

# Devoted to you: The Christian & Singleness

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, if you have a sermon outline in front of you, you might want to have that open. It will help you to follow along, but most importantly is to keep the Bible open in front of you to 1 Corinthians chapter 7.

Let's ask God to open our minds and our hearts to his word. Heavenly Father, your word is living and active. And we pray again that you would humble us to allow us to feel the effects of that living and active word.

So would you again be shaping our perspectives, our attitudes, all that we are, that we might be more and more like your son and be able to live more and more like your people in this world.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. We have a real fascination with couples, don't we? Just watch any Disney fairy tale. There's Snow White, the fairest of them all, waiting for true love's kiss.

And her happy ending comes when she gets it from a handsome prince. Or take Cinderella. Once the prince fits her with the glass slipper, next thing you know, they are married and living in the land of happily ever after.

[ 1 : 11 ] Name other Disney heroines. Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, they all end their stories in wedded bliss. Even Anna from Frozen, which somewhat subverts the usual prince charming expectations, couples up in the end.

And whether you're watching Bollywood cinema, Korean drama or Spanish soap operas, the story is pretty much the same. Can you imagine any of those shows ending with a wholesale celebration of singleness?

Yes, I can't. Instead, coupling up is always the dream. That's the cultural script that has influenced all of us, even here in Malaysia. After all, we all know what topic is going to come up at every Malaysian festive gathering, don't we?

Who is married? Who is seeing who? Who is not yet married? Why they're not yet married? And so our culture teaches us to undervalue singleness.

And too often, the church offers a similar script. At a previous church where I was on staff, I once advertised a seminar on singleness. But after that seminar had passed, and I asked one particular person why he didn't make it, I discovered that he had simply assumed that it was a matchmaking event.

[ 2 : 29 ] Now, I had explicitly said that it wasn't. But it just didn't sing in. Why not? Because in his experience, the only singles events that churches do are events to pair people up.

And so he got the implicit message that singleness is not something churches value. After all, if the only singles events that churches do are attempts to make you un-single, well, what does that tell you about singleness?

For a church to even attempt to promote a positive vision of singleness was so far beyond his comprehension that he was shocked when I told him that we really, really were not looking to matchmake people at that event.

And I suspect his experience is not uncommon. But why should we value singleness? Well, consider this. Jesus was single.

Jesus never married. Jesus never had sex. And he was fully human. In fact, Jesus shows us what it means to live life to the full.

[ 3 : 40 ] And the fact that he did that as a single person shows us that singleness itself is not a barrier to living a full, God-honoring life.

And that reason alone is good enough for us to value singleness. But today, 1 Corinthians 7 will say more. It will help us further appreciate and affirm the single life.

In fact, amongst what we sometimes call the Abrahamic faiths, Christianity alone is distinctive in doing so. Judaism, Islam, and Christianity all honor marriage as good.

But the Prophet Muhammad saw the practice of celibacy as something to be rejected. Judaism similarly sees it in the negative. But not Christianity.

As we'll see this morning, while the Bible honors marriage, it doesn't undervalue singleness. On the contrary, it underlines its goodness.

[ 4 : 43 ] In fact, it underlines it so much that it even suggests something radical. Something that our culture and our churches today hardly ever do.

To consider remaining single for the kingdom of God. And so this morning, we'll explore the value of the single life. That's what Paul does. In verse 25, you will notice that Paul begins to address the situation of virgins.

Now, that's a term that's been somewhat debated, but it appears at the very least to be referring to someone who is currently single, but engaged, as in verses 36 to 38.

You see, according to verse 26, there appears to be some sort of crisis in Corinth, which we'll get into a little bit more later on. And as a result, some Christians were facing the question of whether they should get married, or embrace a single life.

It wasn't so much a question of what was right or wrong, but what was wise or unwise. And so Paul offers wisdom.

[ 5 : 53 ] Look at verse 25 again. Now, about virgins, I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.

