

*The Gift of Singleness: 1 Corinthians 7*  
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church  
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The sermon this morning will be from 1 Corinthians 7 (page 955 in pew Bibles), and the title of this morning's message is *The Gift of Singleness*. And let me just remind you where we're at in the preaching series at this point. The larger context is that we're in the middle of studying through the Gospel of Mark. We spent most of 2010 going through Mark 1-9. But as we approached the passage about marriage in Mark 10, I realized that one sermon on that passage would not be sufficient. We first needed to look at several other passages in the Bible that talk about marriage and talk about divorce and remarriage. So I preached from the very beginning of the Bible where we saw the genesis of marriage in creation and the degeneration of marriage in the Fall. We spent a week in Hosea seeing God's marriage to His people, and then we went to Ephesians 5 to see Christ's marriage to the Church. Finally, we spent two weeks in 1 Peter 3 where Peter describes beautiful wives and the husbands who honor them.

Now we're at the beginning of a new year, and we'll be back to the Gospel of Mark soon, believe it or not. But there are a couple other things we need to consider about marriage first. 1 Corinthians 7 has a lot to say about marriage and about singleness and about divorce and remarriage. Therefore we need to give this chapter some careful attention. So this morning we'll focus on what this chapter says about the gift of singleness, and then next week we'll focus on what this chapter says about marriage and divorce. Then we'll get back to the Gospels and study what Jesus said about marriage, and we'll look not only in Mark, but also in Matthew.

*The Gift of Singleness* – how does this topic fit into a sermon series on marriage? Well, if we've been getting the point of what the Bible says about marriage, then we should be able to recognize that this topic actually fits very well in a discussion on marriage. Indeed, it's an integral piece of how we need to understand marriage.

What is it that we've been learning about marriage? What is marriage ultimately about? Christ and the church. It's so much bigger than any of us. Marriage is a glorious thing that God created with the specific purpose of displaying His covenantal relationship with His people. That's why it's important for all of us, married and single, to understand what the Bible says about marriage. And for the same reasons it's also important for all of us, married and single, to understand what the Bible says about singleness. *There are certain ways in which the ultimate meaning*

*of marriage can be better portrayed in the lives of believers who are single.* That may sound like a contradiction. But it's true, and we'll be able to grasp that if we really understand what marriage is about. As we get into this passage I'll highlight a couple ways in which singleness can uniquely display the ultimate meaning of marriage.

My hope for this message is that it will be wonderfully freeing and encouraging and inspiring to single men and women. And I also pray that it will help all of us have an appropriate view of marriage and the reality to which marriage points.

It's an amazing thing to me to think about the fact that the Apostle Paul wrote such glorious things about marriage in Ephesians 5, and he also wrote here in 1 Corinthians 7 with such passion encouraging people to remain single. He elevates marriage and shows how marriage glorifies Christ, and he elevates singleness and shows how singleness glorifies Christ. Both are meaningful and important, and both are used by God in profound ways.

Let's look, then, at some of the things we learn from this passage about singleness and about God's purposes for singleness. I want to make four observations, and then we'll close with asking the question, To marry or not to marry?

### **The Apostle Paul was Single and Celibate (verse 7-8)**

The first observation is in verses 7-8, and it's simply to recognize that the Apostle Paul was a single man. He was single and celibate. After addressing the question of celibacy in the first 6 verses, Paul says, "I wish that all were as I myself am." Then in verse 8 he says to the unmarried and widows, "it is good for them to remain single as I am." Those are amazing statements. The same man who wrote in Ephesians 5 about how marriage displays the relationship of Christ and the church, says here that he wishes everyone was single and celibate, as he was.

The great Apostle Paul, who had such a tremendous impact on the early church and whose letters were inspired by the Holy Spirit and continue to have such an impact on the church 2,000 years later, was a single man. We at least know that he was single throughout his apostolic ministry. It's possible that he was a widower, but we don't know that for sure.

Single men and women should be greatly encouraged by the fact that the Apostle Paul and John the Baptist and many other passionate followers of Christ throughout the ages have been single. You do not need to be married in order to live a fulfilled and meaningful life that honors Christ. I think of people today like John Stott and Nancy Leigh DeMoss, as well as single individuals

in this church, who are greatly honoring Christ with their singleness and are having an eternal impact on many lives.

Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, lived his entire life on this earth as a single and celibate man. Do you realize the implications of that? Jesus Christ is our perfect example of what human existence is intended to be. He is the perfect man, completely whole, not lacking anything. And He never married and never had sex. Do you know what that means? It means that marriage and sex are not necessary to live a fulfilled life. You may never get married. And if you never get married, that means you should never have sex. And some people in that situation may be tempted to think that they're missing out on something that is essential to humanity. That's simply not the case.

If you are single and you find yourself being tempted in these ways, think of Jesus. When you're tempted to think that real joy and fulfillment is only possible in marriage, think of Jesus. He is the most joyful human there has ever been. Think also of Paul and John the Baptist and others through the ages who have lived out their single lives in devotion to Christ. What an awesome calling and gift. That's not to say that it's easy. But it's good. It's a good gift—just as good as marriage, and even better in many cases.

The other thing to think about in relation to Paul's singleness is the fact that he was the spiritual father to many. When Paul wrote to Timothy he called him "my true child in the faith." He addressed Titus in the same way and spoke also of Onesimus as his child. This is one of the ways that singleness can uniquely highlight a great truth about the ultimate meaning of marriage. Christ came to save His bride, the church, and individuals become part of the church, not by physical birth, but by spiritual birth. Therefore when single people become spiritual mothers and fathers it's a great testimony to this reality. The bride of Christ is a spiritual family.

Let this be an encouragement to you if you're single. You can have, and many of you do have, spiritual children. Those who have come to Christ as you have witnessed to them. Those whom you are teaching in a Sunday School class. Those whom you are mentoring. Don't waste your singleness in selfish ways. Pour out your life in the family of God and be a spiritual father or mother to many.

### **Singleness is a gift (verse 7)**

The second observation we can make here about singleness is that singleness is a gift. In verse 7 Paul writes, "I wish that all were as I myself am." But then he qualifies that, because he's not laying down a law here that everyone should be single. He is

certainly content in his singleness and desires for others to experience the same contentedness and devotion to Christ. But he also recognizes that God calls some to marry, and He calls others to remain single. And each of those callings is a gift. That's what he says in the rest of the verse. "But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another." Do you see how wonderful this is? Everyone has a gift. Some are single, some are married. And each of those is a gift from God.

Carolyn McCulley, in her book, *Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye?* writes, "If we're single, we have the gracious gift of singleness. How we may feel about it—Do I like being single? Do I desire marriage?—is not part of the equation. The emphasis here is on a gracious God who gives good gifts and ultimately on His purpose for giving them." This should really revolutionize the way we all think about singleness and marriage. Both are gifts. There may be some of you here who are single and wish that you were married. There may be others of you here who are married and wish that you were single. The grass can often look greener on the other side. But we must all realize that whatever God has called us to at this time is His good gift to us.

Nobody should think that life begins when you get married. Nobody should think that life ends when you get married, either. I remember some time ago we were at the zoo and I saw a guy wearing a T-shirt, and the T-shirt, in stick figure art, pictured a man and a woman in a wedding ceremony. And underneath it said, "Sentenced for life." What an awful view of marriage. Life doesn't end when you get married, and neither does life begin when you get married. We should view both marriage and singleness as gifts.

The single person shouldn't think that life is just in a holding pattern until you get married. You shouldn't be holding your breath waiting around for Mr. Right or Miss Right to come along. Live your life, pursue holiness, strive to become more like Christ. And pray for God's will to be done. Pray for a spouse, if that's what you desire. And trust in God's sovereign plan. After all, God is the One who bestows these gifts, and He distributes them as He pleases.

Elisabeth Elliot, in her book *Quest for Love*, has a chapter entitled "Marriage: A Right or a Gift." She wrote, "If you are single today, the portion assigned to you for today is singleness. It is God's gift. Singleness ought not to be viewed as a problem, nor marriage as a right. God in His wisdom and love grants either as a gift. . . . Today's business is trust in the living God who precisely measures out, day by day, each one's portion."

Both marriage and singleness are gifts, and God decides who receives what gift (and for how long). Our task is to receive

God's gift with thankfulness and joy, and use the gifts He gives us for building up the body of Christ. If you're single and desire to be married, this may be a difficult attitude to foster in your life. Let me read you a prayer written by Ann Anderson that expresses both the desire for marriage and also a trust in God's sovereignty over her life. She wrote: "Jesus, if this is Your will, then YES to being single. In my deepest heart, I want to marry, to belong to a great man; to know that I am linked to his life, and he to mine, following Christ and our dreams together . . . But you know what I need. If I never marry, it is YES to You."

