

Grace for Singles

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A Brief Theology of Singleness

- The emphasis on the institutions of marriage and family change as the Bible progresses from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

In the Old Testament

- Marriage and procreation were viewed as an indication of God's blessing (Deut 7:11-14; 28:1-4, 11). Barrenness was a sign of God's curse (Deut 28:15-18; Ruth 1:20-21).
- Marriage and procreation were essential for bringing about the offspring (Christ) through whom the world would be blessed (Gen 3:15; 4:25; 12:7; 13:15, 16; 15:5, 18; 17:7, 8; 22:17, 18; Gal 3:16).
- Marriage and procreation were essential to maintaining one's inheritance in the land.

In the New Testament

- The transition from the expectation of covenantal blessings from the plural seed to the singular seed becomes explicit.
 - Jesus is the single, promised seed of the Abrahamic covenant (Gal 3:16-19) and those who are united to him by faith receive the blessings of the New Covenant (1 Pet 2:9, Eph 1:3; 1 Pet 1:4).
- Jesus' teaching explicitly affirms this transition.
 - Eunuchs in the kingdom of God
 - In Matthew 19:10-12, Jesus said that some could be eunuchs for the kingdom of God, whereas previously eunuchs were forbidden from the assembly of God's people (Lev 21:20; Deut 23:1, see also Isa 56:3-7 and Acts 8:26-40).
 - This teaching distinguishes between involuntary and voluntary singleness, but shows that both can be done in a way that benefits the kingdom.
 - This teaching is for those who can embrace it.
 - Marriage is an institution of this age
 - Luke 20:27-40 (cf. Matt 22:23-33; Mk 12:18-27) shows clearly that marriage will not take place in heaven because of the nature of our heavenly existence.
- Jesus taught about the primacy of one's spiritual family
 - Jesus upheld the commandments in regards to family (Matt 19:19, 15:6).
 - Yet Jesus also established the primacy of one's spiritual family.
 - In Mark 3:34-35, Jesus states that his true family consists of those who do the will of God.
 - In Mark 10:28-30, Jesus states that those who have left their families for Jesus' sake and for the gospel will receive a hundredfold now in this time,

though with persecutions. This shows that it is not merely a family to come, but new family relationships that supersede the old.

- In Luke 11:27-28, Jesus shifts the focus from the blessings of his mother to the blessings of those who hear and keep the word of God.
- In John 19:26, Jesus showed that it was more appropriate for Mary to consider John her son than her physical sons.
- Paul's teaching explicitly affirms this transition.
 - He speaks of his relationship to believers in familial terms
 - Begetting children through the gospel (1 Cor 4:15; Philem 10; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 2:2, 2:1; Titus 1:4)
 - Admonishing believers as children and infants (1 Cor 3:1-2; 2 Cor 6:12-13; 12:14)
 - Caring for them as a nursing mother (1 Thess 2:7)
 - Encouraging as a father with his children (1 Thess 2:11)
 - Spiritual children as a "crown of boasting" and "glory and joy" (1 Thess 2:17-19)
 - He affirms that marriage is an institution of this age, and therefore can be engaged in, but we are not to be engrossed in it (1 Cor 7:29-31).
 - He affirms that marriage brings with it responsibilities of this age, but singleness allows one to more single-mindedly serve the Lord (1 Cor 7:32-35).
- Jesus' & Paul's lives affirm this transition by example
 - Both were single and used their singleness to serve the kingdom of God.
 - Though Jesus and Paul lived single lives, their lives were rich in personal relationships with the new family to whom and with whom they ministered.¹

Marriage & Singleness: Blessings Given By God

Marriage has its own blessings and challenges

- It is a relationship given by God to address the "aloneness" which is found in Gen 2:18.
- It has significance that can point to important theological truths.
 - A husband's love is to demonstrate Christ's self-sacrificing, sanctify love for His Church (Eph 5:25-33).
 - A wife's help and submission is to demonstrate Christ's equality yet submission to the Father and the church's submission to Christ (Eph 5:22-24).
 - Yet the degree to which this takes place in an individual marriage can vary greatly.

