

Sermon Notes

9/21/08

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This week we dealt with a practical theology of singleness. The topic is huge, and the sermon and notes together will barely scratch the surface. All I intend to do in these notes is offer some further background to and explanation of some points I touched on in the sermon.

The two contrasting views I mentioned with regard to singleness are fairly easy to identify. In the “singleness as equally valid alternative” camp, you find teachers like Tim Keller, John Piper, and Stanley Hauerwas. In the “marriage as normative” camp, you find people like Debbie Maken (see her book *Getting Serious About Getting Married*), Doug and Nancy Wilson, Al Mohler, Dawn Eden, and the Bounless.org website. My point in the sermon was that both views are *basically* true and I do not see them as incompatible. Rather, I think it comes down to a matter of one’s calling. For those called to singleness, Piper and Keller make great points about how the single Christian is complete in Christ and has special opportunities for service that are just as valid and kingdom-building as raising a family. But they need to explain why God is suddenly gifting so many more people with prolonged singleness (especially since it happens at just the same time as the overall breakdown of the family in our culture). While largely agreeing with the theology of singleness that Piper and Keller lay out, shouldn’t we be worried that many are trying to live a single life even though they do not really have the gift of singleness in the biblical sense (as seen in the fact that two-thirds of Christian singles have thrown away their virginity, and very few actually use their singleness as an opportunity to serve, as opposed to a time of protracted adolescence)? What are to make of the fact that the average age for marriage is rapidly climbing towards 30? Why is the gap between biological maturity and social/spiritual maturity growing so much? Maken and Mohler are right to point out that marriage is the norm (cf. Mt. 24:38). Many people in our culture today are staying singly by choice rather than by gift/calling, and that can have disastrous consequences, not only for the individuals involved, but for society as a whole. Thus, their exhortations, especially to young men to get on the stick, are perfectly appropriate.

Here are some links from both perspectives for further consideration:

http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2004-08-19

http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2004-08-20

http://www.boundlessline.org/2007/05/mohler_versus_p.html

http://www.boundlessline.org/2007/05/maken_on_piper.html

http://www.boundlessline.org/2007/05/being_single_is.html

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001661.cfm>

http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/2007/2162_Single_in_Christ_A_Name_Better_Than_Sons_and_Daughters/

<http://www.tyndale.cam.ac.uk/download/Biblicalsinglenessbnd.pdf>

<http://femina.reformedblogs.com/2007/06/25/glory-and-guilt/>

<http://femina.reformedblogs.com/2007/05/04/unmarried-women-in-the-covenant-community/>

http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/BySeries/78/2179_Marriage_Singleness_and_the_Christian_Virtue_of_Hospitality/

<http://debbiemaken.blogspot.com/2006/09/concluding-remarks-in-conversation.html>

<http://debbiemaken.blogspot.com/2007/05/voice-of-reason-in-world-of-pastoral.html>

<http://debbiemaken.blogspot.com/2006/09/top-ten-reasons-for-getting-married.html>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001491.cfm>

<http://www.riversidestl.org/Articles/Singled%20Out%20for%20Good.pdf>

<http://www.redeemer2.com/webuploads/RedeemerNewsletter-2004-06.pdf>

[http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/ConferenceMessages/ByDate/1927/How to Deal with the Guilt of Sexual Failure for the Glory of Christ and His Global Cause](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/ConferenceMessages/ByDate/1927/How%20to%20Deal%20with%20the%20Guilt%20of%20Sexual%20Failure%20for%20the%20Glory%20of%20Christ%20and%20His%20Global%20Cause)

<http://debbiemaken.blogspot.com/2007/02/foul-word-evangelical-outcry-foul.html>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001254.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001349.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001151.cfm>

http://www.boundlessline.org/2007/02/single_by_circu.html

[http://www.ladiesagainstfeminism.com/artman/publish/Especially for the Unmarried 25/But I Want One 15821001582.shtml](http://www.ladiesagainstfeminism.com/artman/publish/Especially_for_the_Unmarried_25/But_I_Want_One_15821001582.shtml)