### **The Freedom of Singleness (verses 28, 32-35)**

A third thing that Paul emphasizes in this chapter is the freedom of singleness. Singleness can avoid certain worldly troubles and thus afford one added opportunities and unique opportunities for ministry. In verse 28 Paul says that it's not a sin to marry. It's perfectly permissible to marry. But then he says, "Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that."

Then look at what he writes in verses 32-35. "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 [he doesn't mean evil things, just every-day anxieties associated with being married and having children], 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."

Paul was radically committed to the ministry of the Gospel, and he viewed his singleness, not as a burden or a limitation, but rather as an open door to invest all of his time and energy in ministry. He saw singleness as an opportunity for unhindered and undistracted focus on serving the Lord.

A single missionary named Trevor Douglas wrote about the freedom that singleness brings. He said, "The first advantage [of being single] is that it's best adapted to perilous situations. . . . In rugged life among primitive tribes, in guerrilla-infested areas, or in disease and famine, the single man has only himself to worry about. . . . The single lifestyle enables one to get the most out of the time God gives for his work. . . . One of my chief delights is that I don't have to fit my ministry around a family schedule. I don't have to be home at a certain time each night. My time is the Filipinos' times."

He quotes David Brainerd, a single missionary who lived in the early 1700s and died at the age of 29 from tuberculosis. He lived the last weeks of his life being cared for in the home of Jonathan Edwards, and it was Edwards who edited and published Brainerd's journal and diary that have been an inspiration to so many missionaries since then. Brainerd wrote, "I cared not where or how I lived, or what hardships I went through, so that I could but gain souls for Christ. While I was asleep I dreamed of these things, and when I awoke the first thing I thought of was this great work. All my desire was for the conversion of the heathen, and all my hope was in God."

That's the kind of radical missionary zeal that Paul was thinking of. Not that married men and women can't be radically committed to missions and ministry, but the realities of family life necessarily put limitations on what can be done and how much can be done. And again, we should remember that, married or single, each is a gift. And the point here is that the gift of singleness brings with it a unique freedom that can be used in tremendous ways for building up the church and serving others and witnessing to the lost and taking the Gospel to the nations.

Now, these quotes that I just read do need to be tempered with the acknowledgement that single men and women do have practical necessities of life. It may be different than a married person with children, but there is still work to be done, a house or apartment to keep up, bills to pay, meals to prepare, etc. So singleness does not necessarily present a person with complete flexibility for ministry. And I especially think of single parents who may look at these verses and say, "My singleness doesn't feel like freedom. It feels like a double burden, because I'm trying to be Mom and Dad at the same time, and I feel like I'm all alone." My heart goes out to those of you who are in that situation. My hope is that you will find comfort in being part of this family of believers and that you'll trust that God's grace will be sufficient for you. For every single parent, for every single person, for every married person in this church, we have the great privilege of being brothers and sisters in Christ. We are a family. God has given us different gifts, complementary gifts, so that we can band together and support one another and use our unique gifts for the glory of Christ.

Paul doesn't address every conceivable situation in these verses. But the principle holds. For many single men and women, their singleness will afford them a unique measure of freedom that can be used for serving the Lord.

### **The Time is Short (verses 29-31)**

A fourth and final point that I want to highlight from these verses is in verses 29-31. “This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.” These are verses that could be very dangerous if taken out of context. But look at the point Paul is making, which he states at the beginning of verse 29 and again at the end of verse 31. “The appointed time has grown very short.” Then in verse 31, “the present form of this world is passing away.” Do you see the point? The things of this world, including marriage, are not going to last forever. Therefore, understand that and live appropriately in light of that. Don’t idolize the things of this life. The things in this life that cause you to mourn or cause you to rejoice, realize that those are temporal things. And when you buy something, or get something really great for Christmas, don’t make too much of that. Don’t idolize it. Don’t put your hope in the things of this world. Why? Because this world is passing away.

Most shocking of all in this list is the statement about marriage. “Let those who have wives live as though they had none.” What is Paul saying? Should husbands leave their wives? Of course not! That would contradict everything else he is saying in this chapter. He’s simply saying that you shouldn’t idolize marriage, just like you shouldn’t idolize anything else in this life, because these things are all passing away—including marriage.

