

The Gift of Singleness

I Corinthians 7:6-9, 32-35

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Receive now God's Word.

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

And then skip down to verse 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. But the married man is anxious about worldly things. How to please his wife 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. 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.

This is the Word of God. You may be seated.

To remind you, we're in a series in the evening services on the biblical theology of. And Dr. Doriani and other pastors have been preaching on specific topics and how the Bible as a whole speaks to that topic. And tonight we'll be looking at the topic of singleness. And in many ways, the song that Connor led us in couldn't be more appropriate, because in many ways, tonight will be an exercise in fixing our hope on nothing but Christ and in his love.

I read for you a section from I Corinthians, because it is the one chapter in all of Scripture that addresses singleness in the most extensive and nuanced way. You cannot adequately talk about a theology of singleness without at least referencing this passage, but that immediately presents us with some challenges, because I Corinthians 7 is also a very difficult passage.

It is highly contextual, meaning the Apostle Paul is here speaking into a very specific situation, and scholars have debated and even disagreed as to what exactly that historical situation is. I will tell you upfront that I have no intentions of unraveling all the exegetical complexities of this text for you tonight. Maybe that's a relief for some of you to hear, but from another perspective, you could say that everything I'm going to talk about tonight is related to and will help us better understand this verse, I Corinthians 7.

More specifically, in the verses I read for you, Paul speaks of singleness or the state of being unmarried. To use his word as being a gift. And he later explains, starting in verse 32, that the reason for this is because being unmarried allows for the possibility of again using Paul's words undivided devotion to the Lord, undivided devotion to the Lord.

Well, let me suggest to you that the only possible way you can understand Paul's perspective here is if you have at least a basic biblical theology of singleness. Paul assumes that entire theology as he writes first Corinthians chapter seven. So here's what I'd like to do with you this evening. First, I'd like to take just a few minutes justifying and persuading you why this is an important topic.

As Jay said, not just for singles, but for the whole church. And then second, I'm going to provide you with a biblical theology of singleness first by taking a look at the Old Testament and then by taking a look at the New Testament, and then lastly, I'd like to close by simply pointing out some practical implications and considerations for you to chew on as you go on your own way.

Tonight and this week. But before we begin, let me pray one more time.

Gracious Heavenly Father, as I approach this often sensitive topic, I am aware that there are those who are currently wrestling with their singleness and that many of us, both single and married, are experiencing deep disappointments and unmet desires. I do ask that by the power of your spirit, your word would challenge us and comfort us as we fix our gaze on the one who gave himself up for us.

Teach us to live out what we just sang. May our hope spring forth as we fix our gaze on Jesus. It is in the loving name of Jesus that we pray. Amen.

As a matter of definition, to get started here, when we speak of singleness and singles, understand that I'm not just talking about singles in their 20s and 30s and the GNC has come out to support me, so thank you for doing that. So I'm not just talking about 20s and 30 singles tonight. It includes singles who have never married of all ages, whether that's 40s, 50, 60, 70, 80s, 90s.

Do we have any hundreds in our church? But it also includes widows, those who were married but are presently, and perhaps for the rest of their lives, going to remain single, as well as those who've gone through the painful experience of divorce, some of whom have children, others who do not. And I'll even point out a more specific group.

There are also those that I would describe as genuine disciples of Christ, who wrestle with same sex attraction, who've discerned that heterosexual marriage is not something that they desire, nor should pursue, and therefore commit to a life of singleness and celibacy. So singleness includes all of that. It is not a homogeneous group of people. As good reason for me to approach this topic tonight with a wider audience in view, not just because most of you are not single.

I was aware that I would be speaking to a mostly older married group, but also because we are living in an increasingly single age and society. Let me share some statistics with you, most of which come from Pew Research Studies. First of all, it is estimated that about 40% of the adult members in the Church in America are single, 40%.

