*Singleness* seminar

Week 2

**The Gift & Freedom of Singleness**

**A Really Quick Overview of 1 Cor 7**

[Open in prayer; welcome; read 1 Cor 7.] Look down at your Bibles and follow along as we take a quick run through the text to get some context before talking about specific verses on singleness.

* **7:1-7—**Look at thequote in verse 1 –“it is good for a man to not have sexual relations with a woman” (quotation marks included). Paul is responding to unhelpful ascetic teaching in the church. Given this asceticism and the sexual immorality among the Corinthians, Paul thought people should get married and fulfill their marital duty (giving themselves to their spouse in sexual relations). But, Paul adds in verse 7, it is good for some to be single as he was.
* **7:8-9—**To the unmarriedand widows: It is good for you to stay single as Paul was, but if you burn, you should get married.
* **7:10-11**—To the married: Don’t divorce; if you do, you should either be reconciled or stay unmarried.
* **7:12-16**—To the married with unbelieving spouse: Stay married if your spouse is willing, but if they leave, let them go.
* **7:12-24—**To each one in the church: Don’t feel that your earthly status needs to change when God calls you to be a Christian (see especially verses 17, 20). Our earthly status is not our ultimate concern. What is most important is our status before God, not man, though Paul gives freedom to change our circumstances if we have legitimate means to do so (v.21).
* **7:25-38**—To the betrothed (the virgins – NIV): In light of present distress (maybe a famine or a more general reference to living in the last days), you should remain as you are. Since the time is short (v. 29), the married should stay married. Meanwhile, singles should stay single because it prevents them from the “troubles” of married life (v. 28) and gives them freedom to have undivided devotion to the Lord (v. 35). There is a caveat here: If singles choose to get married (and enjoy sexual relations, cf. verses. 1-4) they are not sinning.
* **7:39-40**—To the widows: You are free to remarry if your husband dies but you should marry a Christian if you do.

**The Gift of Singleness**

One of the questions we need to tackle today is “What is the gift of singleness?” This often-used phrase comes from verse 7, where Paul says, “I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.”

Paul wishes that *all* were single, as he was. He clearly sees there is some benefit to singleness, such that he wishes everyone could experience it. We’ll talk about the benefits more in just a minute as we look at verses 32-35. But he clearly recognizes that singleness is for some, and not others. This is implied by that first sentence “I wish…”. But it is more directly stated in that second sentence – each has his own gift. Think of the word “gift” as something that is given and in this case, it is something that is given by God. Paul is saying that only some have this gift of singleness. Singleness is a gift for some and not others. Others have different gifts given to them by God (administration, hospitality, teaching, but not singleness).

What is the gift of singleness? It’s not is some super-spiritual, mystical, or magical ability to resist sexual relations and reject marriage. It’s not some higher, super-spiritual ascetic state where you can deny the flesh and focus more on spiritual issues. That’s what monks and nuns pursue as they cut themselves off from society and put themselves in secluded monasteries and nunneries. If this were what Paul was describing, then God has created a two-tier system for singleness: the super-spiritually ascetic singles, and the rest of you – uncontrolled, burning, “must-get-married” singles. So what is the gift of singleness? It’s a recognition that God has given some the gift of celibacy for a season, or a few, maybe a lifetime. The gift is more than a *status* classification (i.e. you are single and I am married). A person with this gift is spiritually motivated to be single, is able to live a self-controlled life, and is content in their singleness.

Let’s camp out for just a moment on this idea of contentment. If you have this gift, you’ll be content in your singleness. Look at how Paul talks about contentment in the Christian life in Philippians 4:11-13 and remember that this great apostle was single. You might be thinking, “Oh, no, obviously I don’t have the gift, so I need to get rid of my singleness as soon as possible.” No, no, no. That’s just not a helpful way to think of your singleness. Some of you may be very discontent in your singleness, but you should recognize that God has providentially given singleness to you. So, what does it take to grow in your trust of God and be content in your singleness? I don’t want to rush by this question, so just think about the answer for yourself for a moment. If your only answer to this is, “If God gave me what I want then I’d be content,” then you are not really wrestling with this question.

