

Family Matters

*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.
(Genesis 1:27 ESV)*

*Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.
(Proverbs 22:6 ESV)*

*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me,
and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.
(Matthew 10:37 ESV)*

*But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household,
he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.
(1 Timothy 5:8 ESV)*

Singleness And Celibacy

October 1st, 2017

Matthew 19:1-12

1 Corinthians 7:1-7

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles to Matthew 19:1-12, that's on page 824 in your pew Bibles. We are carrying on this with our series called "Family Matters" and we're talking today about singleness and celibacy. There are two principle passages in the NT that address this topic, Matthew 19:1-12 and 1 Corinthians 7:1-7. Now the two passages are remarkably similar and so for the sake of time I will read the one and refer as needed to the other. Both passages establish marriage as the norm and celibacy as a commendable exception. My plan is to read the text and to engage with what the Bibles says on this topic and then consider why it is that God might give the gift of celibacy to some people and not others followed by a discussion of how we as a church can serve and support single and celibate people.

Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1 of Matthew 19:

1 Now when Jesus had finished these sayings, he went away from Galilee and entered the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. 2 And large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. 3 And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" 4 He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said,

‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’?
6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” 7 They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” 8 He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 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.”
(Matthew 19:1–12 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Let’s begin then with what the Bible says about marriage, singleness and celibacy.

What Does The Bible Say About Marriage, Singleness And Celibacy?

I’ve framed the question that way because the Bible frames the question that way. Both Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7 make it clear that:

1. Marriage Is A Repeated And Protected Norm In The New Testament

When Jesus is asked a question about marriage he appeals to Genesis 1 and 2. That is massively significant! Jesus adopts and commends the Old Testament teaching on marriage. He says that marriage is between a man and a woman. He says that it is a one flesh union FOR LIFE. What God has joined together let man not separate.

Jesus was unapologetically pro-marriage.

He did his first miracle at a wedding. Many of his parables are set in the context of a wedding. In fact he frequently described himself as the bridegroom and the church as his bride and the Bible says that when Jesus returns for the church we will all sit down and enjoy together the Wedding Supper of the Lamb. Jesus is pro-marriage, there can be no doubt about that.

The Apostle Paul is also pro-marriage. In 1 Corinthians 7 he is answering a question about the supposed superiority of the celibate lifestyle. Now we have a hard time understanding 1

Corinthians 7 because we are coming at this issue from the ditch on the other side but in Paul's day folks were so impressed with the celibacy of Jesus and John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul that they were beginning to assume that it was God's will for everyone to be celibate and so the question in 1 Corinthians 7 is – should I act as a celibate even though I'm married?

That's the question! Look at 1 Corinthians 7. Paul quotes their question that was sent to him through a messenger. He says:

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." (1 Corinthians 7:1 ESV)

People wrote to Paul and said: "Paul, I was a married man when I became a Christian but I see that Jesus was celibate and you are celibate so I'm wondering should I be celibate, even though I am married? Should I stop having sex with my wife and live with her simply as a sister in Christ?"

That was the question and this is Paul's answer:

NO!

He says:

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. (1 Corinthians 7:3–4 ESV)

Paul's general advice is for men and women to give themselves generously to each other and to serve each other with their bodies as husbands and wives. Paul speaks positively about the gift of marriage and he speaks very negatively about anyone who would teach otherwise. He says in 1 Timothy 4:

1 Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, 2 through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, 3 **who forbid marriage** and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. (1 Timothy 4:1–3 ESV)

Paul says that if anyone says that marriage is bad he is filled with a demon. Alright? So, clearly

Paul is pro-marriage. He says that marriage is a gift from God to us for our good. Thanks be to God!

But.

Both Paul and Jesus go on from there to speak about another gift that is also from God that is also for our good. The Bible says that:

2. Celibacy Is A Commendable Exception To The General Rule Of Marriage

Now, I've phrased that very carefully because the Bible does not tell us that celibacy is "acceptable" or "tolerable" it tells us that it is good. Look at what Paul says:

I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. (1 Corinthians 7:7 ESV)

Marriage is a gift! AND celibacy is a gift – and Paul says, I quite like my gift! I heartily commend it to your consideration.

That's hard for us to get our heads around. We like to think in binary. It would be simpler for us if the Bible said that marriage is good and singleness is bad or singleness is good and marriage is bad – but the Bible says that BOTH are good – both are gifts from God.

Jesus said the same thing. After affirming the standard, Biblical view of the goodness and permanence of marriage, he goes on to say:

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." (Matthew 19:12 ESV)

Now, he's using the word "eunuch" there in a metaphorical sense as in "the unmarried person" and he is saying that there are people who have chosen to be unmarried for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Good. And then he says, "Let the one who is ABLE to receive this, receive it."

Don't despise this gift from God. If God gives you the gift of celibacy, receive it as a gift from his hand.

Marriage is a gift and celibacy is a gift. Now marriage may be given more frequently but when it is given celibacy should also be received gladly as a gift from the hand of the Lord.

That is the perspective and attitude that is commended in Holy Scripture and that leads us to our second question.

