

On Marriage and Singleness (2)

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 28th of May 2000. The preacher is Phil Muleman.

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

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We pray that it teaches us, inspires us, and encourages us to live lives which are worthy of you.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. You may like to open your Bibles at page 930 as we look at the second part of 1 Corinthians, Chapter 7, Verses 25, through to the end of the chapter.

Well, a lot of songs on the radio are about men and women trying to make the right decisions about their future. There can be songs about one person trying to find the right soulmate for the rest of their life, can't there?

[1 : 1 2] Or there can be songs about couples who have broken up because one has been unfaithful within that relationship. But you don't really hear any songs which express joy at being single and unsexual, do you?

Similarly, with movies. The hero in a movie is often single, but by the end of the movie he has solved the problem. I say he because it's usually the he, has solved the problems of the world and got his woman and both live happily ever after.

But if the person at the end of the movie is still single or the partner has died, there is a deep sense of sadness or sorrow for those who go to watch it.

Last year, several of us went and saw the movie The Sixth Sense and at the end of that movie there is an incredible sense of sadness when one of the lead roles is left on their own.

You rarely, if ever, see movies though which celebrate singleness, unless of course you're James Bond or a Playboy or something like that. Well, why don't we see things which celebrate singleness?

[2 : 2 6] One reason is that our world doesn't think it is cool to be single and sexually inactive. Mind you, it is increasingly uncool to be married in our society, isn't it?

Nowadays, more and more people are going for the try before you buy method. I met a couple who had been living together for six years to see, before they got married, to see whether they were compatible or not.

Another reason is that it is much easier to get a storyline from marriage relationships because, as the Apostle points out in this passage in verse 28, 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. And problems abound within relationships and within all relationships.

But within marriage, the problems and distresses are magnified. And so it's far easier to get a storyline for a song or a movie out of that sort of exclusive relationship.

[3 : 42] Well, my question to you this morning, is it uncool to be married? Is life dead? Is life dead for the person who is single? Is life worth living without sexual activity for the celibate Christian?

If you were to go by the many songs and movies that we are bombarded with, you would think that it's not. Or, at the very least, you would be confused. But the Bible has a lot to say about the single life.

And it holds it up, surprisingly, in high esteem. So this morning, I want to try and glean a few things about singleness and put marriage in its right place as well.

And to do that, I'm going to look at verses 25 through to 35 of chapter 7. And then I have a couple of pastoral considerations and comments which I want to add at the end.

So the first point I want to make is about this present distress. In verses 25 through to 31, Paul gives his opinion, the Apostle Paul, gives his opinion to the Corinthian Christians about marriage and singleness.

[4 : 57] Now he says he has no command of the Lord to give, but his opinion is worthwhile because he, by the Lord's mercy, is trustworthy. Now this Apostle Paul, we've looked at 1 Corinthians in quite some detail.

Paul was an apostle. He was the person who founded the Corinthian church under God's direction. And the Apostle Paul believes in the gospel of Jesus Christ for salvation, and he preaches it.

That's what he came preaching when he first visited Corinth. So Paul is trustworthy. And his advice to the unmarried, the unmarried and the widows, is to remain as you are.

In verses 27 and 28 he 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. Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life. And I would spare you that. It is neither a sin for a Christian to marry, or remain single.

[6 : 09] Paul points out that far from solving all our problems, marriage brings problems of its own. And this is a reminder which people concerned about marriage do well to hear.

One of the more damaging phrases in our English language is, And they all live happily ever after. Kids at an early age hear this phrase in their fairy tales.

Who's read stories with their kids in the end? It says they all lived happily ever after. It's good, isn't it? We all read those sorts of things. We hear it in the movies. And it suggests 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, Paul is referring to the whole of the time before Christ returns.

Where everyone will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Now Paul's attitude here is expressed in many hymns, and in one hymn in particular which has the lines, The world is very evil.

[7 : 26] The hour is waxing late. 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.

Sure, security and prosperity are part of the blessings God promises to his people in the Bible. But like the ancient Corinthians, we have forgotten that these promises apply to the time after Christ's return.

We think it's here and now. Now people, it's okay to pray for peace. It's okay to pray for the things that are going on in Fiji, that a just outcome will be resolved in that situation.

It's okay to pray for Israel and all the things that are happening there at the moment. It's okay to pray for all those sorts of conflicts that are going on in the world. Pray for peace. It's fine to do that.

