

XIX. God's Blueprint in Biblical Perspective
Foundations From Genesis
"Biblical Masculinity and Femininity and Singleness – Part 4"
I Corinthians 7
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As we bring our study on the theology of singleness for the Christian man and for the Christian woman to a focus and a conclusion, we will be looking at about three passages of Scripture. Two of them will be I Corinthians 7 and I Corinthians 9. There are times in your life where God providentially brings people into your life that really kind of cement what you think you know from Scripture, what do know from Scripture, what you need to know from Scripture and that happened to me about 30 plus years ago. Here is the event.

I had preached on this matter of singleness about 15 years earlier, right at the beginning of my ministry because in the providence of God I was pastoring a congregation that was drawing from about five nearby universities and colleges. Much of what I studied for that sermon has stayed with me to this point. There were other times that I had the opportunity to do conferences for singles in which I used this research for as well. So, I have been trafficking in the Biblical theology of singleness on a couple of occasions.

I was invited to preach in Westchester New York and knew very little about New York but my roommate my sophomore year in college was from Westchester. I spoke at the First Presbyterian Church there and the pastor said there was this wonderful lady that wanted to take us out and he was excited for me to meet her. We had lunch with her at this Grand hotel that day and she was probably about 25 years older than me at the time. I remember she was an attractive, witty, a woman of means and a great conversationalist. Then I did something that was utterly stupid which I have been known to do from time to time. I said 'I would love for you to come to Charlotte and meet my wife and two daughters but I was wondering if you had family?' She said 'No, I'm not married, nor have I ever been married' and this is when I said something stupid. I said 'Ma'am, I'm astonished you're not married, did you feel called to be single?' She said 'Oh no sonny, not at all. I have wanted to be married my whole life. I haven't been called to be single in terms of a gift or calling, it's just what God has given to me.' I said 'Did you have opportunities to be married?' She said 'I had a lot of opportunities to be married but they were either not believers or they were believers but they were not where I knew they needed to be if we were to be married. My mother before she went to be with the Lord told me something I have never forgotten. She said it is a lot better to be single and want to be married than to be married and want to be single. So, I am going to wait for that one the Lord has granted to me and until then He will be enough.'

That was an astonishing moment for me and in everything I have studied and tried to say in an appropriate way and always feel inadequate, this lady just kind of wrapped it right up and handed it right to me. I want to take what she said which was so attractively Biblical and try to give you this theological framework for it. As you work your way through passages remember the four great themes of the Bible – creation, the fall, redemption and consummation. When we go to marriage next in this series we will do the same thing we have done with singleness by asking what the Bible says about it in terms and impact from creation, the fall, redemption (the Gospel) and the consummation (the anticipation of eternity).

This is our fourth study on this theology of singleness. I summed singleness up in creation in three statements. The first one being, in the creation account perpetual (continued, not eternal) or extended singleness is absent. Secondly, there is temporary or preparatory singleness in the creation account. Adam and Eve were both single for a period of time before God put them in the marital state. Thirdly, therefore it would be reasonable to assume that without the fall, the Divine judgment and without the presence of sin, the state of extended singleness would not have been present at all and would have continued to be absent.

The fall because of sin brought a lot of reasons why there is extended singleness. Number one, is the uneven birth rate and mortality rate of men to women. Sin creates singleness because of the idolatry of marriage or sinful acts in life that makes one not able to pursue marriage or be pursued. When there is the fall into sin and the curse of sin with the consequences of sin there is this extended singleness. While it would be careless to declare axiomatically that without the fall and the consequences of sin perpetual or extended singleness would be absent, it can be said that the fall has clearly produced functional causes which I have just enumerated some and it has exacerbated its existence.

Redemption and the Gospel can deal with this for God is sovereign. God never says that all things are good and I personally do not believe that extended singleness would be labeled a good thing, any more than someone born with a birth defect because of sin's curse in society or because of poverty and violence because of sin's curse in society. God is sovereign over all of these things. God can take these things and by His powerful hand cause them to have a good consequence in the lives of His people if those things in a broken world come within the orbit of the stewardship of our life.