Why Might God Give A Person The Gift Of Celibacy?

I think there are a couple of answers to that. The first one is this:

1. To Serve The Church In A Particular And Focused Way

That is the answer that Jesus points to in Matthew 19. He says:

there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs **for the sake of the kingdom of heaven**. (Matthew 19:12 ESV)

There is absolutely no doubt that you can do more for the cause of Christ as a single person than any married person ever could. There is no doubt of that. The Apostle Paul spoke about that. He said:

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. (1 Corinthians 7:32–34 ESV)

It's simple math, Paul says. If you are a married man you need to spend several hours a day looking after your wife. That's not optional. Paul commands husbands:

love your wives, as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25 ESV)

That doesn't sound like something you can delegate safely to your secretary. That is going to take some decent time and some considerable effort. And that comes off the total of time and effort

that you can give to the wider cause of Christ. That's not a problem – that's just math. The unmarried man can give MORE of his time and attention to the progress of the Gospel and likewise the unmarried woman.

And let's state the obvious: the church has been greatly blessed and helped over the centuries by gifted single and celibate men and women. The mission field has been dominated over the centuries by celibate men and women - thanks be to God!

Paul mentions another reason why God might give a person the gift of celibacy.

2. To Survive An Immediate Or Imminent Crisis

In 1 Corinthians 7:25-31 he has a section of counsel for engaged or betrothed people and in that section he advises a temporary freeze on all marital decisions. He says:

I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. (1 Corinthians 7:26 ESV)

He tells people: "Don't get engaged right now and don't break your engagement. Let's just pause and see how this turns out." And then at the end of the section he says:

For the present form of this world is passing away. (1 Corinthians 7:31 ESV)

The Kingdom of God was breaking into the world and Paul expected a season of tremendous upheaval as a result – and he was not wrong. Judaism in Paul's day was in a battle for its soul. Would it embrace the Messiah or not, that was the big question. The Jewish community was in complete turmoil over this question so much so that they were expelled en masse from Rome around the year AD 50. Further upheavals finally led to the wholesale destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 – an event frequently referred to as the most brutal incident in Roman history.

By the way, in the Old Testament just before Jerusalem was besieged and destroyed by the Babylonians God told the prophet Jeremiah that he shouldn't marry either. He said:

"You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place. 3 For thus says the Lord concerning the sons and daughters who are born in this place, and concerning the mothers who bore them and the fathers who

fathered them in this land: 4 They shall die of deadly diseases. They shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried. They shall be as dung on the surface of the ground. They shall perish by the sword and by famine, and their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth. (Jeremiah 16:2–4 ESV)

There are times when it is best not to be a husband and father. And Paul says, in view of the massive upheavals going on right now in the world, it might be wiser and kinder to hold off if you can until we see how this shakes out.

Sometimes God gives the gift of celibacy to allow his people to weather a storm.

Thirdly and lastly, God also may give the gift of celibacy to a person to show the world what a human being truly is and is not.

3. To Show The World What A Human Being Is And Is Not

We live in a world in which people define themselves primarily in terms of their work and their relationships. You know this if you've ever been to a party. When you meet someone what is the first question they ask you? What do you do for a living? What is the second question they ask you? Are you married or do you have any kids. People in this culture determine identity and value on the basis of work and relationships. And that is one of the reasons that it is so hard to be a single person in this culture.

All of us contribute to this value system without even knowing it. When a woman dies in a car accident we say, "Oh my goodness! She had two kids!" What are we saying? We are saying that her death is MORE tragic because she was a wife and mother – but how does the single person hear that? They hear that as saying that the death of a single person would therefore be less of a tragedy. If you don't have relationships then your life is less valuable – even the insurance companies and the courts feed into that narrative.

But what does the Bible say? How does the Bible attribute value to a human life? We see it clearly in Genesis 9:6:

"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. (Genesis 9:6 ESV)

The Bible says we assign the maximum penalty for murder because the life of every human being has maximum value simply because it has been created in the image and likeness of God. You have MAXIMAL VALUE before you enter into any human relationship or do any useful work. You have value because you were made in the image and likeness of God.

Here is what the Bible says – human life is ultimately about 1 relationship over and against every other. You were made by God and for God and that relationship is what makes you special. Now, the Bible says that this special and defining relationship has been damaged by sin but it can be restored and renewed through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul says in Colossians:

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 22 he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him (Colossians 1:21–22 ESV)

Jesus came and lived and died and rose again in order to reconcile us to God! He came to restore that which had been damaged and defaced by sin. He came to heal the breach and to bring us back to God. That's where salvation ends – it ends with you back where you were created and intended to be – BEFORE GOD! You were there, you fell, Jesus came for you, rescued you, restored you and replaced you BEFORE THE FACE OF GOD. And if you are in Christ then you will live there with him forever – that's the Gospel!

