

I Corinthians 1-7
The Faithful Life, Married and Single
I Corinthians 7:1-9

This may be a short message, probably the shortest one you'll ever hear from me from this pulpit on a Sunday morning or Sunday evening, so we can have time to pray about the topic.

The topic is marriage and singleness. And what we're going to do at the end is I'm going to guide you through a season of prayer right where you sit by yourself or maybe one other person, maybe two other people if you like. But 1 or 2 people to pray for the different kinds of marital status people have for people who are married and happily so, for people who are married, maybe with challenges for people who are single because they've never married, because they're young and have never married, because they're older and have never married because they're widowed, because they're with a young widowed old because they have been divorced. So we're going to pray through various marital situations at the end, and I'm going to lead you through that for a few minutes, and then we'll have our other times of prayer.

But first, let's read I Corinthians 7:1-9, which is our passage for tonight is our custom to stand for the reading of God's Word, and invite you to do so. This is God's word.

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote. "it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. But because of the temptation of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband, for the wife does not have authority over her own body, but her husband does likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. 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. Now, as a concession, not as 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, one of another, to the unmarried and to the widows. I say that it is 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.

Lord, give us ears to hear what you're saying to us. This passage is not always immediately clear to us. In some ways, a challenge to us may be in several ways a challenge to us. And, Lord, we therefore wait upon you and in your word to correct us, instruct us. And as we said, to have a time of prayer about these matters. Together we pray in Jesus name. Amen.

I was teaching about marriage and singleness one day. And a young adult said to me, and I quote, if singleness is a gift, it is the gift that no one seems to want. She was right, I suppose, a sexual desire and sexual temptation. So our sexual desire and sexual expression are so closely tied to identity today that many people would agree that it's almost inconceivable that

someone would seek a life of singleness by design in our culture, if you ask the question, let's set aside our so highly sexualized culture.

What would other cultures say and what do people say? Maybe not at the age of 22, but at the age of 32 or 42? Perhaps the most common thing people say is the challenge of the single life is loneliness. Loneliness has different facets. When we live a life together, of course, we want someone to be our life partner, to think through the hard questions of life, life's riddles, to experience things, to remember them together.

It's so much better to go to Canada and see the leaves in the autumn. If you have someone to see them with you, and it's not usually quite as much fun to go by yourself. We want to share memories. There's loneliness. It was interesting to me that when, the Corinthians wrote, we, we translate to make clear what an illusion is.

But literally it says that they wrote to Paul, it is good for a man not to touch a woman, and I find that intriguing. It is a euphemism for erotic touching. But touching does also mean touching. And one of the things that people who are single miss is human touch. When I was a pastor previously church fairly similar to this one, I had a, I had a group of widows that would hug me every Sunday morning. There weren't as many places, as many ways to go out as there are here. Here. There's about four ways in and 27,000 ways out of the building. And so not all that many people greet me. But in the previous church, there were really only three plausible ways to leave easily. And I greeted more people. And there were a lot of women who are between 70 and 85 who hugged me, and I hugged them week after week. And it occurred to me fairly quickly, there's a good chance this is the only hug they get all week. Because I knew some of those women, I knew that their family was far away, and human touch is something we need.

When I was dad, I noticed that when you put your children little children, I mean, not three, I mean six weeks old and six months old and eight months old in a car seat. They sometimes cry immediately, as soon as they're put in the car seat. And all you have to do to calm a child down many times is for the non driver to reach back to the child and just put a finger or a hand on the child, and that immediately calms them down because human touch is so very important.

So singleness, singleness is a gift, the Bible says. And yet we have to say, I mean, listen to what Paul declares to us that it is. Yes, it is in our society. Meaning if we're an obedient Christian life without sexual contact, but also life, it can be lonely. A life without much physical contact, hugging, touching that people love.

Now, if we look at what the Bible has to say about singleness, the first thing we have to do is say that Jesus changed everything and Paul followed behind Jesus. Jesus, of course, is the greatest person. He's not just the person, he's the God man, but he's the greatest man who ever lived. And he was single, never married, and he did fine without getting married.

And Paul, of course, is the best known of the apostles. And, he probably got married. I'll explain why scholars are reasonably confident that Paul got married, but he also spent a lot of his time

single, and throughout his apostolic career he was single either all the time or most of the time. And so we have to great heroes of the faith, Jesus and Paul, who were single, who not only say singleness is possible.

Paul here says, I wish that all men, whereas I am meaning single. And Jesus said, some are eunuchs for the kingdom. They set aside family for the sake of the kingdom in Matthew chapter 19. So they both thought it, and they both lived it. And they both testified that had a good life, and the good life was not a life of isolation.