One of the great preachers I've enjoyed studying in life is Donald Grey Barnhouse who was the predecessor of one of my mentors, Dr. James Boice. One of the things I learned that Jim shared about Donald Grey Barnhouse and another great preacher from his era, Harry A. Ironside, is that every few months they would go together to do a short conference somewhere as both were great expository preachers. Both would preach that Saturday as one would stay to preach on Sunday as well. Typically, preachers don't come up with different sermons when they do these conferences because they would have a different audience who hadn't heard all their sermons. Imagine how Dr. Ironside would listen to Dr. Barnhouse's sermon time and time again and vice versa. Dr. Ironside was a man of some wit about him so he said to Barnhouse, 'Donald, why don't I go first this Saturday.' So, Dr. Ironside when first and preached Dr. Barnhouse's sermon before he could stand up there. When Ironside sat down he said to him 'I hope that doesn't discomfort you but I actually think I preached it better than you did and I've been wanting to do it ever since we started.' Dr. Barnhouse said to him, 'Harry, I do think you preached it better than me and I think these people think you preached it better than me because I preached it last month when I was here' so Barnhouse got the last laugh.

In the midst of one of those events, there was a young youth pastor there in one of the churches that they were ministering to. The youth pastor was particularly drawn close to Dr. Barnhouse. The youth pastor and his wife were expecting a child and they would poke fun a little bit with him about becoming a father. On the night they were there to preach the youth pastor came into the service late as he sat on the back row and was clearly distraught, weeping the entire time. Dr. Barnhouse went to speak with him after the service and the youth pastor said, 'My wife gave birth to our child this afternoon and the child was born with down syndrome. I just don't know what we are going to do.' The youth pastor continued to weep and Dr. Barnhouse put his arm around him and said 'Oh my son, I want you to know this church will

be with you and I'll be praying for you but I would ask you to consider something. Our God must be doing a great work in your life and your wife's life that He would entrust to you the stewardship of one whom He has designed especially for your family.'

Then Dr. Barnhouse directed the youth pastor to the Pentateuch when Moses was called to speak to Pharaoh and he said to the Lord in Exodus 4:10-12; [10] *Moses said to the LORD, "Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue."*

[11] *The LORD said to him, "Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the LORD?" [12] Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say."*

Barnhouse told him, 'Our God has specially designed this child for purposes that you and I have no concept yet and He has designed you and your wife to steward this that the world calls imperfect but God is going to work together for His good and His glory. The youth pastor immediately went home to call his wife at the hospital and said to her 'honey, I'm about to head your way but we just had prayer and what a glorious privilege our God has entrusted to us, this child for His glory and we are going to anticipate His glorious work that He has given us the privilege to engage.'

The youth pastor now saw it has a stewardship but what he didn't know was the woman who was the operator of the switchboard that transferred his call to his wife's hospital room was listening and this woman had just spoken that Christianity was nothing more than a crutch. When she heard the theology of the providence of God and the stewardship of a life that was not perfect by the world's standards in terms of the fall and sin but one that would be embraced redemptively for the glory of God and by the grace of God, she gave her life to Christ.

There are things in life the fall has brought but God is sovereign and He is at work through redemption and that's where we left off in the last study as we walked through some of those. Let's start by looking at I Corinthians 7 and we'll finish up with this in this study. In this text we will see that Paul is in a perpetual or extended state of singleness. We don't know if Paul was widowed or ever been married but know he is single in this context for an extended period of time.

I Corinthians 7:6-9 says [6] *Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. [7] I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.*

[8] *To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. [9] But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.*

There is so much packed into this. In this present distress and what is taking place, it actually has advantages if you're single. Why would Paul say 'not as a command' in verse 6? He says this for two reasons. This is the same Paul who says in I Timothy that those who forbid marriage in the name of spirituality are not teaching Biblical truth. Paul calls it the doctrine of demon, those who say if you really want to be spiritual then remain single. For those who vow to singleness but don't have the gift would be unbiblical, and Paul says it's a doctrine born from the demonic world.

I speak to this with some amount of experience having grown up in a church that was utterly committed to missions. Many times preachers would come and say to young people 'if really want to serve Christ, go be single and sacrifice your marriage' but they were not gifted so that means when they went out to serve the Lord they put themselves in harrowing positions

because they actually needed a husband or wife. Now could the Lord have blessed them if they had been in an extended state of singleness while under His sovereign hand? Yes, and this leads to the second principle.