[http://www.ladiesagainstfeminism.com/artman/publish/Especially for the Unmarried 25/Get Married1003337.shtml](http://www.ladiesagainstfeminism.com/artman/publish/Especially_for_the_Unmarried_25/Get_Married1003337.shtml)

http://www.boundless.org/regulars/office_hours/a0000824.html

<http://femina.reformedblogs.com/2007/04/11/why-isnt-a-pretty-girl-like-you-married-2/>

http://www.albertmohler.com/blog_read.php?id=793

<http://femina.reformedblogs.com/2007/04/18/dont-pretend-to-be-happy/>

<http://femina.reformedblogs.com/2007/04/25/is-this-really-gods-best/>

<http://femina.reformedblogs.com/2007/05/11/dealing-with-sin/>

http://www.boundlessline.org/2007/01/purposeless_dat.html

http://www.albertmohler.com/blog_read.php?id=506

http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_read.php?cdate=2005-10-21

<http://femina.reformedblogs.com/2007/07/12/milk-and-honey/>

<http://femina.reformedblogs.com/2007/07/23/what-kind-of-man-are-you-looking-for/>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001196.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/answers/a0001424.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001306.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001376.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001381.cfm>

One question that comes up is whether or not Paul's teaching on singleness in 1 Cor. 7 (or Jesus' teaching in Matt. 19, which I take to be essentially equivalent) is a departure from the OT view. Would singleness have been described as a gift in the old covenant? Certainly the case of Jeremiah shows that singleness for the sake of kingdom service was already a possibility even in the more family-centric old covenant arrangement. But singleness is generally seen as far less desirable, and even as a cursed situation (e.g., Ruth; the eunuchs in Isa. 56 and elsewhere; etc.). It seems that the gift of singleness as Paul describes it in 1 Cor. 7 is a new covenant phenomenon, toed into the Spirit-driven mission of the church.

Paul knows that singleness is a sacrifice. He says in 1 Cor. 9 that apostles had a right to take to take their wives with them on their missionary travels. The fact that Paul did not avail himself of this right shows he is forgoing something good for the sake of service. But Paul knows that such a lifestyle is not for everyone and this it ordinarily involves a heavy dose of deprivation. Indeed, we should probably consider Jesus' earthly singleness as a form of deprivation, and therefore an aspect of his suffering on our behalf. Those believers who are burdened with the problems that come with a single life should at least be encouraged to know that they are sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

When we recognize that the gift of singleness is tied into service, we have to also recognize that many who are living singly today are not doing so because they have been called to such a life, but because they simply want to "do their own thing." Of course, this is especially true of men, who if they understood what the

Bible requires of Christian singles, might decide they should go ahead and get married after all!

The church has oscillated between different views on singleness for much of her history. Because of Gnostic, Platonic influences, many in the early and medieval church came to view marriage (and its attendant sexuality) as “second best” and exalted virginity as the highest form of life. For example, Aquinas wrote, “Even married sex, adorned with all the honorableness of marriage, carries with it a certain shame...Without a doubt then the state of virginity is preferable.” On the other hand, after the Reformation, family life was so widely praised that a special gift of singleness was largely overlooked. Indeed, singleness was often frowned upon. Martin Luther argued against singleness as a philosophy of life. Instead, he insisted all men should be married, except for the three categories of eunuchs identified by Jesus in Mt. 19:11-12 (eunuchs born with a deformity, eunuchs made that way by castration [probably for the sake of serving in a royal court] or figuratively by circumstances, and those who become figurative eunuchs for the sake of kingdom work). Luther wrote, “apart from these three groups, let no man presume to be without a spouse...Such persons are rare, not one in a thousand, for they are a special miracle of God. No one should venture on such a life unless he be specifically called by God, like Jeremiah.” (See Maken’s discussion on “What Kind of Eunuch Are You?,” pages 29ff.) The view of the Reformation was prevalent in America until quite recently. For example, Maken relates the story of a certain John Littleale, living in an early settlement in Massachusetts. When he insisted on living a solitaire life “in a house by himself contrary to the laws of the country, whereby he is subject to much sin and iniquity,” he was finally thrown in jail! Even into the 1950s, older bachelors were considered with suspicion, viewed at best as eccentric and at worst as irresponsible members of society. Of course, prior to the ‘60s, women were largely unavailable outside of marriage and the whole courtship/dating process was treated as serious business, requiring the support and oversight of a wider community. The sexual revolution and the rise of a casual dating scene changed all that, interrupting the normal progression of children into mature, responsible (and almost always married) adults. (See Maken, 52ff.)