And that's what we so often need, don't we? Wisdom, not just instruction. Now, of course, sometimes instruction is required. Back in verse 12, Paul was looking at the issue of mixed marriages, and he thought about how Jesus' teaching would apply in that situation.

And he realized that Jesus' words in Matthew 19 meant that with the exception of certain extraordinary circumstances, believers should stick with unbelievers.

We saw that a few weeks ago. And so he issues a command. That was a matter of obedience. But Paul recognizes that not all matters are about right and wrong.

Instead, many are about wise and unwise. And so many of the choices we face fall into this category. And that often includes who you should marry or whether you should even marry.

[ 7 : 07 ] And so Paul offers not a command, but a pastoral judgment. He's not trying to dictate what you should do, but to try to guide you onto the right paths.

After all, such decisions are still significant. They might not necessarily be wrong morally, but they could still damage you if you make unwise choices and make it more difficult for you to live a life glorifying to God.

And so Paul doesn't so much bring directives as direction. You own your choices. You take responsibility for them.

But he will help you to think it true. And so here's how he applies wisdom. Verse 26. Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is.

And how does this play out? Verse 27. Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife.

[ 8 : 22 ] Now just a quick note, I know that verse 27 is translated slightly differently in some other versions, referring to those already married. I think that NIV 2011 is probably right, however, in taking it still to be referring to those who are engaged.

But either way, Paul is still applying the overarching principle from last week. Remain as you are. That's his pastoral advice.

Whatever situation you're in, you can still glorify God. So bloom where you're planted. If you're already planning to get married, go ahead.

Glorify God by enjoying marriage value, what you've been given. We said this already in the first week of this series. You're free. And as we observed last week, making a change is not necessarily wrong.

And so verse 28, if you do marry, you have not sinned. But Paul says, on the other hand, don't be too quick to conclude that marriage must be the way to go.

[ 9 : 35 ] If you are feeling the pressure, don't be too quick to give in. Rather, don't undervalue singleness. Often when we compare singleness with marriage, marriage comes out on top, at least at this present time in history.

But Paul says, let me share with you two pieces of wisdom concerning the goodness of the single life. Let's look at each of them in turn.

Firstly, value the single life because marriage is not forever. That's his first piece of wisdom and it's in verses 29 to 31.

Now, earlier I mentioned that the Corinthians appeared to be facing a crisis of sorts. And the scholars debate amongst themselves what precisely that is. And some historians have worked out that there appeared to be a famine going on in the region around that time.

Food shortages were common. And there might have been outbreaks of diseases going on as well. 1 Corinthians 11 verse 30 suggests that there were quite a number of people in the congregation getting sick.

[10:51] And if so, well, no wonder a few people were hesitant to get married and start families. And so that could have been the historical context.

But notice, however, that Paul never mentions or even alludes to this historical situation. The details aren't important.

Social economic considerations are not ultimately why he values the single life. Instead, he simply says this, verse 29. What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short.

Whatever the crisis was, he simply took it as a reminder of this larger reality that this present age is passing away.

The time is short. Every famine, every natural disaster, every pandemic is simply another sign, another piece of evidence that creation is groaning, waiting for the new age that Jesus has promised.

[11:58] And although it seems like that time is far away, it's nearer than we realize. This becomes clearer when we take a biblical view of human history.

How should we see history? We can think of it as a five-act drama. In Act 1, we have creation. The very beginning of time where God created the world, and everything was very good.

Then we have Act 2, the 4, where human beings choose to rebel against God and are banished from his presence. This is followed by Act 3, which we could call redemption initiated, where God begins to put into motion his plan of salvation to establish his kingdom, especially through the descendants of Abraham.

And then we have Act 4, which we could call redemption accomplished, as Jesus comes into the world to die as our saviour and rise again as our king.

And finally, we have Act 5, which we could call redemption consummated, when Jesus comes again a second time to bring about the fullness of his kingdom and usher in the new creation.

[13:18] But here's the question. What time is it now? Where are we in this drama? Are we in Act 1? 2?