If you read the Gospels, you know that Jesus had 12 people around him on a regular basis. We call them the disciples, but he calls them his friends. And among those 12, Jesus had three who were especially close to Jesus. And in fact, there was one disciple who used to recline on Jesus, which is John. So that was the physical touch.

And it's also the case that he had women who were friends. Remember, Jesus would visit Mary and Martha and Lazarus and they were his friends. So Jesus had a number of friends. Now, I'm not going to try to list the friends that Paul had. We know that Timothy was one and Titus was one. He calls them both his sons or beloved sons in the Lord, but he actually has dozens of other people that he mentions with affection his letters.

People like Barnabas and Mark and Philemon and various other men, literally dozens of them are mentioned. There's one passage where Paul says, I'm entirely by myself. I only have so and so and so on and so on and so on. So with me, because he wanted to have people with him and we learn from that, that when you're single, it's very important to have good friends.

Now, of course, it's the case that from the beginning it was the norm among God's people. To Mary. Adam and Eve were created with a marriage in view. They were naked, unashamed. They were told to be fruitful and multiply. And so we understand their physical connection. They were married, God married them and they had children and children in marriage are among God's fundamental blessings.

And we want to say that marriage is good. When Paul says, I wish that all men were as I am, this is really the only place in all scripture that says singleness is commendable and in some ways superior throughout the rest of the Bible. The main testimony is that most people, the great majority of all people, get married if it's blessed to do so.

If we look at the heroes of the faith in the Old Testament, they were all to our knowledge. They were all married without exception. Still, Paul does say, I wish it all men were as I am, and God has given each person his own gift from God. He says to the unmarried and to widows, it is good for them to remain single as I am.

So let's see if I can just summarize what Paul's saying in this passage goes something like this. If you say chapter seven, verse one, that it's good to be single, I can agree with you if you say singleness is excellent, I agree with you. I'm single and I wish that all were like me. If you have the gift, if you have the calling now the proviso is found in verses two, three, four and five.

If you would look at it with me also, my screen is blank tonight, so I don't know what you're necessarily saying. Can I go two and three first before we go to four and five? He says in verses two and three that one reason is not the only reason to have children, but one reason to be married and to have a family life together is because the temptation of sexual immorality so prominent.

Now, if you've been here on Sunday nights, you know that, the city of Corinth was notorious for its sexual immorality. And so it kind of applies to our situation today, where we're living in a highly sexualized culture, and temptation is everywhere. Prostitution was commonplace, he says, because of temptation. It's good for. And he mentions the man, and the woman is good for a man to have a wife, and for a woman to have a husband.

And then he says, it's important in that situation to give ourselves to each other physically. The husband should give his wife her rights and the wife to her husband, because our bodies, verses four and five are not entirely ours. Now, of course, our body is ours, but it's not simply ours. We take care of our body, we give our bodies to our wives, and in a different way, we give our bodies care for our bodies for the sake of our children.

He does say that, you know, physical connection between husband or wife is not absolute. There's a time to step away, but it's temporary for a purpose. But to punish each other or demonstrate how upset you are was with your spouse. But by agreement for limited time to devote yourselves to prayer and then come together again because of the danger of lack of self-control.

So let's see. Singleness is good. Paul wishes that many were like him. If they have the gift of singleness, because temptation is so very prominent in this world. So what does it take to be happily single? It takes the gift of singleness. If you have that gift number one. Number two, Paul says in verse 26, which I didn't read tonight, that it's good to have the gift of singleness, especially in light of the present distress.

The present distress was almost certainly a severe famine that was going through the land, famine, therefore drought, therefore starvation in that day. And so not a good time to get married when you're in the time of great distress. The third thing is chapter seven, verse 29 to 35. The time is short. Paul says at the end of the chapter, and in this short period of time when the gospel needs to spread rapidly and churches need to be, growing and proliferating to proclaim the gospel throughout the Gentile world, it's very important for the Lord to call some people to the unique task of giving themselves entirely to God's work, and forego the pleasures and

the obligations of ordinary life of marriage. Now he does say that these are these are good things. It's good to be cautious in times of famine. It's even better to be, dedicated to God's kingdom in a time of strategic importance. But he's not laying it on everybody. He's laying singleness on those who have the gift. And elsewhere in First Corinthians, he makes it clear that he is the only apostle who was single.