See the discussion in Andreas Kostenberger, *God, Marriage, and Family*, 174ff for more on singleness in the OT and NT and in church history.

Obviously, given the biblical structure of male/female relations, single men and women will end up viewing their singleness and their possibilities for marriage quite differently. Of a man is not married because of immaturity, he needs to be

disciplined until he becomes marriage material. If he knows he has the gift of singleness, then he needs to realize that means dating is out of the question. If he does not know he has such a gift, he should pursue marriage in an appropriate way.

Maken's book has a lot of good counsel and encouragement for the most vulnerable of singles, Christian women who would like to be married but have not yet had a suitable opportunity. Maken insists that it is "ok" to be unhappy about being single. Singleness can be very hard to accept, as Jesus himself pointed out in Mt. 19 ("All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given...He who is able to accept it, let him accept it.") Maken suggests it is best for church families to absorb singles for protection and support, but what singles who want to be married most need is practical help in finding a spouse, which Maken calls "agency." Maken demonstrates that our society's full scale war on marriage is having disastrous effects, and we have now created a cultural system in which marriage is no longer held out as a worthy life goal. Single women are largely left to fend for themselves, and the deck is stacked against them. Maken suggests that our present dating ethos allows men to string women along, stealing their time and perhaps affection, while giving nothing solid in return (e.g., a guy tells a girl he's been dating for three months that he doesn't even know if he ever wants to get married). She explains:

For so many women the tragic outcome of indefinite singleness is primarily the product of cultural forces that affect believers and nonbelievers alike – an open-ended, male-friendly, mating structure geared toward low commitment, shallow cyclical relationships as opposed to marriage; a protracted education system that doesn't really educate, containing students who embrace perpetual schooling without any commitment or direction to finding a meaningful calling for the purposes of settling into family life; parenting with only minimal expectations of self-sufficiency; under-involvement of fathers in the lives of their children; the defining down of adulthood and the elongation of youthful adolescence; the lack of male leadership; the removal of societal shame for being a perennial bachelor... You get the picture. We no longer have a culture that esteems marriage as a worthy goal, the crowning achievement of one's life. Culturally we think of marriage as optional, and the church agrees, citing God's will as justification of the belief (page 91).

Maken's advice to women desiring marriage is found in Part 3 of her book, and contains many good, practical insights. I would counsel single women desiring marriage to keep hoping for and praying for a husband until and unless God releases them from that desire by confirming their permanent gift of singleness. They should be honest about their desire for marriage with God and others. If the desire remains unfulfilled, the woman will have to learn to trust God in new ways.

I think many of the women in the church today who are single and wish they were married do not have the gift of singleness as described in 1 Cor. 7 in a strong sense. In the categories of Mt. 19, they are single not for the sake of the kingdom (as a voluntary choice, in order to free up time and energy for ministry), but "they were made eunuchs by men." That is, they are single by circumstance, more than choice, and would be married if a suitable opportunity had presented itself. Such women are in a difficult situation and are understandably reluctant to embrace their singleness. However, while they may continue to cry out to God, asking him to provide a husband, in many ways they should also learn to live *as if* they had the gift of singleness in the meantime. They should continue to prepare for marriage until and unless God convicts them otherwise. But they should also view their singleness as God's gift for them at the moment, and use their single status as a platform for specialized kingdom ministry as much as possible.