Now, that percentage is higher for people in their 20s, as we might expect. But when you move past the 20s, that percentage remains fairly constant across age groups. So whether you're talking about 30 to 50 or 50 to 60 or 65 or older, the percentage of church members who are single hovers constantly around 40%. In other words, we should not think of singleness as a stage in life only for those who are in their 20s and early 30s.

Singleness is not a stage in life for younger adults. Furthermore, as of fairly recently, meaning sometime between 2010 and 2015, the United States became what might be described as a marriage minority

culture, meaning in our country there are now, and it's been this way for about a decade. There are more adults who are single than are married. And the trend clearly indicates that singles will only increase.

Last but not least, when you zoom out even further and when you examine the international landscape, we see that the world as a whole is becoming increasingly more single. The United Nations has historically tracked the percentage of women of reproductive age who are married. That's their category. That's not mine. So women of reproductive age who are married in the year 1970, that percentage, again globally, was around 69%.

30 years later, in 2000, it dropped to 67%. And by 2030, so six years from now, by 2030, it is projected to be at 63%. And by the way, this isn't just the trend in Western or developed or urban countries and regions. It's a trend that can be observed in South America and Southeast Asia and even the Middle East.

We are living in an increasingly single church, country and world, and I also feel compelled to have to say this. I am not giving you these numbers, these statistics, as though it's some kind of crisis that needs to be addressed. I'm not intending to sound some kind of alarm here. I'm simply stating the reality of the age and the society in which we live.

So as a church, if we don't know and if we don't care about what God's Word has to say about singleness, then we are not going to be very effective at reaching out to about 50% of the people that God has, in one form or another, called us to love. So yes, this topic should be of equal interest to the whole church, whether you're single or married.

The sad reality is, however, that the church has not done a very good job incorporating singles into the rhythm of our ministries and life of our community. Doctor Andreas Custom Burger, New Testament professor, makes this assessment. He writes, I quote post adolescent singles. In other words, 20 and up. Post adolescent singles are probably the most overlooked social group in the contemporary Western church.

To most Christians, it appears self-evident that marriage is the normal state. Therefore, many well-meaning believers view it as their Christian duty to locate a compatible mate for the single father. When someone is still single. And please observe that I'm making air quotes here. When someone is still single in their late 20s and 30s, many try to diagnose the problem that has trapped the single in this unnatural and undesirable condition of being unmarried.

It is probably not an exaggeration to say that the thought that singleness could be an acceptable, permanent state has not even occurred to many people in churches today. And then, somewhat humorously. He concludes by adding the only call of God that Western Christians fear more than the call to missions. Sorry, Brian. Is the call to a life of celibacy.

Now, whether you're married or single, I wonder if this at all describes your perspective, your mindset of singles and singleness. And so, moving on, I'd like to share with you a biblical perspective, a biblical theology of singleness. But first credit where credit is due. When it comes to this topic, there is a pastor scholar by the name of Barry Danyluk, who has quite clearly, in my opinion, distinguished himself as the expert on this subject matter.

In fact, I've brought this book here with me called Redeeming Singleness for you to look at afterwards, if you care to. This is arguably the best single book on singleness, and if you do, take the time to read through it, which again, I encourage you to do, you'll see that my sermon today is more or less a distillation of this book.

So credit where credit is due. But returning now to our topic, if you take a look at the macro structure of Scripture, if you take a look at the overarching trajectory of the whole Bible and what it has to say about this subject, and this is what you will observe first, you'll see that in the Old Testament, marriage and having a family is clearly the norm.

And clearly the desirable state. In fact, at times singleness is even perceived as a curse and portrayed as a judgment from God as the Old Testament. But then in the New Testament, not only is singleness acceptable, but in some cases it is clearly preferable to marriage. To state the obvious, men like John the Baptist, the Apostle Paul, Jesus himself was a single man for his whole life.

And then when we get to the new heavens and the new earth, human marriages are absolved entirely. And everyone is single because everyone is wired to Christ. Jesus says in Matthew chapter 22, verse 30, for in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. In other words, everyone is single. That's where we're headed.