¹ Danylack, Barry, *Redeeming Singleness*, 171.

- It is a temporary blessing.
 - Our lives begin single, and many people come to the end of life single.
 - The concept of an eternal soul-mate is not a biblical one.
 - It will not continue in the age to come and is therefore an imperfect foretaste of the true fellowship that will occur between God and man in the age to come (Lk 20:27-40; 1 Cor 7:29-31).
- It has an impact on what one is able to do for the kingdom of God.
 - It can create an intimate, sanctifying relationship where we can glorify God (Eph 5:22-33).
 - It also brings with it many concerns and obligations of this age which can create tension in the life of the believer (1 Cor 7:32-35).
 - It can tempt one to idolize the relationships of this age.

Singleness Has Its Own Blessings and Challenges

- Singleness is living without the blessing of marriage.
- All believers live with different blessings and challenges in this life.
 - God is good both in his giving and withholding of particular blessings (Jas 1:17; Rom 8:32; Matt 7:7-12)
 - The giving or withholding of a blessing is not favor/curse as it was in the Old Covenant.
 - Example: some experience the blessing of wealth; others do not have this blessing.
 - Both are cared for by God and given exactly what he deems they need in this life.
 - Beware of bad theology often given to singles:²
 - “As soon as you’re satisfied with God alone, he’ll bring someone special into your life.”
 - This makes it sound like God bestows blessings based upon our contentment. It is a “genie” God who only gives things we want if we meet certain requirements, not a sovereign, loving Father who knows and gives exactly what is best for us – regardless of our performance.
 - “You’re too picky”
 - While one must examine his requirements and desires, God is not limited by our own standards, and there is much wisdom in being discerning in one’s choice of a spouse (Prov 21:9; 19:13; 27:15).
 - “Before you can marry someone wonderful, the Lord has to make you someone wonderful.”
 - Marriage is not a blessing only awarded to those who are more properly sanctified.

² From Paige Benton, “Singled Out by God for Good.”

- A helpful outlook:
 - “I am not single because I am too spiritually unstable to possibly deserve a husband, nor because I am too spiritually mature to possibly need one. I am single because God is so abundantly good to me, because this is his best for me. It is a cosmic impossibility that anything could be better for me right now than being single.” ~ Paige Benton
- Some do not desire to have the blessing of marriage; others do.
 - There can be right and wrong ways to desire or not desire something from God.
 - Some desire singleness because they selfishly do not want to love and serve another person, they have contempt for the opposite sex, or they are not willing to invest in other relationships.
 - Some desire marriage out of discontentment or for love that only can be given by God alone.
 - Both singleness and marriage can be desired in the right way as blessings from God.
 - A desire for a blessing does not mean you are less spiritual.
 - It is fine for an unmarried person to desire to be married. It is *how* the person deals with this desire that is important.
- Singleness has a significance that points to important theological truths.
 - The fact that singleness is an acceptable way of life now in the New Covenant is a testimony to the fact that the age to come has broken in upon this age (1 Cor 7:29-31).
 - Singles worshipping and serving God vividly shows the people of God that we are no longer in the Old Covenant, and that the consummation of pure, heavenly life and worship is very near.
 - The concept of the eunuch in Scripture reminds us of the theological significance of a single’s dependence upon Christ for all things (Matt 19:10-12).
 - Eunuchs were used in the king’s service because they were completely dependent upon the king for support in old age, for significance in his dynasty because they did not have their own, and for an inheritance.
 - So also, the single person can demonstrate a dependence upon the Lord to care for financial needs (often through spiritual family), to provide spiritual offspring, and for a true heavenly inheritance.
 - Singleness is a powerful reminder to married people that marriage is a temporary institution of this age.
 - One’s physical family can become idolatrous, but singleness reminds us of the importance of our spiritual family as well.
 - Just as with marriage, the degree to which one’s life demonstrates these things can vary greatly.
- Singleness has an impact on what one is able to do for the kingdom of God.
 - While singles may not participate in the physical intimacy of marriage, they may have greater opportunity for spiritual intimacy than most married people.

