**Man and Woman in Christ Core Seminar**

**Week 7 – Marriage & Singleness**

Last week we ended by considering what a “cheap sex” counterculture might look like in our church. This week, to begin, I want to describe a different church counter-culture from a different era.

It’s 251 AD, and the church in Rome reportedly has 1500 widows among its members. Despite men greatly outnumbering women in the Roman world, in this church, it was different. There were so many women in the church in Rome that by 370 AD the emperor Valentinian issued a written order requiring that Christian missionaries cease visiting the homes of pagan women. The pagans were losing their women because of the church’s counter-culture.

The church had become increasingly attractive to women, and particularly, widows. But why?

In his book *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark highlights one reason:

“Should they be widowed, Christian women…enjoyed very substantial advantages. Pagan widows faced great social pressure to remarry; Augustus even had widows fined if they failed to remarry within two years … When a pagan widow did remarry, she lost all of her inheritance—it became the property of her new husband. In contrast, among Christians, widowhood was highly respected and remarriage was, if anything, mildly discouraged. Thus not only were well-to-do Christian widows enabled to keep their husband’s estate, the church stood ready to sustain poor widows, allowing them a choice as to whether or not to remarry.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The church’s generosity and love for widows meant widows had an actual choice as to whether or not to remarry. In the church, being single was not only practically doable, it was honored.

In our class today, we’re going to think about the theological foundations for singleness and marriage that would create such a counterculture in the first place. To do this, we’re going to camp out in three passages. The first two will be on singleness: Matthew 19:10-12 and 1 Corinthians 7:1-40. The last one will be on marriage: Ephesians 5:22-33. Together we’ll see that the New Testament has exalted views of both singleness and marriage. Both play an important role, both are callings to be undertaken for God’s glory. Both teach us something critical about the gospel.

As Sam Alberry has written, “marriage shows us the ***shape*** of the gospel, and singleness shows us its ***sufficiency***.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

So let’s begin.

1. Matthew 19:9-12

To better understand the NT’s teaching on singleness, we can look at what is ***given up, what is gained, and what is gifted*** by the single person.

Let’s start with Matthew 19:9-12. This comes in a conversation Jesus has with the Pharisees about divorce:

9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

10 The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” 11 But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. 12 For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.”

The disciples are startled by the strictness of Jesus' teaching. If marriage is “til death do us part,” they might not want to marry at all! Jesus replies that there is *one* group of people who can receive his teaching: eunuchs. Eunuchs broadly speaking were those men incapable of reproduction. Some, as Jesus says in verse 12, were born incapable. Some were made eunuchs by others to guarantee loyalty to the royal court. Eunuchs were commonly employed in the service of the Roman emperors and elite families. Castration ensured that they could be trusted in close proximity to women in the imperial court without concerns of inappropriate relationships or conspiracies. Eunuchs were often appointed to administrative roles, particularly in overseeing the emperor's household, managing finances, and handling confidential matters. Their lack of family ties was considered an advantage in terms of loyalty and dedication to the empire.

And then Jesus points out a third category. Those who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus is talking about those who have intentionally given up marriage for the sake of throwing in their lot completely with the cause of the kingdom.

So, to answer a key question: What did these single people give up?

Because of the sexualized culture we live in, what we might first think of is their giving up of sexual pleasure and partnership. But in Jesus' day, what was most prominent was the fact that they gave up 1) *legacy*. They gave up heirs. Their entire hope for the future was tied up with the destiny of the kingdom of heaven.

They also gave up 2) *status*. Eunuchs were seen, among other things, as *unmanly*. As those who had been quite literally emasculated. This is a rather shocking association Jesus is making here. These were people who had opted out of playing the games of honor that people of the day were playing. Eunuchs for imperial courts were peacemakers rather than men who were able to prove their manliness in war. These were people defined by suffering, rather than by the infliction of violence and power. They were people defined by service of and concern for the weak, rather than mastery over others. Their lifestyle was a ***renunciation*** of many of the underlying assumptions of the day.

So what do they gain?