3? Well, actually, we're pretty far into this drama. We're in between Acts 4 and Act 5. We live in between Jesus' first and second coming.

And so on God's timeline, there is only one significant date left. The return of Jesus. And so we are nearer to the end than to the beginning.

And that's why the New Testament often refers to the entire period between the first and the second coming as the last days. And so what Paul is doing now is encouraging all of us to view history from God's perspective.

To recognize that the time is short, verse 29, or put another way, that this world in its present form is passing away, verse 31.

[14:25] This is the perspective from which we need to view our lives now, our relationships now, even our online shopping now. And that's why verse 30, those who have wives should live as if they do not, those who mourn as if they did not, those who are happy as if they were not, those who buy something as if it were not theirs to keep, and those who use the things of this world as if not engrossed in them.

Now, Paul isn't saying that if you are married now, it's time to throw away your marriage and embrace your bachelorhood all over again. Nor is he asking you to go crazy on the stock market. Rather, he's simply making this point. Don't live as if this world is all there is. Don't live as if this world is all there is.

You know, the end of the age is coming. You know, there's a new world awaiting. And so, don't live now as if all your experiences here are the be-all and end-all.

And what this means is that you don't have to overvalue marriage. After all, in the end, it's temporary.

[15:52] It's striking, isn't it? Given what a big deal that we can make of human marriage that is actually something that will not be brought into the new creation.

Marriage is not a part of the life to come. Marriage is not forever. And if so, do we really want to be saying or implying that marriage should be the ultimate goal for every human being when it is for this world only?

But in the age to come, let me tell you what we'll be. We will be embodied. That is, we'll still have physical bodies. We will be gendered.

That is, we'll still be male and female. But we will be embodied, gendered people as those who are single.

That is, we're not married anymore. And as those who are celibate. That is, we won't be having sex. And when we have that perspective, that should change our valuations of singleness and marriage.

[17:13] It will help us to stop making too big a deal about marriage and stop us from lamenting so much about singleness. And what else will last?

Our relationship with Christ. You know, that will never pass away whether you're married or single today. And that's why the single life cannot be less valuable if you have that relationship.

In Isaiah 56, the prophet shows us two kinds of people who in the Old Testament are usually excluded from partaking in God's covenant blessings.

One is the foreigner. The other is the eunuch. Somebody who by necessity is single. But Isaiah paints a picture of abundant hope for the eunuch.

In 56 verse 4 and 5 on the screen, he says, to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant, to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name, better than sons and daughters.

[18:33] I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever. The eunuch gains a permanent place within God's house and notice, he gains something that is considered better than the blessings typically associated with marriage, sons and daughters.

He gains a permanent name. With marriage, your family name might continue for another generation, but there's always the threat that it will end at some point.

Not so when you trust Christ, who will write your name in the book of life. If you are single, the greatest blessing of all is not denied to you.

You can value the single life because unlike marriage, it will be forever and like all married people, what counts most is not your marital status, but your relationship with Jesus.

Singles share in the exact same blessings of the kingdom of God as merits. They are not second class citizens. In fact, they have certain advantages.

[19:54] Which brings us to Paul's second piece of wisdom. Secondly, maximize the single life because marriage is not simpler.

That will be his main point in verses 32 to 34. But let me begin by reading the end of verse 28. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life and I want to spare you this.

Paul now gets realistic. Did you know, he says, that marriage doesn't solve everything. It might solve a number of things. You don't always have to do the dishes all the time now.

But it also creates new problems. If you're married today, you know that there's some of you today listening in working in different cities right now and it's pretty tough to navigate that.

There's some of you who suddenly have to deal with difficult in-laws and that's a real burden. I think of someone I know whose wife has gone blind.

[21:01] I think of another who was preparing to enter full-time ministry but couldn't in the end because their spouse was suffering from depression and was not ready and it was the right decision not to go in.

I think of those who married non-Christians thinking that it will be fine but now they find themselves constantly on opposite sides when it comes to making so many decisions.