That's the story of your value to the God who loved you from before the foundation of the earth. He loved you enough to come for you and die for you and return you to his presence. He did that for YOU. You SINGULAR. You irrespective of your wife, kids or parents. In fact his doing that may separate you from your wife, kids and parents. Jesus said that:

34 "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.... Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. (Matthew 10:34–37 ESV)

Jesus said, this is a rescue mission! I have come to lift you up and if you hold on to lesser relationships then you aren't worthy of what I am doing for you. Your ultimate reality – your ultimate relationship is with God through Christ. And when you have that, then you need nothing else.

Now that doesn't mean that God won't give you anything else – he may or he may not. He may give you a husband and children – or he may not. Both are gifts given at his discretion. But in NOT giving you those secondary goods he highlights in your life the PRIMARY BLESSING of reconciliation to him through Jesus Christ.

Here is the point – brothers and sisters. When other people see your single, celibate, JOYFILLED LIFE they will realize that you have been received the pearl of great price. You have it all and they will want what you have found.

Joyful singleness; satisfied celibacy might just be the way that God chooses to rebuke and convict and ultimately call and convert our sin sick and sex obsessed modern culture. May God make it so.

Now, lastly and finally I want to end by asking a very important question:

How Can The Church Serve And Support Single And Celibate People?

Let me very quickly suggest 4 ways we can do that:

1. By being a family (not just a collection of families)

When one of the disciples told Jesus that he had left everything to follow him Jesus said:

“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, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. (Mark 10:29–30 ESV)

Jesus doesn't just promise eternal blessings – although he does promise eternal blessings – he promises this brother PRESENT BLESSINGS and chief among those blessings is a 100 homes open to him, 100 brothers and sisters befriending him and 100 mothers mothering him. Where else can you find that but in the church?

Brothers and sisters, we need to do more than bring our families to church, we need to make our families the church. Older women, is there a young person you could spread your wing over? Is there a single person you could wrap into your Thanksgiving Dinner next weekend? They will need this. It is not good for a man or a woman to be alone.

2. By maintaining a standard

We've been using the word "celibacy" a lot because it's a good Christian word with a long history. It means pure and chaste singleness. It means being unmarried and being pure in your sexual behaviour. Our call here has not been for the church to accept unmarried persons who are engaged in casual sexual encounters. No. That is called fornication and it is forbidden. Singleness in the Christian context means ABSTENANCE. It means not having sex. The only blessed sex in the Bible is the sex between a man and his wife. Everything else is immoral and destructive. Sex with other singles is called fornication. Sex with prostitutes is called fornication. Sex with a married person not your wife is called adultery. All of those things are outside the boundaries of blessed sexuality. That is our standard and we do celibate people no favours by obscuring that standard or lowering that standard as if they were incapable of chaste single living.

Gina Dalfonzo, a single Christian lady who writes about the single lifestyle says this in her book "One by One":

"When the whole world seems to be obsessed with sex – and believe me, when you're not having sex, that is something you're very much aware of – the church of God gives us something the world can't. Those teachings and expectations remind us that we don't have to be obsessed with sex ... and in a paradoxical way, they set us free. They help us stay off the crazy, broken merry-go-round of hook-ups and one-night stands and relationships with no real depth or foundation. ... Additionally, it offers us a place where that approach is seen as good and right, not freakish and weird. That just might be the most valuable aspect of all."¹

It is not a kindness to lower the bar and to obscure what we believe about human sexuality.

Kindness is telling the truth of God and offering the love of God to people living as singles in a sex obsessed world.

Thirdly, we can support single and celibate people by:

¹ Gina Dalfonzo, *One By One* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 183-184.

3. By elevating friendship

Marriage is not the only form of intimate friendship that is celebrated in the Bible. When David heard that his best friend Jonathan had fallen in battle he said:

your love to me was extraordinary, surpassing the love of women. (2 Samuel 1:26 ESV)

Now, I'm not sure if a married man should be saying that – certainly not in the hearing of his wife – but the point is that the Bible celebrates the reality and the depth of non-sexual same gendered friendship. We used to speak a lot more about that and I think it would be helpful for single people if we started doing that again.

Fourthly, and lastly, we can support single and celibate people by:

4. By being faithful and consistent in our community

Gina Dalfonzo states in her book that one of the reasons that single Christians often get unwittingly sucked into immoral sexual relationships is that they are secretly terrified of aging and dying alone. Its fear that draws them into relationships they shouldn't be in. She says that watching her dad care for his widowed friend – driving him to his medical appointments and supporting him through illness – encouraged her to be faithful in the life that God had assigned to her and she encourages churches to do the same.

Let the single and celibate people in our midst see our care for the elderly and the widow and let them rest in the life and calling that God has assigned.

We read about this a couple of weeks ago; the wise man in Proverbs tells his son:

Do not forsake your friend and your father's friend (Proverbs 27:10 ESV)

We can support singles and celibates by building and nurturing a multi-generational community of supportive and faithful friends.

Brothers and sisters, let's do this! Jesus said:

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:35 NIV11)

The quality, the diversity, the breadth and the depth of our community is part and parcel of our witness to the world. So let's do this. Let's build and nurture a winsome and welcoming community that wraps in the widow and the orphan, the single and the celibate for the glory of God and for the good of ALL people because this is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God, let's pray together.