For some insight into what happens when people who do not actually have the gift of singleness try to live a single lifestyle, consider the Roman Catholic church, especially monasteries, convents, and priesthood. Many men who do not have the gift of singleness have been caught between a rock and a hard place because they feel called to the priesthood in the Roman church and yet they cannot control themselves sexually. They were not made for a life of celibacy. As Gordon Fee has said, "Celibacy is for the celibate." If you don't have the gift of celibacy, you better find a wife! Thus, many priests have been involved in horrendous sexual scandals (which I do need to rehearse here). Of course, the problem is nothing new – this is one of the biggest reasons the Reformers had major objections to the medieval monastic system, with its unhealthy and unrealistic imposition of singleness on men who weren't really gifted to be single. Of course, that in no way excuses sexual sin, but we should recognize that such systems are deeply flawed and run against the grain of our humanity. A change in the policy of the Roman church is long, long overdue. Ben Witherington exposes some of the problems and confusions that the Roman

system has created here: <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2006/10/after-foley-follies-catholic.html>

We live in a time when there is (understandably) a great deal of insecurity and fear about relationships in general, especially marriage. This negativism and cynicism about commitment probably has a lot to do with the delay of marriage we see in our culture (although that delay does not keep a full 86% of singles from expecting to get married someday – I suppose in some sense most everyone is an incorrigible romantic at heart). In response, church leadership needs to teach and model the beauty of marriage as God designed it. Our message for young people in an over-sexed culture is not just ‘abstinence,’ but an affirmation of the goodness of sex within marriage, an affirmation that marital sex is the best sex and therefore something worth waiting for. In other words, the message of abstinence (which is true in itself, though it doesn’t go far enough) needs to be linked to training and encouraging our children to pursue marriage as soon as appropriate. We also need to train young people that their need for other people is nothing to be ashamed of; it’s an aspect of how God has made us. We are relational beings at our deepest core since we are made in the image of the Triune God.

For a discussion of ways in which God meets the relational needs of unmarried folks, see Christopher Ash, *Sex in the Service of God*, 116ff, 188ff. In my experience, singles almost always have acute sense of *missing something* by not having a spouse. This pain should not be borne by the single person in isolation (for that only makes it worse). Rather, it should be spread through the community, as others befriend and encourage Christian singles in a variety of ways.

Certainly, it is possible to make an idol of marriage. In my experience, singles often desire marriage *too much*, or *not enough*. But the desire for marriage in and of itself is a good thing and not necessarily a sign of sinful discontentment. The desire to be in one-flesh marital relationship is part of God’s creation design, and Paul acknowledges it as a legitimate incentive to get married in 1 Cor. 7. (See Lauren Winner, *Real Sex*, especially 67ff.)

The old cliché, “It is better to be single and wish you were married than to be married and wish you were single” contains a lot of truth. If you have contentment issues as a single person, you will undoubtedly carry them into your marriage (same with lust issues, selfishness issues, etc.). Marriage does not change who you are; it amplifies and exposes who you are. Marriage cannot save us, it cannot bring us ultimate happiness, it cannot solve all our problems, it

cannot make us new. Marriage is a created thing, and our spouse is a merely a part of the creation as well. But at the same time, God has clearly designed most of us for marriage and his normal way to provide for many of our most basic needs is through marriage. All we can say is that if God does not, in his providence, provide a spouse for someone who earnestly desires marriage, God is also going to give that person all the grace they need to live as a (reasonably) fulfilled/content single person, even if it is often very difficult.

Singles need to be very deliberate in seeking community, lest they get curved in on themselves. Don Miller, in his edgy book *Blue Like Jazz*, explains his own bouts with loneliness and the self-centeredness that often came with it:

When you live on your own for a long time ...your personality changes because you go so much into yourself you lose the ability to be social, to understand what is and isn't normal behavior. There is an entire world inside yourself, and if you let yourself, you can get so deep inside it you will forget the way to the surface (p. 152).