I think of those who say that being lonely in a marriage is worse than being lonely as a single. I think of those who have kids but worry because they're not currently coping well in school or they have special needs.

The point is not to say that marriage is bad. Neither is the point to say that singles have no problems. but the point is to say marriage like singleness comes with its own unique challenges.

If we're single we often compare the highs of marriage with the lows of singleness and if we are married we often compare the lows of marriage with the highs of singleness but both have their ups and downs.

[ 22 : 22 ] and if you're single pole says you don't have to feel envy. You're spared the lows of marriage some of which can be very low indeed.

And married people do singles a disservice when they give the impression even if unintentionally that marriage is all perfect. And so marriage do your single friends a favour today. be honest about the difficulties of marriage. I don't mean that you should air all your dirty laundry in public. But if we can just communicate from time to time that maybe right after your Bible study when you're praying together and you can say yes I'll appreciate your prayers because it's just been a hard week as a couple.

You know that will go a long way. Two of my good friends are husband and wife. they've consistently offered friendship to me while I was single. But one of the greatest gifts they gave me was that they were real in front of me.

Sometimes they even fought in front of me which could get pretty awkward sometimes. But they actually modelled a healthy Christian marriage to me because they will forgive one another, they will apologise to me, and they have consistently showed me that the Christian life is not about ongoing perfection, but about ongoing repentance.

[ 23 : 54 ] They helped me differentiate a Christian marriage from a Disney one. But Paul says the single life isn't just about being spared from certain problems, it's also about being freed for kingdom opportunities.

And so in verse 34, he says singles can be concerned about the Lord's affairs in a way that married people can't. Why is that so?

Well, if you are married, you are necessarily being put in different directions. The word used in verse 34 is divided.

And so that means there are plenty of things in your married and family life that necessarily call for your attention. you want to meet with someone to do one-to-one discipleship with them.

You want to read the Bible and pray with them. But then your spouse falls sick or is going through a really difficult time at work. And so you need to be with them to care for them and support them instead.

[ 25 : 00 ] The school is always calling you about this piece of documentation or that special project. And you have to deal with them. And that takes up a lot of your time. And so you are divided.

To use the language of verses 33 and 34, you have to think about how to please your spouse and the affairs of this world. Now, it's important to emphasize that Paul does not mean for this to be a criticism of married people.

He knows very well that you are serving the Lord as you serve your spouse and your kids. as he will say later on in 1 Corinthians 10 verse 31, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

He knows that this is the way you glorify God and so he's not trying to foster a sense of resentment in you if you're married. But Paul is simply stating a fact of life.

Life or merits in one sense is more complicated than life for singles. Now let's take a simple example. Let's compare how long it takes for a single person and a married couple to get out of the house and then throw in the kids.

[ 26 : 25 ] See, when you're single, especially for guys, you think, okay, this shirt will work, okay, got my wallet, okay, got everything, okay, ready to go. It takes less than three minutes. But when you're married, it gets more complicated.

Suddenly, you have a million more things to bring out. Or you are in the car when suddenly your wife says, sorry, darling, forgot my handphone, can you go get it? And if you have kids, just as you're about to go out, one of them will suddenly say, Papa, Papa, I need the toilet.

And then if you have more than one, after number one is done with the toilet, you suddenly discover that number two has a missing sock and you have no idea where she put it. And suddenly it takes three to five times as long to leave the house.

And so Paul is saying, when you are single, there is a sense that you simply have more capacity time.

to be involved in lasting kingdom work. Now again, it's important to note what Paul is not saying. He is not saying that singles have it easy or merits have it hard.

[ 27 : 42 ] Of course not. Everyone faces difficulties. I don't necessarily think he's even saying that singles have more time than merits.

I know sometimes it's applied this way and it can be true of some singles but I know it isn't always true. After all, if you are single and you are living on your own, you still have to work a job, clean your house, do your taxes.

Sometimes you are the one who has the main responsibility of caring for aging parents. But how I think I would phrase it is that you have more flexibility than merits.