Have you ever thought about that? Marriage is life-long. But it’s not eternal. A man and a woman are married, and they are to be married how long?—“till death do us part.” At death the marriage ends. A man and woman are not married forever. And that helps us to view human marriage in its appropriate place. There is one marriage that will last forever, and that is the marriage between Christ and the church. And all other marriages are mere pointers to that one, eternal marriage.

Why is this important for single people to understand? Why does Paul say these things in the context of commending the single life? *Because your life may serve to highlight that great marriage between Christ and the church better as a single person than as a married person.* The time is short. The things of this world are passing away, including human marriage. Human marriage as a pointer is going to fade into the eternal reality of Christ’s marriage to the church. Therefore it would be foolish to idolize marriage and think that you must be married. Don’t look at

the present world. Look to the future. Don't give inordinate attention to human marriage, but rather focus on the ultimate meaning of marriage.

Do you remember what Jesus said about marriage in heaven? The Sadducees were trying to trip Him up and back Him into a corner. They thought they had an airtight argument against the resurrection. In Luke 20:28 they said to Jesus, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. [That's the Old Testament practice of levirate marriage]. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. And the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. Afterward the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife." And Jesus said to them, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection." (Luke 20:28-36)

Do you see what Jesus is saying about marriage in heaven? There isn't human marriage in heaven. A person may be married in this life. And as in the hypothetical illustration from this passage, it's possible that a person might even be married multiple times in this life. Does that mean, then, that the person will have multiple spouses in heaven? No. Because nobody will be married in heaven.

My hope for all of us is that we will see marriage for what it is, and for what it is intended to point us toward. Human marriage in this life is not something to idolize. Married people should not idolize marriage, and single people should not idolize marriage. It's a temporal reality of God's creation that is designed to point us to something eternal. So let's all look primarily to that eternal reality and not idolize the temporal pointer.

### **To Marry or Not to Marry?**

I want to close by asking the very practical question that seems to be one of the key things the Corinthians were wondering about. To marry or not to marry? That is the question. And if you're a single person that question may feel very pressing and weighty. And as we consider this passage you may be wondering what God is calling you to do. Could it be that God is calling you to a life, or at least a season of life, that would be similar to Paul's life—a life of singleness and celibacy, devoted to serving the Lord?



There are many things that could be said here, but let me just give you one exhortation concerning sexual purity and then two questions for you to consider about marriage and singleness, and finally the context in which you should consider those questions.

First, an exhortation concerning sexual purity. Whether you will marry someday or not, God commands you to be sexually pure, and He commands this for your own good and for your joy. If you live in sexual immorality (if you're sleeping with your boyfriend or girlfriend, or if you're addicted to pornography), you will be a miserable person. Not only that, you will be eternally miserable, because the Bible says that those who live a life of sexual immorality and don't repent of it will go to hell (see, for example, Galatians 5:19). This is that serious. Just a few verses before the passage we read this morning, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:18, "Flee from sexual immorality (porneia, fornication)." Don't flirt with sexual immorality. Don't ask, how far is too far and try to justify behaviors that you know are wrong. Repent of your sexual sins that satisfy for but a moment and leave you empty and ashamed, and put your trust in Jesus who is infinitely more satisfying, and who will make you whole and holy.

I want to say to single men that God gave you a sexual drive for a reason. You may feel like it's a curse at times, when you can't control it. But, listen, if God has given you a strong sexual drive and you are not at peace with singleness and celibacy, then you're probably supposed to get married. As Paul says in verse 9, "But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion." Now, if you feel like you're burning with passion, and you desire sexual intimacy with a woman, here's what you should do with that. You should let that passion become a major motivation in your life to become a godly man whom a godly woman would want to marry. So you study the Word, you pray, you ask godly men to mentor you, you get the training you need to get a good job so you can provide for a family. And then you look for a woman who has the imperishable beauty that 1 Peter 3 talks about, and you honor her and you love her and you ask her to marry you. And then you make a covenant with her before God (you get married), and then you enjoy God's blessing of sexual intimacy in marriage. Don't gratify your sexual desires in cheap and immoral ways. Rather, let your sexual desires be a motivation to become a godly husband who will truly appreciate what God gave you those desires for, namely, to become one flesh in Christian marriage.