So the overarching biblical theological trajectory goes like this from marriage as the norm to singleness as acceptable, and in some cases preferable to singleness as the norm. That's the picture that the Bible paints. So how do we understand that? And on a more personal level, how does that challenge or nuance your evaluation of the importance of human marriage and biological children?

Well, let's unpack this a little further. Starting with the Old Testament again in the Old Testament, marriage is the norm, and singleness is exceedingly rare for anyone who is old enough to marry. For women, that would be around 12 to 13. That's when you're eligible to get married. For men that would have been around 15 to 16. In fact, it was so rare a singleness was so rare that in the ancient world, the concept of young adulthood did not exist.

My job as the singles ministry pastor specifically who shepherds singles in their 20s and 30s, would not have existed in ancient Israel because the period of time in between someone becoming physically capable of bearing children and marrying was so short, it was so abbreviated that the modern concept of young adulthood basically did not exist. Indeed, in the entire Bible, what is?

Here's a pop quiz for you. What is literally the first command in the entire Bible? It's be fruitful and multiply. God commands the creatures of the earth first and then humans to procreate. But in the context of the Book of Genesis, that mandate has to be understood as part of the larger motif or the larger theological theme of the promise seed.

One of Moses's primary concerns Moses, as the author of Genesis, is to trace the seed or the offspring of the woman whom God has promised will crush the head of the serpent. Genesis chapter three. And of course, for that reason, as we read through Genesis, the author slows down the narrative pace considerably. When we get to Abraham in particular, who is the chosen seed of the woman?

Starting in Genesis chapter 12, God repeatedly promises Abraham that he will make him into a great nation, make his name great, bless him, and bless the nations through his descendants. And

furthermore, what is the focus of the entire dramatic tension of the Abraham story arc? Well, it's that his wife Sarah is barren, and she cannot bear children. She cannot bear this seed.

This offspring. That's a major obstacle to God's promise, isn't it? In fact, even at the very end of Abraham's story, even after Isaac is born, what is the last test that God administers to his servant? God says, now sacrifice me, your son. The entire Abraham's cycle centers around bearing a physical child. Now here's why I'm focusing on Abraham in particular, because Abraham's story reveals two things for us as it relates to our topic.

Number one, we learned that one of the primary reasons why marriage and bearing children is so emphasized and so exalted in the Old Testament is because of the way in which it is so integrally tied to God's plan of salvation. In the Old Testament, at that particular stage of redemptive history, the fulfillment of God's promise of ultimate blessing and his promise of salvation, it literally depends on the physical generation and growth of a nation.

And from that nation, one seed, one offspring who will crush the head of the serpent and deliver God's people from sin. So, number one, we learned that the old covenant promises necessarily requires God's people to marry and have children in order to be fulfilled. That is unique to the Old Testament. That is no longer true. But second, we also learn from Abraham's story that while this promised seed or offspring is physical or natural, he is nonetheless brought about supernaturally.

So at one point, Abraham and Sarah tried to take matters into their own hands, and Abraham takes Hagar, who then buries Ishmael. And so the problem is solved, and God's promise of seed and worldwide blessing lives on right? Wrong. God says that's not the seed. That natural, biological son of yours is not what I meant when I promised your seed.

And God continues to say, in order to provide you with the true seed, I will miraculously, supernaturally reverse both Sarah and Abraham's barrenness. In other words, even at the earliest stages of the redemptive history, we're led to understand that God's promise of blessing is not ultimately tied to physical marriages, to physical children and physical blessings, but to a supernatural seed and spiritual blessings.

So we have to bear this in mind and understand that in all the subsequent Old Testament covenants and Old Testament language that speaks of marriage and children as blessings on the one hand, and singleness and barrenness as curses on the other. Yes, there's a physical and natural dimension to those blessings and curses that's pertinent to that particular historical context.