Loneliness is something that happens to us, but I think it is something we can move ourselves out of. I think a person who is lonely should dig into a community, give himself to a community, humble himself before his friends, initiate community, teach people to care for each other, love each other. Jesus does not want us floating through space or sitting in front of our televisions. Jesus wants us interacting, eating together, laughing together, praying together (p. 173)

Living in community made me realize one of my faults: I was addicted to myself. All I thought about was myself. The only thing I really cared about was myself. I had very little concept of love, altruism, or sacrifice. I discovered that my mind is like a radio that picks up only one station, the one that plays me: *K-DON, all Don, all the time....*

Having had my way for so long, I became defensive about what I perceived as encroachments on my rights. My personal bubble was huge. I couldn't have conversations that lasted more than ten minutes. I wanted efficiency in personal interaction, and while listening to one of my housemates talk, I wondered why they couldn't get to the point (p. 181).

Despite the difficulties, singles need to make sure they continually immerse themselves in Christian community.

Stanley Hauerwas explains how singles gifted with singleness can fit into the life of the church as vital members:

We, as church, are ready to be challenged by the other. This has to do with the fact that in the church, every adult, whether single or married, is called to be a parent. All Christian adults have a parental responsibility because of baptism. Biology does not make parents in the church. Baptism does. Baptism makes all adult Christians parents and gives them the obligation to help introduce these children to the gospel...In the baptismal vows....the whole church promises to be parent...

By these vows the church reinvents the family...

From the beginning we Christians have made singleness as valid a way of life as marriage. What it means to be the church is to be a group of people called out of the world, and back into the world, to embody the hope of the Kingdom of God. Children are not necessary for the growth of the Kingdom, because the church can call the stranger into her midst. That makes both singleness and marriage possible vocations. If everybody has to marry, then marriage is a terrible burden. But the church does not believe that everybody has to marry. Even so, those who do not marry are also parents within the church, because the church is now the true family. The church is a family into which children are brought and received.

Hauerwas is exactly right. Not everyone has to marry. At the same time most should (and young men need to make marriage a goal, and prepare themselves for it, as quickly as possible, until and unless God convicts them otherwise). But however obligated the rank and file church member might be to pursue marriage (or be open to being pursued, in the case of a woman), still the church must acknowledge that some *do* have the gift of singleness and must make room for them. The church includes the family, by virtue of God's covenant promises. But the church is not based on the family and does not depend on the family as such. Peter Leithart explains:

The family is not a redemptive institution. It is a fallen institution in need of redemption.

Through the power of the Word and Spirit, God does redeem families. Through the Spirit, marriages can begin to reflect the marriage of Christ and His church; through the Spirit, the entire life of the family can become a living communal portrait of Christ. Families can be redeemed. Families can also become redemptive. Families exist, in fact, not only to be redeemed but to become redemptive. Your family exists not only to receive the grace of God, but to extend that grace. Your family doesn't exist only for your personal satisfaction and comfort. Your family exists for the sake of ministry. This is what being redeemed means: Being redeemed means becoming God's agent for redemption....

[F]amilies can serve those outside by brining the outside in. But we're also supposed to minister by sending those inside out. The whole point of training and teaching our children is to prepare them for their life outside our family, in families of their own, in the church, in the world.

In this way, redeemed families participate in the fulfillment of the great commission and play a part in the redemption of the nations. Redeemed families participation in the redemption of the world.

But, obviously, if all this is the case, singles participate in the redemption of the world just as much. The question the church must answer is, "How?" That is, "How can we help our single members find their place, their niche, their role, in the growth and maturation of God's kingdom?"