It's fine to pray for yourselves, for peace of mind and all those sorts of things. But true peace will only happen after Christ's return.

[8 : 34] We don't hear enough about that in the church. And the New Testament tells us that until that time, until Christ's return, the world will go on the way it always has, and that Christians also will frequently suffer hardship.

We tend to think that the normal Christian life consists of a happy childhood, a dream wedding, a successful career, and a cosy retirement.

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 them. But we need to realise that such an experience is abnormal.

For most people, life is pretty tough. And for most Christians, it is even tougher, because on top of the usual problems, they have problems that come from being a Christian.

Now in Australia, we're fortunate that we don't suffer persecution for being Christians. Therefore, we're able to think of marriage, career, and retirement as opportunities for Christians to enjoy.

[9 : 53] But if you are a Christian in an Islamic country, the same opportunities are best available to you if you become a Muslim. Now I'm not advocating that if you go be a missionary over, say somewhere, that you become a Muslim.

I'm not advocating that at all. But to remain a Christian, and to try and bring some perspective to this, to remain a Christian in some Islamic countries is to court discrimination and even death.

Look at the recent situation and developments that have gone on in Nigeria. 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 in verse 28, those who marry will experience distress in this life. And I'm distressed because I've dropped my piece of paper.

There's hardships in this life. Paul's advice is that we should sit light to the things of this world.

[11 : 05] And he says in verses 29 through to the first part of 31, I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short. From now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none.

And those who mourn as though they were not mourning. And those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing. And those who buy as though they had no possessions. And those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.

Why does he say all those things? At the end of verse 31, he says it, for the present form of this world is passing away.

All these things, all these blessings and all the temporary blessings that we have in this world are only that. Temporary blessings. And cannot be the source of our final security.

Not even the best car that we might have. It's not the source of our final security. 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 : 24] And Paul's advice here is also that given by Jesus. If we look at Matthew chapter 6, verses 31 to 33, Jesus says, 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 strive for all these things. And indeed, your Heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive for the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

And all these things will be given to you as well. Now on the principle that morally neutral circumstances are no hindrance to Christian living, the Christian who is engaged to be married should 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 throughout chapter 7.

What we should all seek, though, is the kingdom of God and His righteousness. And let all the other things that happen in our life follow and flow from that.

[13 : 33] And if in seeking the kingdom of God we find we have had no opportunity to marry, we may be sure that this is for good reasons. And equally, if in the same process we find marriage coming our way, we too can be sure that this is good and is God's good will for us.

So we have present distresses in this life. We need to seek the kingdom of God. The next point I want to talk about is marriage anxieties.

Paul goes on and counsels against marriage because marriage itself brings problems which single people need to think about.

One person said this, A woman is a great help to a man in all the problems a bachelor never has. There's a bit of wisdom within that.

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

[14 : 53] Clearly, the closer the family member the greater the duty. So Paul says that the married man or woman cannot simply serve the Lord without anxiety.

Now if I could go on and summarise verses 32 through to 34 it would be this, The married man or woman cannot simply serve the Lord without anxiety or distraction.

They are concerned with pleasing the Lord but they are also quite properly concerned with pleasing their wife or husband.

Notice, Paul does not say that married people should spend less time on their families. That would be to undermine one of the key things about church life. And to be honest, this is one of the greatest struggles that I have in my married life.

There's a cartoon which sort of illustrates it that this man has gone off to a conference and leaving his wife and children behind. he says, I'm sorry to leave you for the weekend again but it's essential I attend this conference on the breakdown of family life.

[16 : 05] Does the wife look happy? Many church families, particularly those of full-time clergy, see too little of one another because of church activities.

There's an inordinate amount of activities that I could go to and not have to come home really. The unmarried simply don't have the same problem, the same marriage anxieties that we who are married do in quite the same way.

Now marriage brings other anxieties and even sorrows. Family members have accidents or fall ill, don't they? And that takes up a considerable amount of time and energy for the married family.

Another thing that happens is that children require constant attention or fall ill. Barb and I went with the kids to someone's place for dinner last year which was some distance away and one of the kids started feeling sick and we had to give her a bucket and leave her in the corner for a while.

Then one of the other kids started feeling sick and we had to put him near the bucket as well and then the other kid that's Anna Joshua and Laura now so they're all framed in this started feeling sick as well and we had to leave.