In the passage right after this one, children are brought to Jesus to be blessed. The disciples rebuke those bringing the children, because they are distractions from the work that really matters. They ***lack*** honor and status, and yet Jesus pays attention to them. Not only does he pay attention to them, he honors them and says the kingdom belongs to those such as these. Jesus is teaching his male disciples something significant in these two scenes. He puts before them a eunuch and then a child, and he says, ***be like them.***

Do you see how singleness is **seen** by the Lord Jesus? What is gained is ***honor****.* Earthly status forfeited. Heavenly status gained.

And what do they gift to the people of God? Singles give the people of God an ***example*** of loyalty to the King. They are a ***living testimony*** to the upside-down values of the kingdom and the rewards of the kingdom. Those committed to singleness for the kingdom “tell us what time it is.”[[3]](#footnote-3) They remind us that In Jesus the kingdom of God has broken into the present. The kingdom of God has been inaugurated in Jesus, and consummation is coming. And so in their commitments to celibacy and spiritual offspring, they signal to us all that we have *one* husband, Jesus Christ. And in the meantime, their presence reminds the church that her future is not tied up in physical offspring, but in conversions.

Dani Treweek writes,: “One of the most distinctive features of Christianity is that its adherents do not need to physically procreate in order to belong, nor to contribute to or secure the growth of that to which they belong. Christian are those whose understanding of God’s [ultimate] purposes in Christ leads them to ‘believe in the power of God to create a people through witness and conversion rather than through natural regeneration.’”[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. 1 Corinthians 7

Whereas in Matthew 19, we focused on legacy and status as that which is centrally forfeited by eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul seems to be especially paying attention to sexual activity. Look at how 1 Corinthians 7 begins:

7 Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” 2 But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. 3 The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. 5 Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

There's an element of realism in Paul's counsel here. One of the problems in Corinth seemed to be an asceticism in which couples were denying each other sexual relations and as a result of such denial, sexual sin was happening. Paul says, basically, if married couples abstain from sexual relations, it should only be for a time, and it should be by mutual agreement. Abstaining from sex is what is in view then when Paul says,

6 Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. 7 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. 8 To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. 9 But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

He tells them that it's good for them to remain single, and celibate. The point isn't that it is the only good thing to do, but that there's no absolute necessity in the Christian life to marry. Here, Paul says only “if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry.” (7:9)

We see here that singles give up sexual relations.[[5]](#footnote-5)

*Paul’s gift is best understood as a supernatural equipping for celibacy so that he can give himself contentedly and completely to God and his people*. He is talking about a particular response to the love of Jesus the bridegroom that comes in the form of a voluntary renunciation of sexual relations. It is this chosen calling that Paul will say, in certain respects, is better than marriage.

In 1 Corinthians 7:38, Paul says “38 So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.”

So in what respects is singleness better than marriage? Note that is not good versus evil, but good versus better. Let’s look at 7:32-35:

32 I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. 33 But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, 34 and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. 35 I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

**Focus, freedom, and flexibility** is gained by the single person**.** They can give undivided attention to the things of the Lord. And flexibility to give themselves to ministry and service without being slowed down by a family.

And what is gifted to the church? Singles **add to the church’s witness.** They show to the world that marriage, sex, and biological procreation have been *relativized* in the Kingdom of God. It’s one thing for me as a married person to say last week, “sex is not ultimate,” it’s another thing for a single Christian who has radically committed him or herself to celibacy.

Day-to-day, **singles add to the church’s life.** Singles can give undivided attention to the Lord that raises the spiritual temperature of the church and with their flexibility can make a significant kingdom impact. This church knows that well. Celestia Farris was left a widow at 33, with three young children. To provide for her family, she entered the workforce, eventually working as a washerwoman at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. As a single person, placed in those circumstances by God, Celestia gave herself to the work of evangelism and prayer, and in starting a sunday school for kids on the Hill. That Sunday school eventually became Capitol Hill Baptist Church!

(Pause for questions)

Paradoxically, singles even make it clearer what ***marriage*** is. Like the kind of singleness Paul describes, marriage is a calling. It’s a calling involving goods that are made for the present age like sexual relations and procreation. It is very much a calling that takes prominence over others. It’s a forfeiting, in some sense, of the flexibility and focus that singles have.