The second principle is they sought singleness when they weren't gifted for singleness. There is where the dynamic is for if I'm in the state of singleness, I am to embrace it with contentment in Christ as a stewardship that God has assigned to me, with confidence, not that everything is good, but that all things will work together for good. God is using this. I am not to use it as a calling of giftedness if I'm not gifted. Our confession is clear about this, where celibacy is not a vow to take, for it is a gift to use.

So what if you find yourself in extended singleness? Then you begin under the sovereignty of God to embrace the stewardship of it without embracing it as the status of eternity necessarily, for you leave it in the Lord's hands. Now I want to look at I Corinthians 9.

I Corinthians 9:3-7 says [3] This is my defense to those who would examine me. [4] Do we not have the right to eat and drink? [5] Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? [6] Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? [7] Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?

Paul is referring to the fact that many of the disciples were married, and here he tells us Peter was married and his wife accompanied him on many of his trips. Paul who was single, had embraced the stewardship of it, determined to use the advantages of it in his ministry without laying the burden of it upon others if they're going to do ministry if they weren't gifted for singleness. That's why Paul says were to do what we are to do according to the gifts that were given to us and if we haven't been gifted with it, when we marry we are not in sin, because it is better to marry than burn with passions if you don't have the gift of celibacy.

Here are a few thoughts under redemption concerning singleness. There are redemptive advantages in singleness. One, when you are in a state of singleness you're not always planning for the spiritual maturity for your spouse and children and you can focus on your own spiritual maturity to bring blessing and testimony into the church and into the world. Two, in this state of singleness you are free from many of the concerns of this age. For instance, one of the responsibilities of a parent is to pass property onto children, but if I'm in a state of singleness I'm not going to have children to pass on property to, therefore I have more resources available for ministry in the opportunities that the Lord gives me to do. Thirdly, I have more time and opportunities for not only spiritual growth but for spiritual ministries. If you're married and have kids there are not the opportunities to have nights off. Fourthly, I can make ministerial decisions in life and ministry that I wouldn't normally be able to make if I was married. For instance, I have more opportunities for extended time away as a single. Fifthly, there are the absences of certain obligations in the stewardship of life.

In our stewardship position we have to steward our time, talents, resources and relationships and we also have to think of priorities. My priorities of stewardship under Christ is first my marriage, then my family, then my extended family, then my church family and then into the world. If I am in an extended state of singleness then instead of those priorities being at the top, I can now move to the other priorities and I now have more resources available for those purposes of ministry.

There are also disadvantages in the extended state of singleness in redemption that we must avoid. God has given us means of grace for us to grow and one of those means of grace is

fellowship. I believe the closer the relationship is in fellowship the more potential there is for growth in your life as a Christian. There is also the potential for decline. The potential for growth is you have friends and I'm sure there was a dynamic between Jesus and the 70, but note what was taking place in the relationship between Jesus and the twelve and then Jesus and the three (Peter, James and John). Is there are closer relationship of intimacy, awareness and knowledge than a marital relationship?

The reason we grow in relationships is because relationships provide both friction and momentum. There is friction that rubs away that which is protruding and sinful over a period of time in a friendship, an accountability group, and then in a marriage. If we're speaking truth in love to one another then we are iron sharpening iron and that friction is doing its work of molding, smoothing, showing, exposing, but it's also providing momentum.

Think about people that you are close with and when you are away from them for a period of time, you come back together and you just kind of pick right up where you left off and move right on. I have three men that I have been meeting in an accountability group for 41 years now and when we get together there is very little catching up for we just jump right in. We know each other and we just start throwing the flag or blowing the whistle for we do everything. We just get right to it with really no preliminaries at all.

The same thing is true in a marriage. Men, I'm not giving you carte blanche to act obnoxiously in the marriage. Always come into the life of your with respect and consideration and men you're probably thinking 'but we're past courting, dating, engagement' so when you come home you can pick up right here. Now you probably want to ask a few preliminary questions for given my own inadequacies there are things that probably happened when we weren't together that are going over my head and I need my wife to put them in front of my face. Overall, your relationship just picks up as you leave in the morning, go your way and then come back together.