[17 : 36] We had to go home and how long was it? Five, ten minutes into the trip home the kids were jumping around the back seat. They were happy as Larry.

It brings marriage anxieties. You can't seem to do the things that you used to be able to do. Other anxieties is that the cost of living goes up with each new mouth to feed and body to dress and I guess the big question on everyone's mind at the moment is really how will the GST affect our budgeting?

There are education hassles. What school do I send my kids to? Do I go private? Do I go state school? And all those sorts of things you have to think through. And 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 ill or physically handicapped?

Do they think through those issues? And of course no one but no one lives happily ever after.

Death always intervenes bringing the greatest sorrow of all. There are marriage anxieties. Now I need to balance that.

[18 : 58] I have no complaints about being married. I love my marriage. I am extraordinarily happy. Marriage is a God-given thing for those who are married.

married. It's a gift and it is wonderful. I love being married and I am thankful to God for the joy that Barb and the kids bring me over 12 years.

But it is hard work. It is not easy. And you have to make some difficult choices about the things that you do or you don't do within marriage relationships.

relationships. And there have been some painful episodes within 12, nearly 13 years of marriage. And no doubt there will be more sorrow to come. But there have been lots of joy.

But for those who are considering marriage, it is important to ask whether this person is the one whom you would be wise to face these difficulties with.

[19 : 55] And this is the kind of consideration that the Apostle Paul calls us to as we weigh the advantages and disadvantages of singleness. So there are marriage anxieties within any marriage.

Now we should esteem singleness. Now I'm a great believer of family services and services for families. I think that they have done much to establish the idea that children are as much a part of God's people as adults are.

But they have also tended in a sense to over emphasize family life at the expense of those who don't fit the normal pattern of being married and having children and all those sorts of things.

And moreover, many churches, evangelical churches, show a strong preference for married ministers over against the single. Now I've had several churches contact me, about jobs.

And one of the attractions to me is that I am still reasonably young and I'm married with young children. Now I'm never sure whether this is because they like the married image or it's because they think that they get Barb as a free curate and the children as a token Sunday school or it's because they are afraid that single clergy just might be gay.

[21 : 26] Whatever the reason, it clearly ignores the teaching of the Bible. Of course, ministers should be free to marry, but for sheer value for money, if I can use that quaint expression, the single are to be highly or preferred.

And there's a serious need for our churches to esteem singleness as highly as the Bible does. We're fortunate here at Holy Trinity that we have both models.

Paul is single. That's a well-known fact. He does claim to have a wife in the cupboard sometimes, but we've never found it.

But he is far freer to go on trips to Israel, to England, to wherever he's going. That's not really meant to be funny, but he's far freer to do those sorts of things, than Warwick, Ian, or myself.

He doesn't have to think too much about it, whereas I have to consider my family in the equation, as does any caring wife or husband. Paul gets far more work done than I do, not because I'm lazy, but because there are obvious family commitments which I need to attend to as well.

[22 : 44] Now, whilst my first priority is to serving God, my next highest priority is to my family, and I make no quirks about that. And that means forgoing some of the freedom that a single person may have.

Ultimately, it is our freedom to marry or not, which the Apostle Paul emphasizes time and time again throughout this chapter. In verse 28 he says, single people who marry do not sin.

And in verse 35 he concludes by saying that he's not trying to restrict the Corinthians. His only concern is to establish the point that singleness brings opportunities for undivided service, which marriage can take away.

Now, I'm not saying that undivided service can only come by being an ordained minister within the Anglican Church. Of course it doesn't. As a single person you can serve God in your own work environment.

And that's what all of us should be doing. Whether we are single, whether we are engaged to be married, or whether we are married. The single person though is going to have fewer distractions serving God if their priority is focused on God's kingdom.

[23 : 59] As such, we should regard singleness, whether short or long term, as an available option. And since we all start out single, we should approach life from the point of view of seeking out the kingdom of God, not the end of our singleness.

Friends, esteem singleness. It's a worthy calling. Well, we've looked at the present distress, some anxieties within marriage, and esteeming singleness.

Now, let me turn to a couple of considerations for single people. You might just want to put that cartoon up. A couple of passport considerations for people who are single. Doesn't work?

That one. It's just a man on a rock wondering what to do. Well, a couple of the issues are, first of all, identity and self-worth. That's a common problem amongst single people.