I entered Christian ministry full time right out of college. As a single person, especially as a young single person, I had energy and flexibility to be in the lives of college students at all hours of the day. Where they were, I was. I wanted to be like the “furniture” in a freshman dorm. Always there. And yet I often felt I lacked credibility. I was barely older than they were, and I didn’t have much in terms of worldly status or accomplishment that I assumed would help give me a hearing with people. I ***had flexibility but I lacked credibility***. Now, almost 12 years later, married with 3 kids and a fourth on the way, I find more often I ***have credibility but that I lack flexibility.*** Those visits to the dorms are far more occasional than they used to be because going to them necessarily involves leaving my wife. And leaving her to somehow get my kids into their beds 🤣.

Paul said this would be the case.

“But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, 34 and his interests are divided.” (v 33)

All this sets us up for what’s next. Marriage. Paul assumes that marriage for a man is about pleasing his wife, and marriage for a woman is about pleasing her husband. And that this takes work, and time. It’s *wholehearted* involvement. Let’s look at Ephesians 5:22-33 and consider the contours and meaning of this relationship.

1. Ephesians 5:22-33

22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. 33 However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

We will certainly come back to this passage later on in the class, but for now we should see what is **pictured** in marriage, and what is **prescribed** in marriage.

First what is **pictured**: Spousal union is the great sign that God has given to the world to reveal the mystery of his own love. It’s not that Christ and the church is the metaphor for marriage. Christ and the church is the reality, and marriage is the metaphor. Marriages are to represent, embody, and exemplify the mystery of the gospel.

What is **prescribed** flows from this. Husbands step into the role of picturing Christ as head, wives step into the role of picturing the church as helper.

In the commands in Ephesians 5 marriage is marked by, in the words of Alastair Roberts, a “profound asymmetrical reciprocity.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

There is asymmetry: Husband and wife, man and woman are not interchangeable. They play distinct roles with distinct symbolic meaning. Their sexual difference is critical for the metaphor to have meaning. The different bodies of a man and a woman in marriage represent the union in difference between the divine Jesus and the human church in that ultimate marriage. Sexual difference matters, not for some arbitrary reason, but because it is meant to help tell the story of the beautiful difference between the divine Christ and his human church.

In this relationship, Verse 23 says that the husband is head - notice it does not say he must seek to be the head, he *is* the head. He may be a good head or a bad one, but his authority “is what it is.”

As the head, from the rest of the passage we see his job description is to cultivate oneness, to bless his wife with attention and care, to beautify her with his counsel and concern, and to lead them together in the shared work of dominion.[[7]](#footnote-7) He is to, in the words of Ray Ortlund, seek to *lead and love her towards magnificence,* the way Christ leads and loves his church.[[8]](#footnote-8)

He has a unique responsibility and authority.

In his helpful book *Authority*, Jonathan Leeman says this is an authority of *counsel*, not command.[[9]](#footnote-9) An authority of command is the authority, for instance, given to the government. The government can tell me what to do, and then enforce it with the sword. But a husband absolutely cannot *enforce* compliance. Read Ephesians 5, and this makes sense. The husband has no right to raise a hand, raise a voice, issue threats, or force his wife to do something against her will. That is not how Christ relates to his church, and it’s not how a husband relates to his wife. This is an authority to be exercised in a way that *strengthens* rather than *suppresses* her. The rest of the NT instructs husbands to love, not be harsh, to live in an understanding way, to show honor, and to provide. The Bible commands husbands to do everything a godly woman would possibly *want* in a leader.

And yet it is a real authority. He has real power and will be held accountable for leading, and she will for submitting.

Verse 24 says “wives should submit in everything to their husbands.”

In everything? Really? What is Paul saying? Paul is saying she is to promote her husband’s leadership and authority, and treat his counsel as conscience-binding unless it would require her to disobey God. It’s important to stress this – the husband does not have rights to ask her to sin, and she should not sin in order to “submit.” What it means then to submit “in everything” is to see that there is no area of her life that is cordoned off from her husband. To be one-flesh in marriage truly is an all-encompassing relationship. He who loves his wife loves *himself*.

There is reciprocity in the relationship as well.