There is one last issue with regard to 1 Cor. 7 that I want to deal with, and it especially concerns married folks. What does Paul means in verse 32-35 when he says that marriage distracts us from the Lord? What does it mean to seek to please one's spouse rather than the Lord?

The Christopher Ash quotation I used in the sermon gives the seeds of an answer. He makes the point that (obviously) one of the chief ways for a married person to serve the Lord is to serve his/her spouse, so there is no dichotomy there, however much Paul might sound that way on a first pass. (Note that the service of the wife towards her husband in 7:34 is matched by the concern of the husband to please his wife in 7:33 -- so whatever it means to please one's spouse, it's a mutual duty!!!) Paul is not imposing a secular/sacred dichotomy on the

Christian life, in which marriage would be a "secular" concern, outside the realm of God's purposes. Certainly, Paul affirms elsewhere that service to a spouse *is* service to the Lord in an ultimate sense. So no married person needs to go around asking, "Hmmm....should I please the Lord *or* my spouse today?"

Rather, I think Paul's focus is this: He expects singles to carry on ministries that are ordinarily prohibited to married people because of the (complicated) demands that come with married life. He wants singles to be "holy both in body and spirit" (7:34), that is, using all their faculties to do kingdom work, as much as possible. A married person has to consider not only his welfare, but that of his entire family. A single person is less vulnerable, more independent, and more free, at least in that sense. A single person should (all things being equal) have more time and energy available for needy people and other forms of missional/ministry work. All the concern and effort that conscientious married persons put into family life (over above other tasks), the single person should pour into specialized ministries.

Again, ultimately, I don't think there's any dualism between serving God and serving a spouse. A husband/wife serves God precisely by serving his/her marriage partner. But the kind of specialized service Paul has in view in 1 Cor. 7 is something a bit different. And in that sense, married life would be "distraction" (7:35) from the kind of service he has in view. When Paul says, "I wish all men were as I am myself," he doesn't just mean "unmarried," but "unmarried *and* serving in specialized ways in the kingdom." Those who would say they have the gift of singleness need to have something to show for it, in terms of ministry involvement.

Of course, I don't think Paul means to excuse married people from service outside their family life, either -- he's just being realistic about the demands of family life (cf., e.g., Aquilla and Priscilla). And his realism is also intensified by the "present distress" (7:26), which probably includes some form of persecution and famine that would be very trying for families. A single man can survive that kind of situation much more easily than a head of household with several dependents. I imagine the temptation to compromise the faith rather than be killed is greater for a husband/father. And I cannot even imagine the temptation to compromise if the wellbeing of a wife or young children is threatened.

But don't miss the radical implications of these verses for married people. The focus is singleness, but in the background shadows, Paul hints at some important truths about marriage. One point is obviously this: married people need to serve

their spouses and seek to please them with the same kind of fervor that single people are supposed to show in serving the Lord! Seek to please your husband or wife just as diligently as Paul would demand a single person seek to please Christ!

The church has to teach young wives how to please their husbands -- and young husbands how to please their wives, too. That has to be a priority. Obviously Paul believes the demands of married life are so great and bring on so much stress that, despite all the glorious things he says about marriage elsewhere, he would be happy for his readers to forgo marriage in order to not have to carry those burdens! That means married people are going to need preparation, training, and encouragement. Married life is hard. Spouse-pleasing is hard. Marriage brings anxieties and problems that prevent a married person from doing many otherwise good things.

What does it look like for a wife to please her husband? I guess the best answer the Bible gives is in either Proverbs 31:10-31 or Titus 2:4-5. I think if a woman is discreet, chaste, good, obedient, manages her home, loves her husband, and loves her children – her husband cannot help but be pleased with her! Of course, it's one thing to say that, another thing to do it.

What does it look like for a husband to please his wife? The Bible answers in places like Eph. 5 and 1 Pt. 3. If a man gives himself sacrificially for his wife on a daily basis, if he lives with his wife in understanding – she will surely be pleased with him! Again, easier said than done. But that's what a husband needs to aim for.