- The “gift” of singleness enables one to use this situation in life to edify others.
 - A Spiritual “gift” is a Spiritual enablement to build up others (1 Cor 12:7).
 - Desiring to be married does not necessarily mean that you do not have the “gift” of singleness. You can still seek to be empowered by the Spirit for the edification of others, even if you desire to be married.
 - Like other gifts (service, teaching, giving, mercy), it is one that can be developed and fostered. It does not mean one is zapped into a state of supernatural, Spiritual productivity without any struggle (Rom 12:6-8).
- Just being single does not mean that one is more productive in kingdom activity, but it an opportunity to live and serve in a way that the commitments of marriage and physical family do not always allow.
- God-honoring singleness, then, is learning to embrace the blessings God has given and withheld as what is best for your life right now, and seeking to please him in that particular situation.

Common Struggles for Singles

- Loneliness – particularly certain times/events
 - Holidays/taking a vacation
 - Weddings – watching one more person share in what you desire
 - Brothers & sisters having children
- Big decisions – it is hard to make them by yourself
- Feelings of failure
 - Personal failure – what is wrong with me?
 - Failing your family by not producing grandchildren, etc.
- The ticking clock - there is always the opportunity to be married, but singles often grieve the end of the opportunity to have children – the loss of what could have been.

Areas of Growth for the Church

- Teach the church about the realities of marriage.
 - Don’t downplay the institution. It is a unique union.
 - Don’t over-exalt it either. It is an institution of this age.
 - Most singles struggle because they and the people around them have improper concepts of the relative importance of marriage.
- Teach the church to cherish and invest in their spiritual family.
 - Singles often struggle because they are viewed as being in a “Plan B” until they can get a “real” family. The reality is that they have a “real” family now.
 - The body of Christ is strengthened by embracing of diversity and loving one another in different places in life.
- Teach the church to think of how they can specifically love single people in the congregation.
 - Many hurtful situations occur because of ignorance.

- Help people brainstorm how they can integrate singles into the life of the congregation
 - Having over for meals and special events (not just to babysit or introduce to other singles)
 - Spending time in discipleship (talking through decisions, giving opportunities for mentorship, being able to talk about relationships)
 - Encouraging and thanking them for their service to the body

An Approach for Counseling Singles

- Empathize and engage in the counselee's emotional trials.
- Help the counselee think through marriage and singleness biblically.
- Help the counselee with other areas of wrong or inadequate thinking.
 - The sovereignty of God with this situation (Rom 8:28-39)
 - The goodness of God's gifts (Jas 1:17; Matt 7:7-12)
 - Dealing with desires properly (Jas 4:1-10; Ps 37:3-6; Jer 17:5-8)
 - Dealing with worry (Matt 6:25-34; Phil 4:6-7)
 - Focus on being single "for today"
 - Christian contentment (Phil 4:12-13)
 - What to look for in a potential spouse (see Courtship & Dating: avoiding the hurt www.ibcd.org, or Timothy Keller's The Meaning of Marriage)
 - How to handle unhelpful reactions from others (Pr 19:11; 1 Pet 4:8)
- Encourage the counselee to balance honoring God in singleness with seeking the blessing of marriage (if desired).
- Help the counselee with specific ways to foster his/her spiritual family and serve the Lord in this particular situation.
- Work to connect the counselee with others in the church who can offer support and who could be ministered to by the counselee.

Helpful Resources:

- Benton, Paige. "Singled Out By God for Good." No pages. Cited Sept 4, 2012. Online: <http://www.pccp.org/ministries/singles/pdf/singledout.pdf>. *This short article gives a great perspective on how to view being single.*
- Danylack, Barry. Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010. *This is a very extensive theological treatment of the subject. It hardly has any applications for singles or counseling them, though.*
- Keller, Timothy with Kathy Keller. The Meaning of Marriage: facing the complexities of commitment with the wisdom of God. New York: Dutton, 2011. *Chapter 7 is an excellent chapter on singleness within a great book on proper expectations for marriage.*