Specifically in chapter nine verse five, he says that he would have the right to travel with a believing wife if he chose as all the other apostles do, and the brothers of the Lord, which would include James and Jude, the half brothers, and Jesus. So the norm is still there. Paul's dedicated to the kingdom of God, and as a single man he has a privilege that some single people have, and that is to take risks and to live a life that he could not live if he were married.

Let me illustrate it this way. I've talked about it enough that you know that I like to climb in the mountains, and my wife likes to be in the mountains, but doesn't like to climb mountains, if you will. She likes to hike at the lower levels, and she's happy for me to go to the higher levels with a certain arrangement that we have made.

And that arrangement is I don't do things that could plausibly lead to death.

Now you can die any time. You can die in the parking lot. But I'm not going to go up any hill in which, you know, the death rate is 2%, right? Because you are a father and we have children, we have obligations. But Paul was single and he could do things in which death was a plausible outcome. He was shipwrecked two times in the open sea, was beaten and left for dead.

He was stoned, which very commonly leads to death. And he did it because his life was in God's hands. And he believed correctly, that as important as his life is, he would not leave a widow and childless or fatherless children behind. And he says, the kingdom needs this kind of person. The kingdom needs people who are dedicated to God's work.

Now Paul says, it's good to be single, and if I may say it one more time, he says, it is good to be single. If you have the gift. Verse seven I wish that all men were as I myself am, but each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. Verse eight to the unmarried and the widows, I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am, if they have the gift.

But if they can't exercise self-control, then they should marry. So let's just make sure we have the main ideas of Paul states for us, marriage is good. Marriage is the cure. 1234512345I think is a good way to put it. good, a good cure, the best cure for sexual temptation. That's not all marriage is good for. But in our sexual society, he says it's good for that.

Then he says, I wish all people were single as me. He does not command. He says, I wish, I wish all were single was me. But then he immediately adds, that is, I have that wish for all people who have the gift of singleness is not good for people who don't have the gift of singleness to be single.

So it's good to be married. Most people have that gift. It's good to be single if you have that gift. Now, I'm going to use a handful of words to summarize what Paul says. His preference for singleness, then, is mild, conditional, strategic, and temporary. That's all for people who like to take notes. So mild it's mild. He doesn't command, he says.

I wish it's mild because he says for those who have the gift, it is a mild preference. That's number one. Number two, it's conditional. I'm repeating myself here for emphasis. It's

conditional. It's for those who have the gift. Most adults don't. Paul did. Jesus did. Some of us do. Number three, it's strategic because the infant church needs people.

I'm quoting from later in first Corinthians seven who can give themselves with undivided devotion to the Lord. It's temporary because the present distress and because of this extraordinary situation, Paul does say, I wish all people were as I am, and I want to, because it counts for what we're going to pray about later and for understanding of single people.

I think it's worthwhile for me to show you why. I think Paul was married but had lost his spouse, most likely through her death. So the first thing we can see is that Paul says, I'm going to ask you to look carefully at these words. He says, I speak to the unmarried and widows. That's in verse eight.

I speak to the unmarried and widows. Now I'm going to say that I believe there are multiple reasons to think that unmarried means men who are unmarried. Let's just say they were married and now they're not the reason. first of all, it goes like this. You notice verses one, two, three, four, five that Paul carefully talks about men and women.

Do you see that in verse two he says, each man should have his own wife, each woman, her own husband. I speak to the man. I speak to the woman. Conjugal rights. A man should give to his wife, her conjugal rights wife should give to her husband the same thing. A wife does not have authority of her body.

The husband does not have authority. The body is always saying both. It says the man, the woman, the man, the woman. It's very unusual for that culture. Most literature just simply addressed men. The Paul keeps saying, the man, the woman, the man, the woman, the husband, the wife. Why does he not say the man and the woman with regard to widows in verse eight, to the unmarried and to widows, what happened?

What happened to widowers? The answer is there was no such word in the Greek language at that time. And the word they subbed in was the word unmarried. Now, of course, when we say unmarried, we mean somebody who never got married commonly. But if you think about it, the most basic meaning of the word unmarried is somebody who was married, right?

Nod your head. It means you're with me. Okay, so what's the most common way for becoming unmarried in that culture? The answer is in our culture, it's divorce. But in that culture where life expectancy was something like 37 to 40 years, the most common way to become unmarried is through the death of your spouse. That's why people believe, and I'm one of them, that Paul was unmarried, meaning he had been married and his wife died.

Is there a chance that he was unmarried because of because he was widow? Because sorry? Because it was divorced? Because his wife wanted no part of a man who decided to follow Jesus and travel all over the world. There's a tiny chance. But women could not. Simply it was very rare for women to be able to divorce their husbands, so that's very unlikely.