When that is absent in a state of singleness, I believe it is the call of the family of God, not to try and replicate a marital relationship with someone in extended singleness, but to create the best possible fellowship for their blessing and yours, within the bounds of propriety in Christ's church. I so appreciate how our church is working in the congregational communities to work on this kind of fellowship with those in extended or temporary singleness. Those relational blessings as a means of grace need to be provided through Christ's church to those in this state through fellowship, that will provide spiritual fathers and spiritual mothers (spiritual uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters) for those who are single. This is crucial because of the disadvantage of the absence of the blessings of the marital relationship.

Another disadvantage is the appropriate Godly outlet for the sexual passions that are God given to bless your spouse. Unless you have the gift of celibacy those passions are still there and Satan is going to try and entrap someone in the unbiblical, immoral use of these passions. Look at the panoply that is here in our culture – trans-sexuality, pan-sexuality, mono-sexuality, bi-sexuality, homosexuality, promiscuous heterosexuality. We live in a culture that is saying dark is light and light is dark. We need to surround one another, pray for one another because of how the evil one might use those moments of extended singleness as a disadvantage to trap someone into sexual sins and all of the consequences that come with it and bring the redemptive power of the Gospel to bear whenever there are those who have faltered. We bathe one another with the love of Christ and with the washing of the blood of the Lamb with the washing of the water of the Word.

Thirdly, another disadvantage with self-denial my extended singleness can become the opportunity for expanded growth and ministry but if self-denial isn't there then my expanded growth and ministry could become self-pity because of self-absorption. So instead of seeing singleness as a stewardship it is seen as a trap which could quickly make marriage no longer a blessed institution to pray for and prepare for but an idol to sacrifice anything to obtain. The example I gave earlier with the older lady who was single, refused to make it an idol at all costs but she knew the blessings of stewardship of self-denial that come with singleness. That is why Paul says if we have not the ability/gift to be single then let us marry and then they have not sinned. Now, I'd like to give a couple of takeaways.

The first takeaway is, embrace extended and temporary singleness as a stewardship with contentment in Christ. Avoid spiritualizing it whereby marriage is seen as a trap in order to feel better about one's status of singleness and avoid marriage being idolatrous. Embrace singleness with confidence that God is doing something in your life.

I'd like to look at a passage in Ruth. Ruth is a great book to expound on in the theology of singleness. To summarize Ruth, Naomi, her husband and two sons go to Moab because of the famine in Bethlehem, and then their sons marry outside the covenant – a woman named Orpah and Ruth. Then Naomi's husband dies and her two sons and Naomi hears that the famine is over back in Bethlehem so they turn to go.

Ruth 1:6-18 says [6] *Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. [7] So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. [8] But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. (meaning go home and get married) May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. [9] The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. [10] And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." [11] But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? [12] Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, [13] would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me." [14] Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.*

[15] And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." [16] But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. [17] Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." [18] And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.

Now, I understand this has a great redemptive framework for Christological purposes but I want you to see something else that is here in the human drama and the human narrative. These two women have lost their husbands and are now in a state of singleness. To go back with Naomi would likely be an extension of that singleness because Naomi can't provide any other sons to take the place of her sons as the law of Moses would have allowed. Ruth is now coming back as a foreigner to the city of David, the king and even more than that as a Moabite for there was nothing worse to the Israelites than Moabites and Ammonites. This was a very important

city, Bethlehem, not a large city but still important that had been set up in the tribe of Judah which carried the scepter.

When Ruth goes with Naomi there is not much hope except for extended singleness. Orpah on the second plea turns to go back and there is nothing negative said about her for doing that because there was nothing wrong with her decision to do that. She wanted to go back and seek marriage in her mother's house. Ruth has obviously had a converting experience with the Lord of glory and Ruth decides to keep covenant was more important than turning back for the understandable desire to be married. Ruth considered herself dead to herself for nothing but death would separate her from this covenant relationship. This is the passage my wife and I chose when we got married, not because Ruth gets married, but because of her covenant faithfulness to the Lord and He was enough. Ruth was going to endure and embrace this stewardship.

The Lord had other ideas when they returned. Naomi sends Ruth into the fields of her kinsman Boaz who happens to be single. My mother was doing that regularly for me by sending me into "field" where there were other single women but when it came to my wife Cindy my mother said she was out of my league. I remember that well. Thankfully God was gracious, but here is this wonderful glorious moment where Ruth understands the validity of the marriage out of her singleness, but she is willing to face the extension of her singleness out of a covenant faithfulness to her covenant keeping God that she has now come to embrace. Therefore, God was enough and Ruth would be a steward.

