.

Because we always think that marriage is good. We always say marriage is good, even if we concede that it can be tough. But we don't really agree with Paul that singleness is better.

Our culture certainly doesn't. You see, if finding someone special and starting a family, if that is how you orient your life, then yes, clearly, obviously, getting married is better.

If you're a Christian here, maybe you see that as your mission through the first Adam from Genesis, remember? Fill the earth, go forth and multiply. But as Christians, we're in the era of the second Adam, Jesus.

[16:23] And there's a very strong argument to say that we're not here to fill the earth anymore, but rather to build the church. This is where all of human existence is going towards the church.

The church was the bride in that picture, in that wedding in Revelation 19. Singleness is better because you can focus on building the church with undivided interests.

I wonder for you, how many unmarried Christian heroes can you think of whose ministry has really helped you? Me personally, I named, I got to a list of ten.

How many unmarried Christian heroes have helped you along the way in your life? Obviously, there's Jesus himself. The Apostle Paul, he's single. Paul Barker, he was a minister of this church a while ago.

The good effects of his ministry are still being felt today. Currently, there are so many single people serving in so many huge ways here, I couldn't name them all for fear of leaving some off.

[17:33] HTD, our church, is better and more built up for single people's ministry here. Peter Adam, he's the godfather of the Melbourne church scene.

He's always travelling to preach here and there. No family of his own, but a huge spiritual family. His diary is full. He's always checking up on ministers, how they're going.

No children of his own, but dozens and dozens of spiritual sons and daughters. He wouldn't have been able to serve half as much if he were married.

See, loads of Australians, we have been fighting for marriage in some way or other this past year. Marriage is good, marriage is godly. But maybe we've said that so strongly that we've stopped wondering if singleness is a better option.

A whole life of singleness that can bring countless opportunities to serve the Lord, to serve the church in ways big and small because you don't have to share HTD with your spouse.

[18:40] And you may not be a Christian here and if that's the case, you may not care at all about devotion to the church and building the church, but you should know that devotion is one of the marks of God's people.

It's one of the marks of your heart determining whether or not we are part of that final wedding banquet or not. Singleness is a gift.

Singleness is temporary. Singleness is freedom. And finally, singleness is your choice. When it comes to big decisions in life, we want people to tell us what to do.

Just tell me what to do and I'll do it. For Christians as well, we want the Bible just to say, accept this job in this situation. Turn left at that street. We just want the Bible to tell us what to do and we'll do it. We're happy with that, Lord. But in all the verses about singleness, Paul leaves it up to the people to decide for themselves. And so I've got a slide here just to show you where the decision-making power is.

[19:43] So in verse 8, now to the unmarried and the widows, I say it is good for them to stay unmarried as I do. That's Paul's opinion. It's not a command. Verse 25, now about burdens, I have no command from the Lord but I give my judgment or my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.

Verse 36, and if he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He's not sinning. Verse 37, but the man who settled this matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion, but has control over his own will and who has, sorry, and who has made up his own mind not to marry the virgin. Lots of biblical, thanks, Brian, lots of biblical wisdom works like that. But choosing singleness is wisdom territory as well. It's a massive life choice.

It can't be I've chosen singleness because someone has told me to. Just like getting married, staying single, you have to own that decision for yourself.

And again, not everyone chooses singleness in that way and so their choice will be to choose contentment or not. And therefore, as we move to application, permission to gently prod us quite firmly, as we move to application, one of the key applications today is let's give single people a break.

[21 : 09] Let's just give single people a break. Let's give them a break. Let's not put pressure on people to be single because it seems more godly. Let's not put pressure on people to get married because lots of us are.

Ultimately, people have to own their own decisions. There is a great cost to singleness in our culture. No one out there will be able to recognize that you have chosen singleness or you've chosen contentment in singleness.

They will assume a lot of unkind things. There's the cost of loneliness, the cost of no physical intimacy, the cost of not having children. It is up to the rest of the church to reduce the cost so single people can be content.

We need to make singleness a realistic option and one of the ways we can do that is friendship. Friendship. The church should be a place of deep friendship. The church should be the best community in the world, a place where we share our lives, share our possessions with one another, share our sorrows and our joys.

That is the picture you get in Acts 4. the men's lunch today. It's primarily for community and so whatever your plans, can you just cancel them?

[22 : 27] Just come along. Just cancel your plans and come along. Can I, permission to say that? It is really important that we do community well. Our Bible groups this year, I'm going to bang on about them so much from this pulpit but I'm clearly unapologetic about it because Bible groups, small groups, prayer partners, wherever you meet, that's fine.

Catching up together around God's word, that builds deep community and friendship. For married people, sometimes we disappear into our own cliques, our own married little cliques or even worse, we're so inwardly focused on a huddle of husband and wife.

If you're married, why not invite single people to go on holiday with you? Why not just do that? You'll have other holidays. You've got another life to live if you're a Christian. Just invite single people on holidays.

Invite them over for dinner. Just bring them into your family somewhat. One of my teachers at Ridley is Rhys Bezant. He's fantastic.

He's a single fella in his 50s and I asked him about this and he told me, he said, I love it when married friends invite me over to do Bible time with the kids and the grandkids.

[23 : 44] He says, I love to go for bushwalks and activities with married male buddies. Another important application is let's stop assuming that every single person is plotting to get married.

Let's give them space to remain single and therefore, can we please, can we please not set people up? Can we please not set people up?

I don't know, I haven't seen it happen at HCD but I'm sure it might happen in a lot of family circles. Please not set people up. It assumes that everyone wants to be married.

It assumes that marriage is a better way of life. And again, I've not seen this one at HCD too much but I see this all the time every day in Melbourne. When it comes to social media, I see lots of posts about how perfect marriage is and how gorgeous children are and that may well be the case but I never see the equivalent post of how tough marriage is or how much of a struggle kids are.

Every time I see posts about marriages and things like that, I always think, how is that helping the single person in your church to be content? It's not wrong to give up your right to post whatever you want.

[25 : 01] You have another life to come. Speaking of children, and this is where I found it really tough this week, speaking of children, I always pray for my kids to marry godly husbands and wives and I know that we all do that and that is good and that is right.

But until now, I never thought that I should be praying for them to make or choose singleness as an equally good life decision. How would we feel if one of our children came to us in a few years' time and said, I'm choosing to be single so I can devote myself full time to paid gospel ministry and in service of the Lord?

Maybe they would have to give up a glittering secular career, a financial security, a future family. Would we see that as a good or better life decision or would we tell them to stop talking nonsense? Statistically speaking, and I'm just being real, statistically speaking in Christian circles, there just aren't enough Christian boys. There's just not. To constantly talk about finding godly husbands for all our daughters, it might be weighing on them and loading on them a burden that could be crushing later in life because statistically speaking there just aren't enough boys. If we believe this chapter, then single people aren't odd people with some strange gift. they're Christians who realize this world is passing away.

[26 : 39] They choose undivided devotion and spiritual family. Please don't think of your singleness as anything other than a gift. Paul says, be content in your singleness.

The grass is not always greener and start loving the advantages of the gift you have been given. Amen.