It's also true that when Paul and you know, you may not have noticed this, but in Acts chapter 26, verse two of this, verse ten, Paul says he voted against the Christians in the Sanhedrin, in the council. Well, to be a member of the council you had to be married. So Paul was in the council. Paul wrote in the council, he's a married man.

Now. Those votes occurred before he became a Christian. He became a Christian around the age of 30. So Paul was, I would say, almost certainly a man who was married. And then unmarried by losing his wife. So that's the reason for saying he is someone who is single. Now, what is up through the death of a spouse, by being a widow?

What does Paul have then say to us? He says, first of all, when we talk about singleness, we have to remember there are different kinds of singleness. And if I can just jump ahead a little bit, it's really different to be single at the age of 25 and single at the age of 35, it's really different to be single at 35 and a man 35, and a woman who feels that biological clock ticking man doesn't on in the same way.

Think I've got to hurry up and get married if I want to have children, it's different again. To be divorced. Different to be divorced at the age of 25 than it is to be divorced at the age of 45 with a couple kids. Different again, to be divorced at the age of 65 when your children are grown, when you stayed together until, I don't know.

For some reason, I decided was I'm finally, I'm finally done with you, which occasionally happens different again if you're widowed young versus widowed old. Now, when Paul addresses the person who's single, he says one of the considerations is, is this person burning with passion? Someone is burning with passion. Then they should not be single. Well, John Calvin, who was married for ten years and then his wife died, said we have to make sure we define this because if any feeling of sexual desire is burning with passion, then no one will ever be qualified to be single.

This is what I'm talking about. As someone is burning where does not feel, feel, desire or does not feel some level of temptation. Paul uses the word that means to burn if to control yourselves. Ordinarily. Ordinarily the call is for self-control and self-discipline. Verse nine says, if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. But the ordinary call is for self-control.

Well, now, interestingly, at that time in that day, a lot of philosophers and ethicists praised self-control. Plato did. Aristotle did the main religious movement of the day. The Stoics praised self-control, a group known as the neo-Pythagoreans. I know that word is on many of your lips day after day. The neo-Pythagoreans, who had many followers in that day, believed in a well-ordered life, including one that had self-control.

So we're always glad when the Bible connects with the secular age. And today we call for self-control in the sexual realm, and our society calls for self-control in other areas. And maybe we can persuade people together that self-control is a good thing. Sexual appetites and also food appetites. You know, I probably too many cookies this afternoon. Had lunch with some friends.

The cookies were sitting there. A box of cookies I had. One was tasty two, three, 4 or 5. Next thing you know, 44 cookies. Maybe not. Maybe not. But you know, we believe it was probably five. If you were keeping score. There are lots of people who wish they could stop smoking, wish they could stop binge walking, watching programs, or people who are thankful to.

TikTok was, at least briefly banished from the face of North America because they spend too much time on TikTok. Please ban TikTok. So I'm saved from my obsession with social media. We agree that there's a need for self-control, but to apply to the church for a moment. Is minute. Stanley Howard Ross, who wrote about this about 30 years ago, said something really important.

He said singleness was legitimate in the early church, not because sex was considered a questionable activity, but because the mission of the church was so important, because we're living between the times that the church mission at that time, the mission of the gospel proclaiming Christ, required people who are capable of complete service because the appointed time was very short.

First Corinthians 7:29 people had to make a sacrifice. And then and then. Hawass adds this. He says the sacrifice we might think of singles was to give up physical intimacy. But the much more great sacrifice in that day was the sacrifice of giving up family and giving up heirs. Then this. There is no more radical act than this.

It is the clearest institutional expression that one's future is not guaranteed by family, but by the church. The church, the harbinger of the Kingdom of God, which is our theme of our prayer tonight. The church, the harbinger of the kingdom of God, is now the primary source of loyalty. And that's what makes it plausible to not only be single, but to embrace singleness at the age of 25 or 30 5 or 55.

Never married to say the church is my true family. And upon losing a spouse, whether at the age of 75 or 45 through death, to say, you know, God may be calling me to singles so I can be committed to his church without reservation and even those who are divorced. And of course, divorce is always a tragedy. We'll talk about that actually next week.

But sometimes, occasionally people are divorced and they say this means not that I should, grief and sorrow and lament without limit, but I, I lament, I grieve, I sorrow, and I dedicate myself the kingdom of God. Now, what that means for the rest of us is that we have to have an eye for single people if Howard wants us.