Ruth goes to the field of Boaz and Boaz takes notice of her. Then he begins to tell his servants to leave grain for her and extra grain as well as he makes sure she is fed food and drink. When she returned home to Naomi, Ruth told her what Boaz did. Naomi knows what is happening and tells Ruth to put on her best clothes, perfume and go back to the field. Ruth initiates after Boaz initiated first and there is nothing illicit or immoral about her initiation to Boaz, then both initiate. There is a lot of reciprocity in this text. Men need to be men and pursue relationships, first in fellowship, then as God would lead in courtship and then with commitment if the Lord leads there. But also, women, for Ruth can be your example. There is appropriate presentation of oneself, not soliciting but just there walking in faithfulness, doing her duty to provide for her mother-in-law, the field God appointed – the field of the kinsman redeemer.

Then Naomi's famous words that Boaz will not rest until all is solved (Ruth 3:18). It is amazing what mothers and mother in laws do know. All is solved and Ruth becomes a part of the genealogy of our Savior.

The next takeaway is to walk carefully in temporary or extended singleness. Take advantages of the advantages of this moment in your life. Walk carefully so that you are not entrapped in the disadvantages. Develop relationships. Christ's church ought to have all kinds of initiatives and structures whereby we are cross pollinating appropriately and with propriety of marrieds and singles, in order to provide those levels of fellowship. But even among those who are in temporary or extended singleness there ought to be a fellowship. Don't let the fears of the world cause you to cower from establishing friendship with one another for those friendships need to be established. You are in seasons of life where you have much in common with each other. Turn what people think over to Jesus and keep your heart pure. Go out with one another after church services – morning or evening and fellowship. Establish fellowship times together and then if God draws hearts together then move forward accordingly. Have those times together male and female. Cross pollinate in friendship and fellowship.

The next takeaway is continued or extended singleness is a time to cultivate the future of your life in Christ by preparing and anticipating the marriage that God will bring, even while you

are content in the moment of stewardship that God has called you to, if you do not have the gift of celibacy. This is a time of preparation, prayer, purpose and growth in Christ. The advantages are many so take advantage of them, the disadvantages can be destructive so avoid them. Walk carefully with the Lord.

Those of us who enjoy marital status in life, we can be spiritual grandparents, parents, brothers and sisters in the Lord to those in the body of Christ in a status of singleness. The key is the stewardship with contentment, even in the anticipation with preparation of marriage and the refusal to make marriage an idol to obtain at all cost, for when that happens there will be costs that you don't want to pay. Embrace how the Lord has called you and gifted you to accomplish it. There are many who can say this even much better than me so share that with one another.

I have watched some older couples in our church that have embraced the opportunity for ministry to those who are temporary or extended singleness and I thank the Lord for it as I pray their tribe increases, not that they come in with all the answers but to fellowship, guide, mentor and shepherd. Let's create ways we can all cross pollinate in fellowship and in ministry opportunities together. We try to do every ministry through teams and I think every team not only has ordained leadership but has lay people – male and female, older, younger, single, married – and I believe that matrix profile brings nothing but strength to such leadership teams and provides another means of growth together in the Lord so that we are one body and one people. We will give thoughtful ministry to people in their seasons of life, but not at the expense of our unity. Our diversity is always pointing to our unity together in Christ.

By God's grace we will be able to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice to spur one another on to love and good deeds. A single man in Christ is one who is strong and courageous and doesn't cower from the stewardship. He is sensitive and compassionate to his brothers and his sisters. A single woman in Christ is one who has a walk of confidence and contentment in Christ and the desire to have all the blessings that Christ has when He has them that we might walk together in and for the Lord. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the time we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for the joy and privilege to give You praise this Lord's Day. Father, please bless these Your people. May they be blessed in their growth as disciples, in their worship as the redeemed and in their outreach as evangelists. Father, for my dear brothers and sisters who are in the transition of singleness or some extension of singleness, give them eyes fixed on Jesus, the embracing of the stewardship even as they walk thoughtfully, taking advantage of this time of their life and walking carefully not to be entrapped by the onslaughts and snares of the evil one. We will give You praise as we hold one another up in Jesus' Name, Amen.