But there's also and more ultimately, a spiritual dimension to them. This is why bearing children and being barren are also spoken of symbolically. This is why those things point to something beyond the literal. And this is especially true when we get to the prophets. Let me just give you a couple examples from the book of Isaiah in Isaiah.

Once again, one of the primary motifs or theological themes that the author is concerned to trace is that of the promised seed. Isaiah is speaking to a people in exile, to a people whose moral failures, whose disobedience has resulted in a spiritual barrenness. And in the first 11 chapters of Isaiah, the Lord pronounces this judgment of barrenness upon Israel, but also the future hope of an offspring.

God promises to reverse Israel's barrenness, but somewhat surprisingly, as we proceed in the Book of Isaiah, this motif reaches its climactic fulfillment not in the birth of a physical child, but in the birth of spiritual offspring. And how is this brought about? Isaiah chapter 53, verse ten. This is a passage that you're all familiar with. It's speaking of the suffering servant Isaiah 53, verse ten.

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him. He has put him to grief. So the Lord is going to allow the servant to be destroyed, to be killed. But then Isaiah goes on to say, when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring. He shall prolong his days. So what's in view here is that the suffering servant will make a guilt offering.

He'll be sacrificed for Israel sins. And the outcome of that sacrifice will be that the suffering servant shall see his offspring. But how is that possible? How does dying. Result in many children? Well, because what's in view is not natural offspring, but spiritual.

See, Isaiah is saying, you know that promise that God made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all those years ago? You know that promise back then? Well, that was not ultimately pointing to a physical nation that was pointing to a spiritual family. So it's not a coincidence that in the very next chapter, Isaiah chapter 54, verse one, we read, sing, O barren one who did not bear.

Break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor for the children of the desolate one, will be more than the children of her who is married, says the Lord. Now don't misunderstand that Isaiah is not saying that God is going to bless barren women in Israel by physically reversing their barrenness like he did for Sarah, Rebecca and Hannah.

No, Isaiah is saying that through the sacrifice of the suffering servant, the barren woman, though she remains barren. And I might add, the single woman, though she remains single, will have more children than the married can ever possibly imagine. That's the blessing.

So again in Isaiah 56, two chapters later, for thus says the Lord to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me, and hold fast my covenant. In other words, to the unmarried who follow after God, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters.

Isaiah promises that when this suffering servant comes, when he makes a guilt offering, those who are single, those who are never married, will inherit a better blessing and a blessing that will far exceed the gift of human marriage and biological children.

And so now, transitioning into the New Testament, we of course know who this suffering servant is and what this guilt offering entails. It is nothing other than the cross of Jesus Christ. It's his death and resurrection in which the promised seed now crushes the head of the serpent, and through which, by faith, all those who believe in him are regenerated, born again, and adopted into a new spiritual family, into the family of God.

You see, the church is the many offspring and the greater blessing that the barren woman in the eunuch was looking forward to in Isaiah. The family of God is what all the promises and blessings associated with human marriages and families were pointing to. And if that's the case, what we would expect in the New Testament is that the cross radically reorients how we think about singleness and marriage and families.

And that is exactly what we find. This is why Jesus says in Luke chapter nine, verse 60, leave the dead to bury their own. And when someone says, let me first say farewell to my family, Jesus replies, no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom. This is why Jesus describes his own family in this way Matthew chapter 12 verse 48.

Who is my mother and who are my brothers? In stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother. And this is why Jesus promise says in Mark chapter ten verse 29, truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house, or brothers or sisters, or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake, and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now, in this time and in the age to come eternal life, you will receive a hundredfold now, not just later.

Now, in this life. What is the 100 fold blessing that Jesus is talking about? It's your spiritual family. It's your brothers and sisters. It's your mothers and fathers. It's your children in the faith.

Now, Jesus is not, and I am not intending to disparage biological families. But Christ here is pointing out that your biological family is not what is ultimate. In other words, because of the cross, our familial ties, loyalties, and love is redirected not first and foremost to your natural family, but first and foremost to God and his family. To state the obvious, human marriage and familial relations are temporary.