That's just a sense in which your life is simpler. And flexibility to do what? To invest in God's kingdom.

To live, as verse 35 puts it, in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord. Notice that's how Paul assumes you would live your life as a single person.

[ 28 : 54 ] It's easy isn't it as a single to live in a self-centered way? If you're single, it's easy to think that you should maximize your current state by making it all about pursuing your hobbies, indulging your interests, and doing what you like.

That's the default mode. But Paul says if you follow Jesus, maximizing your single life is all about how you can serve God and serve others.

It's not about you. But how can you use your flexibility to do that? Well, one of the most important things is to make sure you take the time to invest in friendships for the sake of the kingdom.

And that can be a blessing to you too. I once lived in London. And London is sometimes known as the lonely city. It's a huge place and it's not easy to find community.

And I did get lonely. But after some bouts of self-pity, God whacked me on the head and said, stop thinking about yourself. And so I made some effort, got to know this older single mother and her son from church.

[ 30 : 13 ] And I agreed to help tutor her son in English. And so I would go to their apartment and not only teach, but just build relationships, enjoy being part of the family.

You know, the kid would show me his bookshelves and his toys and so on. And then actually try to encourage them in the faith. And certainly a part of my life was enriched in ways I never expected. just yesterday I heard about one of the single ladies in our church offering to help out one of our newcomers to our church who is feeling a little bit overwhelmed.

She's just started studying and is having trouble managing her time and one of the single people in our church offered to just study with her and just help her out a little bit.

That's a great encouragement. And think of it this way. Ed Shaw, a single pastor whose writings on sexuality I've come to appreciate, once mentioned how he used to dread weddings.

[ 31 : 19 ] He longed to be a father but felt sad that it probably would never happen. And so weddings were an unwelcome reminder of that reality.

But one day he bumped into a friend who then mentioned to him how someone Ed had discipled a long time ago was now in this friend's church and he was growing strong.

And he often mentioned the influence of Ed in his life. And Ed came to realize that although he wouldn't have any biological children, in God's kingdom he had the blessing of many spiritual children.

Because he had consistently maximized his single life for the sake of the growth of other Christians, he now got to be a proud spiritual parent.

And so if you're single, here's a good question. When you die, what spiritual family tree will you leave? What spiritual legacy will you leave?

[ 32 : 28 ] And here's a quick aside to the merits? Are you willing or humble enough to allow singles into your life and let them use their gifts to serve you?

Let them want to build relationships with you? When I was single in KL, the Reverend Andrew Chia was my boss. And he often invited me into his family home even when family life was a little messy. And he allowed me to babysit and even cat sit for him. And he wasn't using me as cheap labour. He was giving me space to contribute to his family.

And I deeply appreciate that. I really appreciate that to this day, you know, I actually have fond shared memories with his daughters. And so why not offer space for singles to maximize the gift that God has given them?

I know some of you marrieds tried to do that. That's great. We've tried to do that ourselves. Although obviously the pandemic has complicated things. Now I know in Asian culture, we feel like sometimes that our homes must be perfect with nothing out of place before we can have guests over.

[ 33 : 43 ] And when we can't achieve that, we say, okay, better not let anyone come. So no friends, no singles. But as I often say in my sermons, why not let Christian culture take over instead?

be counter cultural and show singles that you're more interested in them than in saving face. And singles, don't be paise if your married brothers and sisters invite you to share in their family lives. Accept them. Invest in Christian friendships. Maximize your single life. Don't focus on its difficulties, but it's advantageous. And so my brothers and sisters, don't undervalue the single life.

After all, don't forget, even if we are married, for many of us, one day, we will be single again. It's built into our wedding vows, for better, for worse, till death do us part.

Joe Martin was a senior member of one of the previous churches I attended. When I first met him back in 2003, he was already a widower, but he played the part of the wise, fun grandpa very well.

[ 35 : 06 ] He hosted us, he played games with us, he advised us, and many of us in that church were grateful for that. He passed away, I think, less than two years, if I remember correctly.

