

Sermon Notes

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Here are some more links to go with the sermon (sorry for any duplicates from last week):

<http://www.boundless.org/beingsingle/>

<http://feeds.feedburner.com/~r/boundlessline/blog/~3/399895657/another-look-at.html>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001097.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2000/departments/theophilus/a0000398.html>

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/september/20.47.html>

<http://www.leithart.com/archives/001500.php>

<http://www.leithart.com/archives/001513.php>

http://www.baptiststandard.com/2001/4_23/pages/pressure.html

<http://40bicycles.blogspot.com/search?q=singleness>

<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1221>

http://www.churchsociety.org/churchman/documents/Cman_119_3_Ervine.pdf

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001480.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001290.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001220.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001145.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001093.cfm>

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

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001217.cfm>

<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001123.cfm>

One of the main points of 1 Cor. 7 is that it doesn't matter if one is single or married in an ultimate sense. We can use our situation to serve, whatever it is. If we get married, it should not be merely for the sake of personal fulfillment, but kingdom expansion. Likewise, we can ask: Why stay single? Not for the sake of personal freedom, but to be of service to the church. Stanley Hauerwas is right that "for Christians it is as good to be single as it is to be married," and that we wrongly presume that "married with children" is the only real way to live the Christian life. In the church, there are those (like Paul) who have been gifted with singleness and they should be welcomed and included in the life of the covenant community.

In general, singles (who wish they were married, whose present status does not necessarily imply a long-term gift) should not think of their singleness as punishment for sin. The flip side of that would be disastrous because it would lead the single to think, "If I can only be righteous enough, God will reward me with a spouse." That's non-sense; no doubt every single Christian could find married people who are less righteous and less mature. A spouse is not a paycheck for being a good person. (See Paige Benton's article "Singled Out for Good" for a helpful antidote to this kind of thinking:

<http://www.csu.ruf.org/News/NewsStory.aspx?guid=b170b47d-e66b-419b-b9bf-aa3e780bf9b2>.)

If you are called to marriage, seek out an opportunity for marriage as soon as possible (with the caveat that men and women will do this seeking in gender specific ways, men initiating and women making themselves available and then responding). If you are *not* called to marriage, then quit worrying about it and get to work as a single. Don't mope around thinking life won't *really* begin until you're married. Do the work God has given you to do in the present.

The very fact that the early church could speak of singleness in positive terms, indeed, as a gift, speaks volumes. According to Paul, singles are not defined by

their lack, but by an excess – not the lack of a spouse, but the abundance of grace and freedom.

The church rejected the traditional view of family as the central institution in society. Instead, the early Christians insisted that the family finds its true fulfillment in the church. As with every aspect of natural life, so the family has to undergo death and resurrection in Christ, in baptism, in order to be fully sanctioned and sanctified. As Alexander Schmemmann put it, in the church, the family finds its “source, the content and transcendent goal of its existence.” The family has undergone eschatological renewal and transfiguration in Christ.

The church also rejects the liberal view of family, in which familial relationships are considered voluntary. In consistent liberalism, family ties are malleable and dispensable, only existing at our convenience. We can leave them or reconfigure them as we choose; they cannot bind us against our consent. There is no “natural” family rooted in creation design; rather the family structure is a matter of changeable social convention. Against this, the church insists that the family is a creation ordinance, designed and ordained by God for our good, with benefits and responsibilities for all family members. The family is held together by covenant bonds, not merely voluntary commitments. Moreover, we find that God’s grace does not negate or nullify creation, but perfects, heals, and transforms it. The family is not central to God’s purposes, but that doesn’t make it unimportant.

[Note: If the family *could* bring redemption, what are we to make of the virgin birth? Abraham tried to bring salvation through the family in Gen. 16, and it ended in disaster. The family can be saved (and in this way become an instrument of grace!), but the power of redemption does not belong to the family in any intrinsic way, and the primary means of grace have been entrusted to the church, not the family, institutionally speaking. As William Willimon points out, sometimes we actually need to be saved *from* our families!

The old covenant was familiocentric in a way that the new covenant is not. This is because the old covenant focused on bringing the promised seed into the world. Hence, the OT is littered with stories about barrenness and attacks on the male children of Israel. The OT includes laws that demand procreation so the seed line could be carried on, e.g., the Levirate. Priestly, kingly, and sometimes even prophetic offices were passed on in genealogical lines. But in the NT, we don’t read anything about the barrenness of Peter’s wife, or the sons of John taking on apostolic duties. These things simply aren’t in the foreground any more as they are in the old covenant after the call of Abraham.]

It seems that in today’s society, the pendulum constantly swings back and forth between idolizing family and despising it. The gift of singleness bears witness

against both distortions, reminding us that while family is a good gift, it is not God's only gift (since singleness is equal to it) or God's ultimate gift (since salvation comes through Christ by way of his church, not the family).

The gift of singleness is to be celebrated with joy in the church, not looked on with suspicion. Jesus and Paul placed a high premium on those who used their singleness for the sake of kingdom service. But nothing I've taught on this topic excuses those (men especially) who intend to get married "someday" but put it off for a period of time so they can live for themselves and have fun, or put it off because they are afraid of the responsibilities that come with commitment. Biblical singleness does not serve selfishness, but serves the kingdom. Men who are supposed to be married need to "strike out in the name of God and find a wife," as Luther put it.

The gift of singleness does not so much mean that the single person has the gift. Rather, it means *the church as a whole* has been gifted with a single who can serve and enrich the community in a variety of ways. Spiritual gifts always belong to the church, not to the individual through whom they are exercised. That's why the use of gifts is to be social and not private.