Brothers and sisters in Christ are eternal. Now, obviously your natural family can also be part by the grace of God can also be part of your spiritual family if they are believers. But we all know that that is not necessarily the case.

And now, finally, we can come back to first Corinthians chapter seven. It is only in light of this new covenant reality that we can make any sense of Paul's perspective. It is only in this communal context in which we're in fellowship and enjoy intimate relationships with our spiritual family, that it becomes conceivable that singleness might not only be acceptable, but in some cases strongly preferable.

Therefore, the emphasis or the tilt in the New Testament now is no longer towards human marriage and natural procreation. But it's towards spiritual regeneration. In this context, singleness can be described as a gift insofar as it allows for greater devotion to kingdom ministry. Because why do you see the connection? Because the more devoted the members of the church are to sharing the gospel, to bringing people to Christ, the more spiritual offsprings we produce and the bigger our family grows.

Paul is not the only one who teaches this. Jesus also taught the same principle Matthew chapter 19, verse 12. He says, for there are eunuchs who have been made 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.

Jesus is not speaking literally. There. Jesus is not saying that there are those who have literally physically castrated themselves for the sake of the kingdom. He is saying that there are those who have committed to a life of singleness and celibacy for the sake of the kingdom. So is singleness a gift? Answer the question absolutely. And what is this gift of singleness?

Well, without getting into the weeds of the debate of this question, let me offer you my view and what I consider to be kind of a minimalistic kind of answer to this question, at the very least. This is the gift of singleness. It's that in your state of being unmarried, whether that's because you just haven't met your

spouse yet, whether that's because you're divorced, whether that's because you're a widow, and whether that state is temporary or permanent.

Whatever the reason, whatever the length in your current state of singleness, the Lord has gifted you with this weighty call to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord. And how amazing is it that in God's goodness and in his wisdom? Your labor, your undivided devotion, your labor is directly linked to the multiplication of the deepest kind of human relationship that you can possibly experience, which is not marriage, but which is the relationship between those who are in Christ.

Lest I offend couples, obviously that includes Christian couples, but for Christian couples, this is what I would say. Your marriage and I'm married to your marriage is so wonderfully beautiful and intimate and deep. Not because you're married and get to have sex per se, but because both of you believe in Jesus Christ.

I know I'm going long, but I'd like to close then by simply spelling out a few practical implications and considerations for you to chew on and apply. Number one, I cannot stress this enough. A very clear implication of this theology of singleness is that the family of God is very, very, very important to say the same thing again.

Singleness is a gift, but what's assumed is the relational context and community of the family of God. Many singles struggle with feeling lonely and being alone. Those two things, by the way, are not the same. Feeling lonely is a subjective experience. Being alone is an object of experience. Those who are single and those who are married may and often do feel lonely, but they should never have to live life alone.

A widow in her 70s may indeed be called to be single for the rest of her life, but she is not called to live life alone. What I'm suggesting is that the reality is that many singles in the church today suffer in their singleness, not because they can't control their emotions or sexual passions, not because they pine after marriage in an unhealthy way, but because the church, because we do not practically live out the spiritual reality that we are a family of God.

Here's a very practical question you can ask yourself. What would it look like if I began treating the people sitting next to me as though they were my biological family? How might that change the way you interact with them and love them, and care for your brothers and sisters in Christ? Number two. Second implications. I think it's the case that this theology also exposes the reality that we have a tendency, again, in the church in America in particular, to idolize marriage and having children, and that idolatry can occur from both the perspective of singles and married.

For those of you who are single, it is okay and it's even good to desire a spouse and to grieve unmet expectations and desires. But here's a simple litmus test to determine whether or not your desires are no longer good, but idolatrous. If in your sorrow, your tears makes you blind from that hundredfold blessing that you already have in Christ and in your spiritual family, then likely you are desiring marriage in an unhealthy way.