33 “However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.”

Love and respect. This practically demonstrates the gospel.

This is the same basic dynamic in 1 Peter 3:1-7. The wife is to live in a respectful way to her husband, and the husband is to live in an understanding way with his wife.

Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, 2 when they see your ***respectful*** and pure conduct. 3 Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear— 4 but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. 5 For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, 6 as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.

7 Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an ***understanding way***, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

In this class time and time again we’ve noticed that God’s commands do not come from thin air. There is a “fittingness” to them when read in the light of our design and with the backdrop of the entire Biblical narrative.

*Question for the class:* Why do you think there is such overlap with these particular commands? Why is it that husbands must *love* and wives must *respect*? (Pause for answers)[[10]](#footnote-10)

For most of this class, I’ve tried to lay out just how ***marriage shows us the shape of the gospel, and singleness the sufficiency of the gospel***.

To conclude I want to give a few words of specific applications: first to all of us, then singles, then to married couples.

1. Applications:
2. Live as you are called.

This is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:17-24. I’ll read the first verse:

17 Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.

In our church, there are those who are happily married. There are those with the gift of singleness, wonderfully stewarding it for the glory of God. There are men and women who are single and who want to be married. There are those in this congregation surely who are married and have had seasons they wish they were single. There are those married to unbelieving spouses. There are widows. And yet Paul would remind us *no* circumstance keeps you from knowing the grace of God. What matters is keeping his commands. We all find ourselves in constrained situations, but our freedom to obey God is in no way compromised or undermined by those situations. The gospel has the power to transform the actual lives that we are living, right here, right now.

Of course we shouldn’t flatten every situation or make them seem equally preferable. For many, many singles in this church, singleness is an **affliction**. *Many are in the state of singleness without the gift of singleness*. This is difficult, and somewhat a byproduct of changes in our modern world that have left more single people wanting to be married than ever. Walking with God may very well include long seasons of *coping* with singleness, and fighting hard for contentment.

To you, know that though you may not have the “gift” of singleness, singleness may still function like a “gift” from God. And by gift, I mean, you know, one of those hard gifts that produces hope.

 3 Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, (Romans 5:3-4)

In the meantime, what should you do with your desires for marriage? Move away from self-pity. Christ is sufficient. And while singleness may be an affliction, it is definitely an opportunity to devote yourself to knowing and serving the King.

If you want your status to change, as a baseline, you can ***pray towards the natural fruition of your desires*** for motherhood / fatherhood, and ***work towards the spiritual fruition*** of those desires in the contexts God has placed you. Women, if that’s you begin by doing the things that mothers do – in the church, in your home, in your workplace. Men - do the things that fathers do: in the church, home, workplace, neighborhood. A good conversation with a friend would be to identify what that might look like more specifically for you.

1. If you can change your circumstances, do it.

Here I’m leaning on 1 Corinthians 7:21. In the same section we were just reading Paul says to bondservants.

“Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.)”

Later Paul tells betrothed persons that if they want to get married, they definitely can.

In our world, what are possible ways one *could* change your circumstances if he or she wanted to be married?

1. You could marry a non-Christian. Paul says directly in verse 39, don’t do that.
2. You could adjust your standards for a Christian spouse. That may or may not be a good idea. Marriage is a serious calling, so it shouldn’t be undertaken lightly. But your standards might be more influenced by the world than the Word.
3. You could build friendships with people of the opposite sex and see what happens. That is almost certainly a good idea, if done in community and with wisdom.

To be honest, there are more ways to do this for **men than women**, because men bear the burden for initiative. To the men:

The Bible’s teaching on marriage and children is like a two-lane highway. Lane 1 is Genesis 1:28, “Be fruitful and multiply”: that is, get married and welcome children. Lane 2 is 1 Corinthians 7, the gift of singleness. Both lanes are good! Both lanes are ordained by God and blessed by God.