When we put verse 7 with verse 37, it’s clear that ***some* *singles can choose to remain single*** for a season or a lifetime. Such singles feel no necessity to get married, are spiritually motivated for singleness, and are able to live self-controlled lives. In a church culture that teaches on the beauty of marriage and encourages singles to get married, it can be falsely assumed that singles are second-class Christians. That should never be the case. Generally speaking, more singles are going to get married than remain single. Remaining single is less common. But, biblically speaking, just because it’s less common should never mean it should be thought of as abnormal. You know what I mean by that? Some people think that a single person would never knowingly choose to remain single, either for a season or a lifetime. If people ask you, “Why are you still single?” or “You want to be married, right?”, sometimes they’re implying that marriage is a better state. Yet, what we learn from Paul in this chapter is that singleness and marriage are both valuable; one is not superior to the other. Paul wishes some to have the gift of singleness (v. 7). Moreover, he also encourages some singles not to rush into marriage, stewarding their season of singleness well (v. 27, 32-35, 37-38). Do you think like Paul? Do you see your singleness as *valuable*? Or do you have such a strong yearning for marriage and to change your singleness that you don’t place any value on your singleness? In fact, do you devalue it and always think the grass is greener on the other side of marriage?

Let’s fit a few more verses together. In verse 2, we see that each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband, because there is so much sexual immorality. In verse 9, Paul exhorts singles to get married rather than burn with sexual desire. Bringing these together, it makes sense that ***some singles should get married***. Paul is a good pastor and he recognizes that many singles are going struggle with sexual desires. Rather than falling into sexual temptation, it’s good for you to enjoy sexual relations in the context of marriage. That’s where sex is meant to be—in marriage (v. 4 – conjugal rights or marital duty – the rights of a spouse to give their bodies over to the other and to enjoy physical relations with their spouse). Granted, this is not the only reason why someone should get married, but it’s a good reason to pursue marriage. Two caveats to this. First, you may struggle with sexual desire and pursue marriage by dating others, but circumstances may not work out for you to get married. It’s easy to think, “This isn’t fair! God is torturing me. Don’t you see I burn and therefore I *must* have marriage?” That’s a poor way to read this verse. Just because we burn with desire doesn’t mean that God *guarantees* us the gift of marriage. No, in verse 9, Paul saying that if you can’t control yourself, you should do everything you can to pursue marriage. It is better to be married and enjoy sexual relations within marriage than to burn, so work towards that end. Second, I’ve talked with a lot of single men who struggle with internet pornography who assume that because they struggle, they shouldn’t date or get married. They think the problem needs to be completely “fixed” before they ask a girl out for a date. What do I think? YES – single men, do everything you can with God’s strength to fight the problem *now*. The longer you have reprieve from the problem, the more it will serve you in your dating relationship and marriage. NO – the pornography problem is a sign that you burn and what does Paul say about that? It is better to get married than to burn with passion. But don’t think that when you get married and enjoy marital intimacy, that your porn problem will magically go away. It won’t. You can find great satisfaction in your sexual relationship with your wife, but it’s not a magical prescription to make your sexual struggles go away. Third, it’s okay to enjoy singleness for season, having great contentment as you run hard after Jesus, but, at the same time, be open to getting married one day. The two aren’t mutually exclusive.

[PAUSE FOR QUESTIONS.]