And that meant he was single again for at least 16 years, possibly longer. But even then, he maximized his single life.

And as a church, one implication of 1 Corinthians 7 verse 25 to 35 is that we should stop assuming that everyone must be married.

Sure, if you think that there's a pairing that is worth exploring, it might be worth mentioning. It's a matter of wisdom. But what we need to see is that our priority is not marriage, but the kingdom of God.

And so that means as a church, our constant aim should be to help one another, whether single or married, bloom where you are planted.

[ 36 : 14 ] and could it be that on occasion, it might even be worth exploring with someone whether they should make the deliberate choice to remain single, if that appears to best serve the kingdom.

I don't think we hear that much in churches nowadays, but why not? As verse 35 says, this isn't to restrict a person, but to see if that's the best way they can be devoted to God.

Now, each situation is unique, and sometimes there might be ungodly reasons for avoiding marriage. In verses 36 to 38, which we don't have time to explore in any detail today, Paul basically says to those who are engaged, but not yet going ahead with marriage, not to sit on the fence for too long, either get married, or break up.

If you have no intention of committing, then it is unloving to keep people in limbo. Don't delay unnecessarily.

Be married, or be single, that's his point in verses 36 and 38. But, if you do live the single life, then marry a believer.

[ 37 : 41 ] Marry a believer. That would be Paul's final point for today. In verses 39 to 40, Paul addresses the widow, but his point can be applied more widely to all singles.

And his point is very simple. You are free to remain single, or marry, but if you do marry, it's not a free for all. You should marry only those who belong to the Lord.

And so that means the way of wisdom is that you should only go out with another Christian. After all, if you can't commit to someone who is not a Christian, why go out in the first place?

The common answer, of course, is so that you can convert him or her. But let me suggest two reasons why that's a bad idea. Firstly, it's not fair to the other person.

If they know that the first thing you want to do is to convert them, it's not the best footing to start on, is it? It doesn't exactly build a foundation of trust. And secondly, the very fact that you are going out with a non-Christian has already compromised your witness.

[ 38 : 49 ] When you do so, you are already indicating to your non-Christian boyfriend or girlfriend that he or she can compete with your affection for Jesus. And that's not a good place to be, spiritually speaking.

And so please don't. it usually ends in tears. If your experience is different, then please count that as an act of God's grace and mercy to you.

But just because your experience might be different doesn't mean this is the way to go. An unhappy mixed marriage is not better than singleness, that's for sure. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Staying single is a legitimate choice. And so here's my hope. I pray that moving forward, we no longer undervalue the single life.

I pray that we are humble enough to allow the scriptures to change our perspective. I pray that we will be intentional about helping singles to flourish.

[ 39 : 57 ] And to help us better do that, let me just recommend this book by Sam Aubrey, *Seven Myths About Singleness*. It's in our church library. And it's the best recent Christian book on singleness that I know of.

Everyone will benefit from reading it. And as we come to the end of 1 Corinthians 7, I hope it's clear that in the end, it's not so much about being single or married.

It's about how we can best serve God's kingdom. What matters in the end is that we seek to glorify God wherever we are, whatever situation we're in, whatever gift has been given us.

And so let's resolve to do that. Let's be devoted to our bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Amen. Heavenly Father, I just pray now that as we slowly let your word sing into us, as we digest the word, I acknowledge that perhaps for some of us this might not be an easy word to hear.

[ 41 : 21 ] But I pray that again, whatever situation we're in, we'll allow you Lord to keep on molding us, shaping us. And above all, help us to want to make the kingdom of God our top priority.

So we pray Lord today, whether we're single or married, we pray Lord that you would help us to look at the status that we currently have and think about how we can glorify you wherever we are. and Father, I pray too that as singles and married, we would look to support one another, we would look to help one another, we would want each other to grow, we want the best for each other, help us to forgive one another where sometimes we might have hurt one another inadvertently.

and above all, we just pray that you would cause our church to be a flourishing community of singles and married, together serving Jesus.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.