Right. And I quoted him because I think he is if dedication to singleness permanently or maybe for 5 or 10 years. Sometimes people say, you know, I'm going to stay single until God clearly calls me out of it. If dedication to singleness for life or a period of time is legitimate because the church is the family of single people, then married folk, we need to be family to single people.

That is a solemn obligation to make sure that we recognize people who are 25 or 30 5 or 40 5 or 50 5 or 65 who were widowed or divorced, and we invite them into our lives, into our fellowship

and not have, you know, discipleship groups that are all married couples and all single couples. But we take care, deep, lasting care of our single friends.

Now, I, you know, I teach about this. And so, a while ago, we started practicing what we preach at our home in in our home now. And it's mostly in Saint Louis. We're glad to be here with you, but in our home for a number of years at all the major holidays, which would include kind of everything but Valentine's Day, when we gather as a family, which we usually do, whether, you know, it's Christmas, it's Easter, it's Memorial Day, Labor Day, July 4th, Thanksgiving, the word is always the same to our children.

If you have any friends who don't have somewhere to go, they're welcome in our house, period. I don't care if they're if they're believers or not, don't care if they're polite or not. We've had people take God's name in vain in our house and we didn't like it, but anybody's welcome. We have had people who are full blooded atheists in our home, and we're glad to have them there, but we're above all glad to take care of the Body of Christ.

And we focus on being family for people and recognizing a couple things. The first one is, the first one is if you're married now and you were single 20 or 25 or 28 or 30, don't assume you remember at all. Ask questions of your single friends. Don't think you know what their life is like because you were single once, 20 years ago.

Be open. Listen to them about their experience, and keep a watch for people who are single in different ways. Widowed, divorced, never married and be what we say. We are the family of God, the children of God, brothers and sisters living together in faithfulness. So that's what I have to say to you today. And what I want to do then is, pause with prayer.

And I'm going to pray for just a second. But then I'm going to I'm going to invite you, whether you're by yourself or with maybe one or 2 or 3 people, with you, to pray for people in these various marital situations. And that'll be the marriage and family part of our, our family of our time together. Okay. And then we're going to go to a longer section in which we pray through the Lord's Prayer. And our various pastors will lead us in that.

But let me pray, and then I'll walk you through prayer together. Heavenly father, we thank you for your word, for your words, candor and discussing all the various situations in life, including, being single and being single and through never being married to being divorced or being widowed. I pray, Lord, that, those who are single here tonight, that they would seek you and ask the question, are you calling them to a life of singleness or a season of singleness? And the Lord, if we are around somebody who's single, whether they're gleefully single or unhappily single, may we truly be their mother and father and sister and brother. We pray this Lord in Jesus name. Amen.

And now I'm going to invite you to pray, and I'm just going to guide you. And we'll pray about one minute on about 6 or 7 issues, okay. So number one, number one, please pray for your friends, the people in this church, your other friends who have never married, pray for them.

If they've never married, if you know they're 25 but would really like to get married, they're not happily single at 25 and pray for them. If they're 35 and they really want to get married, or if they're 45 or 55 or 65, pray for a minute for your single friends in the various walks of life. Let's pray as we are, where we are. Amen.

Now let's pray for our friends who are single because they are widowed. Can think of particular people you know who are widowed, or imagine the people around you who are widowed, whether they're a man or a woman, whether they're young or older. Let's pray for our friends who are widowed.

So, Lord, we pray for those who are widowed, especially Lord, for those who do not have a great number of family or friends nearby, feel a deep sense of loneliness. May we be sensitive to them. And then let's pray for those who are divorced. Pray for the divorced who are divorced because they made a mistake, because they suffered mistreatment.

For those who are isolated because of their divorce. Let's pray for our divorced friends.

Lord, we pray for our friends who are divorced, who are still reeling and grieving from the blow, from those who wonder they should seek marriage again, or whether they're happy in their position in life. May we love and care for our divorced friends, and let's pray that we would all be sensitive to those who are single, that we would love our single friends, that we would not deliberately or accidentally, put them aside.

That we would open our homes and open our lives to our single friends. Let's pray, therefore, for ourselves to love people who are single. Amen.

Finally, I'm just going to pray for a moment, and then, next leader is going to come forward to lead us to the next phase. But we just pray for one moment. That would be a church that would care for those who are single.

Let's pray for just a moment. Heavenly father, I pray that one by one, but also collectively, we would love and care for and encourage those who are single. We pray that we would love those who are single, who want to get married, those who aren't sure if they should get married. And for those who are thinking seriously about the life of devotion to you and to your cause, we pray, Lord, that we would welcome and be sensitive and kind and gracious, and father and mother and sister and brother to all the folks in our family who are single.

We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.