**The Freedom of Singleness**

Let’s look again at verses 25-35. As I mentioned earlier, Paul says in verse 26 that because of the “present distress,” the Corinthians should remain as they are. The married should stay married and the single should stay single, although it isn’t sinful for the single to marry (v. 28) The Corinthians should live this way because the time before Christ’s return is short (v. 29) and the things of this world are already passing away (v.31). The New Testament often addresses the time between the resurrection and Christ’s return. Paul reminds us that we do not know how long this time will be (1 Thess 5:1-2). James warns us not to be attached to this life because it is fleeting (James 4:14) John exhorts us to get ourselves ready for Christ’s return (1 John 3:2-3). So it might sound strange when Paul says, “let those who have wives live 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 goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it” (v. 29–31). He’s saying that since the things of this life are fleeting and passing, they won’t matter when Christ returns. That’s the immediate context for Paul’s statement in verse 32: “I want you to be free from anxieties.” He doesn’t want us to be caught up with the things of this life. Rather, we should take full advantage of the season that the Lord has put us in because “the time is short” before Christ’s return (v. 29). To give an example of what being “free from anxieties” might look like, Paul contrasts unmarried folks and married folks in verses 32-35. The unmarried person is “anxious about the things of the Lord” (32b). Namely, “how to please the Lord” (32b), how to be “holy in body and spirit” (v. 34), and how to give “undivided devotion to the Lord” (v. 35). The married person “is anxious about worldly things” (32, 34). Paul further defines these worldly things as a preoccupation with pleasing your spouse. This is a deliberate contrast. Paul shows us the single, concern-free life and the married life, filled with concern for a spouse and the other things that come with marriage. If you’re single, then you know your life is by no means concern-free—especially in a fallen world!—but the point of this is the comparison. When compared to a married person, a single person has less to be concerned about and much more freedom to be preoccupied with the Lord.

Let’s define these freedoms a little further according to this passage…

***Freedom from the Troubles of Marriage (v. 28)***

When Paul says “those who marry will have worldly troubles” (v. 28), he’s not necessarily talking about bad things, like spousal abuse or abandonment, though that might be included. What he’s likely referring to is the fact that marriage is a lot of work. There are a lot of daily burdens you face when you are married and have a family. When you get married, you marry a sinner, and you get to deal with their sin up close for the rest of your life. That’s certainly not easy. When you get married, you take on responsibility. To daily keep up with those responsibilities is a lot of work. Take this morning for example. Just to get to church, I had to get my three older kids up and ready, make our breakfast, get their shoes on, and get them checked into nursery. And that’s what I do when things go well. When things don’t work out as I plan, it can be a lot of more work and in some cases a major burden. In our morning routine, if one of my kids misbehaves, he or she needs to be disciplined, and that adds time to our already pressured morning schedule. On top of sin and responsibility, there are also unique burdens in marriage. As a husband, if you get fired from work, you’ve got find another way to provide for your wife and children. If your car gets totaled in an accident, you’ve got to find another way to get your kids to school in the morning. There’s daily work, daily burdens, and daily responsibilities that must be faced if you are going to be married. As a single adult, you are free from those troubles.

***Freedom from Pleasing Your Spouse (v. 33-34)***

When you are married, apart from pleasing the Lord, one of your greatest priorities is pleasing and serving your spouse. A good marriage takes a lot of work, just like any good relationship. It requires vulnerability, transparency, self-sacrificial love, servant-heartedness, communication, kindness, time, and lots of energy. There is a level of intensity that comes along with “pleasing” a spouse that is very different than pleasing any of your friends. As a single adult, you’re free from the hard, daily work of building a good marriage.

***Freedom from Having Divided Interests (v. 35)***

When people make requests or announcements in Sunday PM service, asking for volunteers, I often think, “Oooh, I’d love to do that.” But often times, I just can’t. Why? Well, my family life requires a lot of time from me if I’m going to be a good father and husband. I’m not complaining. I love the responsibilities of being a husband and father, but it requires a lot of time and energy. On Saturdays many are volunteering at a wedding, or ESL, or community outreach, or an evangelistic outreach. Meanwhile, I’m on the sidelines of a soccer practice, or dropping my daughter off at ballet, or giving my wife a break while I watch our youngest. I can’t volunteer for a lot of these things because I have divided interests; I need to serve both the church and my family. In serving my family, I also serve the Lord. But practically speaking, it prevents me from serving the church and participating in certain ways. My interests are divided because I have a wife and family. As a single adult, your interests are not as divided because you don’t have the preoccupations of marriage and family.