The cause may be external. Customs which require balanced numbers at dinner parties, for example, or anxious comments from parents saying you'll be left on the shelf if you don't do something soon, and attempts at matching all serve to make single people feel second rate, in a sense.

[25 : 19] Thanks. And the celibate single person today, I think, is labelled or can be labelled immature or abnormal. So, Western secular society today promotes the single lifestyle in three ways and tries to suck us into it.

First of all, it says, pursue a career. Well, that's all right. Secondly, be mobile and financially secure. That's not a bad thing in itself either. And the third thing is, be free to pursue sexual relationships, unencumbered by child-rearing and commitment.

Well, I don't agree with that. In addition to the external pressures from the world placed on single people, singles also often have a low self-esteem or low self-image because of emotional deprivation.

That is, they may be conscious that they lack the special person in their life who would give them top priority in their time of need. Someone to touch them in a loving and a sexual way.

Someone to be in the presence of, to have a familiar person in their home and so on. Someone to laugh with. Someone to cry with. Someone to help them relax from the pressures of society as well as contact with children.

[26 : 39] Well, none of this is exclusively a problem for single people. All may occur at times within marriage as well. But once some of these needs, as I've pointed out, are identified, there are ways in which it can be alleviated or met.

If singleness is accepted as a parallel way towards the goal of maturity and the kingdom of God, then its particular gift is for a wider number of relationships.

Single people need to take time then to cultivate friendships with other singles, with other couples and with other families, people who have children and so on. They need, like Jesus, to have a small circle of close friends with whom you can share intimacy and feel accepted as they really are.

So that's the first issue, is identity and self-worth. A second one is sexuality and celibacy. And I think one of the hardest issues for a Christian single to face, and an issue that the church largely ignores, is the fact that if you are a Christian and unmarried or widowed, there is the loss of the sexual relationship.

Today, the pressure that is applied to a person in this state must be enormous, because there is so much explicit material available through the internet, so much free love advertised on billboards in a sense.

[28 : 19] business. They try to get you business. Last year in Melbourne there was advertised the Sexpo, which was a weekend of erotica advertised and available freely to anybody who wanted to go.

Businesses were advertising thousands and thousands of dollars to get the single person's business. Last Thursday night, I watched Getaway, and there was this group going around Melbourne called Go Getaway Tours or something, advertising trips, bus trips, around Melbourne for single people to go on a bus, on a pub crawl, to drink as much as you could, to get a woman to have sex, and all those sorts of things.

It's just an amazing amount of free stuff available if you want it. And that sort of pressure for a single person must be enormous and even tempting.

But friends, it's tempting for the married person as well. Let me say this. For those who follow a Christian path of celibacy, maturity involves accepting, not denying sexual feelings and needs.

We are all sexual beings, whether we are married or single. And that's part of the way that God has made us. Fantasies and acts of comfort or self-gratification should not be regarded with excessive guilt or fear.

[29 : 53] They often provide clues towards needs that can be provided for in other ways. But a wise and gentle self-discipline is needed to avoid unhelpful habits.

And sexual tension builds up in all people. Some people are more sexual than others. And this includes single people as well as married people.

Married people have a sexual partner with whom they can share sexual intercourse and an intimate relationship with. Singles don't. Masturbation is the only outlet to release sexual tension.

The point, though, is that it shouldn't be obsessive or addictive like drugs or alcohol to a drug addict or alcoholic.

If it is, then you should seek some counselling on this issue or talk to someone. Perhaps there are other ways, too, that sexuality can be fulfilled in the celibate.

[30 : 58] And I've mentioned a couple of those. It can be expressed through compassion, through tenderness and affection in relationships. But the key is balance in relationships.

And those scales sort of pick up that sort of notion. We have to have a balance within our relationships. Thanks. Well, let me conclude. A lot has been said, and perhaps some things which we don't like to hear.

But it's not uncool to be single and celibate. In fact, it ought to be esteemed highly among Christian people in particular. Enjoy it.

If you're single, enjoy it. Neither is it uncool to be married with or without children. If you're married, enjoy your marriage. Work on your marriage.

Enjoy your family. Love your children. In whatever state we are right now, we need to keep as our number one priority, serving God and his kingdom issues.

[31 : 59] This present life does have affliction. There's no doubt about that. Both for married as well as for singles. But the goal of God's kingdom has set aside for those who are faithful and obedient to him, abundant blessing and a future in heaven that is bound to be one which lasts happily ever after.

How am I to get accused?