I want to give a word of warning to single women as well. The thing I see so often, and hear about so often, are women who want so desperately to be married that they will compromise their

standards. Let me give you two scenarios. A godly woman is pursued by an ungodly or immature man. But she feels like this may be her only chance at marriage, or her last at marriage. “What if no other man takes an interest in me,” she thinks. And so in spite of major character flaws and spiritual immaturity, she marries him. And later she regrets it.

Another scenario is a woman who desperately wants to get married to her long-term non-committal boyfriend. He likes her and enjoys being with her, but he’s not ready to settle down. And besides, he still has one eye scanning the crowd for better prospects. Now, here’s the lie that so many women in that situation believe, and I hope I can show you the foolishness of it so that you’ll never fall into it. A woman in that situation may think, If I sleep with him, he’ll love me and want to marry me. If I move in with him, he’ll love me and want to marry me. Let me tell you why that reasoning is not only sinful but stupid. Because the depraved, immature man in that relationship is going to be all the more resistant to marriage if he’s already getting sex without the commitment. For many unregenerate men, that would seem to be the best of all possible worlds. He gets what he wants, and he doesn’t have to make a commitment. He doesn’t have to be responsible. And he can leave at any time. So women, please don’t fall into that trap. I say this because I care about you as my sisters in Christ. A guy may say he loves you, and you may want desperately to believe him. But if he’s pressuring you to have sex, and he doesn’t want to enter into the covenant of marriage, then he doesn’t really love you. He doesn’t know what love is.

Be pure and patient. And in God’s timing, if it’s His will, then He will bring a godly man into your life. And even if God doesn’t do that, you must believe that living a single life devoted to Christ is far better for you than compromising biblical standards and getting involved with an ungodly man.

That’s the exhortation concerning sexual purity. Here are the two questions you should consider in seeking to answer the question, To marry or not to marry? The first question is, Do you desire to be married or are you content to be single? And the second question is, Why? If you desire to be married, why is that you desire to be married? Is your desire for marriage conforming to the biblical view of marriage? Are you offering that desire to the Lord and praying for His will regarding marriage? Are you praying that God will multiply the impact of your life through uniting with a godly spouse and serving the Lord together and raising a family together? Or is your desire for marriage superficial and selfish? You feel lonely, and you want someone to take away that loneliness. You feel incomplete, and you want someone to complete you. You have sexual desires, and you want

someone to gratify those desires. If your desire for marriage is mainly characterized by those superficial and selfish things, then you need to do some serious maturing in the Lord before marriage would be a wise step.

On the other hand, if you feel content to be single, why is that? Is it because you are like Paul and you have an all-consuming passion for the Gospel and the lost, and you would see marriage and family as a hindrance to pouring your life out in service to the Lord? And when I say content to be single, that's not to imply that you never feel lonely or never have any sexual desires. But in God's goodness to you and His calling for you in this season of life you have a peace about being single. Some of you are in that place, and I rejoice in that. God gives different gifts, and He has given to some the gift of marriage and has given to others the gift of singleness.

For many single people, though, your contentment in singleness may be superficial and selfish. You like being single because everything can revolve around you and you can spend all your money on you. You don't have to accommodate your schedule to anyone else's. You don't have to make your future plans in conjunction with someone else. This is where I have a burden to say especially to young single men, Grow up! Way too many young men, even young men in the church, are frittering away their years with leisure activities, video games, and sexual immorality. Don't waste your life like that. Grow up in the Lord and honor Him either by pursuing a godly marriage or by pursuing a godly life of singleness.

Now, finally, the context in which you should consider these questions is the church. The church is where you should wrestle through these things. The church is where single men should be talking with other single men and with married men and saying, "I really desire to be married," or "I'm content to be single," and then talking about the motivations behind those statements. And a brother in Christ should be able to say, You know, I'm glad you want to get married, and here are some areas where I think it's really important for you to grow in. Or, I rejoice that God has given you a peace about your singleness, but I've noticed these self-centered tendencies that you should really try to fight against. And single women should be having those same kinds of conversations with other women in the church.

Do you desire to be married, or are you content to be single? And, why? Talk about those questions in the context of the church, and thus seek the Lord's will for your future. And most of all, focus your attention on that great truth that marriage points to, that Jesus Christ laid down His life for His bride, and He is coming back for her. And when He comes back there will be a

wedding feast that will be better than any wedding feast we could imagine, and it will last forever.

"Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God.'" (Revelation 19:6-9, ESV)