***Freedom to Be Single (vs. 32-35; Matt 19:10-12)***

Don’t overlook how radical Paul’s statements about singleness are in this passage. In Paul’s day, to be single as a female was the equivalent of being a poor and destitute. Your livelihood was often connected to being married and having a husband. For him to encourage widows and the unmarried to stay that way was a big deal. It showed that Paul valued singleness, even if it was counter-cultural for his day.

Look for a moment at Matthew 19:10-12. Jesus sounds similar to Paul when he says that it is good from some to choose to be single for the sake of kingdom of God. In describing the complications that divorce brings on a marriage, the disciples over-react in verse 10 and say, “it is better not to marry.” Jesus affirms that the disciples are right, but only for whom this word is given, namely eunuchs. A lack of sexual relations comes to some who are born that way, to some who are castrated, but also to some who deliberately choose a life of celibacy. Don’t get thrown off that these verses are talking about eunuchs. Jesus’ point here is very similar to Paul’s—this gift of celibacy can be chosen by some for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

You don’t have to think about singleness for a lifetime as your only choice. Let me give you a few examples that I’ve heard from some singles who chose to be single for a season:

(1) *Time.* Singleness might be preferable so that you can meet your current obligations and avoid short-changing a boyfriend/girlfriend, or much worse, a spouse. I knew a young man who was leading a bible study, actively serving in the church, working full-time, going to graduate school, and had lots of good friendships. When he started dating, the only time he had to talk during the week was late at night, between 11pm and 1am. This couple sometimes saw each other on the weekends, but not always. He said to me, “I just realize I didn’t have the time it took right now to dedicate myself to a dating relationship. So I chose to wait until something significant changed in my life.” In his case, after graduate school was done, he had a lot more time that opened up in his schedule and a lot more freedom to pursue dating relationships.

(2) *Personal Issues.* Some of you are dealing with very difficult issues. Maybe it’s prior physical or sexual abuse, or a difficult childhood with an alcoholic father or drug-addicted mother. In that case, you may want to work through some of these issues while you’re single so you won’t bring as much baggage into your marriage.

(3) *Maturing in life and faith.* Increasingly, I’ve had conversations with 20-somethings who want time to learn to live on their own apart from family and after college life. They want to learn how to pay bills, to organize their life, to be a faithful employee, and, most importantly, to take greater ownership of their faith. Using your singleness to mature in these areas is a wonderful way to prepare for life in general and marriage in particular.

***Freedom to Dedicate Your Life with Singular Purpose to God (v. 32, 34, 35)***

As a single, you have freedom to be concerned“about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord” (v. 32). Your aim is “to be holy in body and spirit” (v. 34) and to live with “undivided devotion to the Lord” (v. 35). Paul uses these three phrases to describe the freedom you have as a single adult to dedicate your life to God with singular purpose.

Two ideas I want to emphasize here:

(1) First, you’ve got a freedom to invest in your spiritual growth in a way that will be harder when you are married. When I was single, I had the freedom to take missions trips, read good Christian books, and pour into relationships in a way that I can’t as a married adult. Don’t take this season for granted. Take advantage of it, especially for the sake of growing closer to Christ.

(2) Second, you’ve got a freedom to love and serve God by investing in our church community in ways that married adults often can’t. When Paul talks about gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, he says the point of our gifts is not personal gain, but for building up the body (1 Cor 12:7). Is that the way you think about your gift of singleness? Do you enjoy being single just simply for your personal gain, or do you see your singleness as a means to building up the body of Christ?

[PAUSE FOR FINAL QUESTIONS.]