And guess what? Should you get married? You will likely continue to idolize your spouse in a manner that supplants Jesus Christ. To those of you who are married. Here's a simple litmus test for you. If you are so enraptured and so enamored by your spouse and your children that your familial loyalties empties you

of any capacity to intentionally and to deeply love your spiritual family, then your biological family is likely an idol.

Three. If you have the humility and the maturity to look beyond your own sorrows and look to the larger family of God in which you're a part, then one of the things that you'll quickly realize is that life is full of unmet desires. Let me be even more specific. Life is full of unmet relational desires. Those who are single may yearn to get married. Those who are married. May yearn to have children. Those who are only childhood may yearn to have siblings. Those who are parents may yearn to be grandparents. And those who are widows may yearn to sleep in the embrace of their spouse once more. My wife is currently in Korea visiting family. That's why she's not here. And I'll share with you something private. Normally, I sleep on the right side of our bed, but for the last two weeks, I've been sleeping on the left side. Can you guess why? Because I miss my wife. And the left side of my bed has wonderfully preserved her scent. It smells like her. Which is to say that it smells like flowers and lotion. I cannot imagine what widows and widowers experience on a nightly basis.

Life is full of unmet desires. But I pray that you have the eyes to see that you are not alone in your sorrows, and that in Christ God has given you this local spiritual family. He's given you brothers and sisters. He's given you Christian friends. He's given you mothers and fathers and children in the faith through which. And here's the important point through which all of those unmet desires can actually be fulfilled and satisfied.

Now? Certainly not fully. That won't happen until Christ comes back, but nonetheless fulfilled and satisfied in a rich and meaningful way. I'm going to give you a long sentence to summarize this point. The family of God is the divinely ordained channel through which every single one of us, single or married, can experience deep, life giving, satisfying, relational intimacy that points us more clearly to the union we enjoy in Christ Jesus.

Do you believe that?

And this leads me to the last implication and consideration, which is both the most obvious and most important, is that the new covenant therefore proclaims that Christ is sufficient for me. This is how Sam Albery puts it. He says, if marriage shows us the shape of the gospel, singleness shows us its sufficiency. Just as those who are in Christian marriages have the ability to shed light on the shape of the gospel in a unique way.

Those of you who are single understand that you have the ability to shed light on the sufficiency of the gospel, the sufficiency of Christ in a unique way. To quote buried in a book, he says, when you are content and trust in God in your singleness, you are a walking sign of the coming age. You're a walking sign of the coming age.

I meet with young singles quite often, and as you can imagine, dating and marriage is a recurring topic. It's not the only topic, mind you. I wouldn't even say that it's the most frequent topic, but it is a recurring topic and one of the things that breaks my heart just from a pastoral perspective. One of the things that breaks my heart.

Is when people say to me, and oftentimes it's women, they'll say to me, Pastor Sam, I just want to meet a godly man who will pursue me. I just want to be pursued. Can we all empathize with that?

And for those of you who may be feeling that way, let me just say that that is a good desire, and I pray that the Lord indeed provides you with a man who loves you so deeply that he relentlessly pursues you, not just before, but even after marriage. But if I may also gently remind you, don't ever forget that you already have a man who pursues you in that way. And his name is Jesus. Consider this Matthew chapter 19. Again, Jesus says that there are those who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom. Do you understand? Jesus is speaking as one of them. Jesus is that eunuch. Christ committed himself to a life of singleness and celibacy so that he could be wed to you. You see, Christ is sufficient for me because I was sufficient for him.

Let's pray.

Lord, I cannot see into people's hearts. And so I don't know how this word affects them in their present longings and sufferings. But I do pray that the realities of the New covenant, that the truth of the gospel might so deeply take root in their hearts that the counterintuitive, countercultural, Christ centered love that we have for one another will bear witness to the world that we are your people, and that we are your bride.

We pray all of this in the strong name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.