But here’s the problem. Some of the men aren’t really in either lane. Instead, you’ve drifted over to straddle both lanes and you’ve put the car in neutral or you are discouraged and have pulled over to the shoulder. You don’t evidently have the gift of singleness, but on the other hand you aren’t exactly pursuing marriage. My goal is to signal you into one lane or the other, and to convince you to shift from neutral into drive. And for very many of you, the lane you should shift into is pursuing and preparing for marriage.[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. To married: see your differences as a stage for God’s glory

Marriage is a calling from God. Christians do not get married just because they are supposed to. Marriage is about following Christ together, and showcasing the gospel. Your spouse is a gift to you. And the two of you together are to be a gift to the world.

The gospel icon shines brightest when we lean into our asymmetries rather than avoid them. A marriage is a picture of beautiful difference. But it can be very difficult. I’ve benefited from a wise mentor who has an exemplary marriage with someone very different than he is. Here are 5 lessons he’s learned and passed on to be. They are like little douses of “wasabi”. A little applied will go a long way. (Pause after each one).

1. Before you complain about who your spouse is not, start by celebrating who they are.
2. Before you demand to be understood, start by desiring to understand.
3. Many of the marriage problems we take *personally* are actually *predictable* in light of our difference in design. So learn what those are and anticipate them.
4. Seek to consistently communicate a desire *for* each other, not a demand *on each other*.
5. Learn to love how they typically like, and like how they typically love.[[12]](#footnote-12)

So there we go. A counter-culture. A theology of singleness and marriage. And some applications along the way. Let’s pray.

1. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sam Alberry, *7 Myths About Singleness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Drawing from Danielle Treweek, quoting Stanley Hauerwas in *The Meaning of Singleness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023), 217-227. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Treweek, 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Optional note: There are apparent differences between Paul’s world and our world. By and large in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul talks about marriage and singleness as matters of choice, whereas many singles in our church would categorize their singleness as involuntary. Still, those who find themselves in the *state* of singleness regardless of whether they understand themselves to have the *gift* of singleness can learn from Paul’s life and example and with God’s help pattern their lives after his. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Quoted from Alastair Robert’s Biblical Reflections on Scripture, “September 8th: 1 Kings 1 and Ephesians 5:18-33,” accessed at <https://adversariapodcast.com/2020/09/08/september-8th-1-kings-1-and-ephesians-518-33/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Drawing from Jonathan Leeman, *Authority: How Godly Rule Protects the Vulnerable, Strengthens Communities, and Promotes Human Flourishing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Raymond C. Ortlund, *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The following three paragraphs draw heavily from Leeman, *Authority*, 168-182. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. There are many worthwhile reflections the listeners might offer here. As the teacher, It’s especially worthwhile to draw from Genesis here. Here are a few:

	1. God made Adam first and brought him to the garden. His first “world horizon” (before Eve was created) was a world of *things*. He was made to excel at discovering what things are, how they are to be distinguished from one another, and what they are for. After the fall, men will often have proclivities to see *persons* as *objects*. And so, it makes sense that Paul would especially remind husbands that they must “love” their wives. She is not one to “have dominion over” like the rest of creation. She is “flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones.”
	2. God put Adam in the garden with a job to do (Gen 2:15-17). In a fallen world he will inevitably ask “Am I enough for the task God has given me? Won’t I end up failing?” Respect from his wife has the unique capacity to empower him to meet the challenges God has put before him. He will accomplish more by the power of her respect than he ever could on his own.
	3. God made Eve from Adam and for Adam (Gen 2:21-22). She was made and “brought to” Adam. Her first “world horizon” was a world of persons. And yet the fall disordered this relationship significantly (Gen 3:16). After the fall, she will try to dominate him, and he will dominate her (Gen 3:16). It makes sense then that Paul would especially remind wives to “respect” their husbands as the men God has called them to submit to and follow.
	4. God made Eve with a person to help. In a fallen world she will inevitably ask, “Do I please him? Will he love me to the end? Am I safe with him?” She will need love and reassurance that she is cherished. Love from her husband will uniquely breathe life into her as they together pursue oneness and work together in their calling to exercise dominion. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. More could be said here directly to single women, depending on things like age and life stage. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. These come from marriage seminars delivered by Matt and Julia Bradner, long-time staff workers with Campus Outreach. Some of their content can be accessed in short & engaging videos [here](https://mailchi.mp/campusoutreach/couple-minutes-episodes1-10). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)