Singles must note that it is possible for man's "aloneness" (Gen. 2) to be met and overcome outside of a marriage relationship. God gives us the gifts of friendship and fellowship to enrich us and fulfill us. Time and time again, the NT makes reference to personal unity and community in way that brings the focus onto the church rather than marriage. This is important. Singles often experience an acute sense of loneliness – and being alone is the most dreaded curse imaginable! The rest of the church body has an obligation to make singles feel connected and cared for. That's a big dimension of what we mean by "the communion of the saints."

Again: If singleness is a gift, we must remember that (like all other spiritual gifts), it is owed to the church. (Likewise, marrieds are to use their marriages for the sake of kingdom expansion and maturation. Marriage is for bringing children into the world and into the church – but so much more, including evangelism, hospitality, caring for the poor, furthering dominion over the earth through legitimate work, etc.) Thus, singles should commit themselves to service in a way analogous to the way married people are supposed to commit themselves to family life. There is an open, endless field of opportunity in which singles can minister. The gospel-shaped life for a single person is going to be deeply involved in the community and ministries of the church.

Here are some quotations by Stanley Hauerwas that spell out a theology of singleness for those who are so gifted:

Singleness is the one practice of the Church that most profoundly shows that it has accepted and wishes to participate in the hope that God secured through Christ's cross, resurrection, and ascension. Singleness embodies the Christian hope that God's kingdom has come, is present, and is still to come ... when the Church loses the significance of singleness, I suspect it does so because Christians no longer have the confidence that the gospel can be received by those who have not been, so to speak, "raised in it."

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 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. Listen to the baptismal vows; in them the whole church promises to be parent. The minister addresses the church with these words:

"Will you nurture one another in the Christian faith and life and include [those being baptized] now before you in your care?"

With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ.

We will surround [those being baptized] with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their services to others.

We will pray for [those being baptized], that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life."

With 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 parents within the church, because the church is now the true family. The church is a family into which children are brought and received. It is only within that context that it makes sense for the church to say, "We are always ready to receive children. We are *always* ready to receive children."

The most extraordinary thing that is pretty clear that the early Christians did that distinguished them from the Jews is they didn't have to marry. You've got to remember, Jesus was not a good Jew. He was single. He walked around with twelve guys all day...

Followers of Jesus didn't have to marry. And you may think that's because they had negative attitudes about sex. They may have had negative attitudes about sex, but that's not why they didn't marry. The reason they didn't have to marry is because you don't have to have a child to be a Christian. You don't have to have a child to be a Christian because we are an apocalyptic sect that grows by witness and conversion. Just about every time Christians make a fetish of the family, you can be sure they don't believe in God anymore. Because they don't want to witness to anyone about the truth of the gospel, they just want to make sure their kids grow up thinking that they don't have an alternative but to go to the Reformed Church. Singleness is the absolute necessary correlative of the fact that the church is an evangelizing body that grows by witnessing and conversion.

And we must remember that the 'sacrifice' made by the single is not that of 'giving up sex,' but the much more significant sacrifice of giving up heirs. There can be no more radical act than this, as it is the clearest institutional expression that one's future is not guaranteed by the family, but by the church. The church, the harbinger of the Kingdom of God, is now the source of our primary loyalty....They now understand that they have been made part of a community that is more determinative than the biological family.

When the church loses the significance of singleness, I suspect it does so because Christians no longer have confidence that the Gospel can be received by those who have not been, so to speak, 'raised in it.' Put differently: Christian justifications of the family may often be the result that Christians no longer believe the Gospel is true or joyful.

I think that we cannot overlook the fact that one of the few clear differences between Christianity and Judaism is the former's entertainment of the idea of singleness as the paradigm way of life for its followers....I think it cannot be disputed that Paul and Jesus both tend to say that some people will choose not to get married because of a specific religious mission. Moreover, they seem to imply that this is a good thing.

I think the implications of this have seldom been appreciated. For in a certain sense it breaks the natural necessity of the family. The family is not just something we do because we are in the habit, nor is it something we must do to fulfill a moral purpose. Rather marriage and the family, like the life of singleness, becomes a vocation for the up-building of a particular kind of community. Christianity, in a certain sense, thus prepared the way for the romantic view of marriage and the family by setting the institutional form necessary to make marriage voluntary.

The romantic perversion should therefore remind us that if we are to sustain marriage as a Christian institution we will not do it by concentrating on marriage itself. Rather, it will require a community that has a clear sense of itself and its mission and the place of the family within that mission. ... It is clear that the family, in order to be a viable moral enterprise, requires community beyond itself. We see, however, that the special commitments of Christians concerning marriage require an even more substantive community. Yet it is our conviction that the church is formed by a story that gives it the convictions necessary to sustain those called to marry and have children in a world that has been bent by sin and evil. We have the courage to call children into such a world because our hope is not in this world but in a God who has called us to his kingdom through the work of Christ.

See also (and especially) *After Christendom*, 127ff; and *The Hauerwas Reader*, 498, 512ff.

The fact the church privileged singles and set people free from the burden of having to marry had a profound effect on marriage. It may be truly said that the whole notion of romantic love grew out of the biblical view of marriage as a non-necessary relationship, which grew out of Paul's teaching on singleness. Of course, romantic love is an abused notion in our day. But in its purest form, it is right and holy (cf. C. S. Lewis on eros in *The Four Loves*). By disconnecting personal worth from one's marital status, Christians set marriage free to be established on a whole new footing, which was just as much a blessing to marrieds as Paul's teaching on the gift of singleness was to singles.

While marrieds should do all they can encourage singles and help bear their burdens, they should never look on them with pity as though the singles had drawn the short straw. Singles don't need condescending or patronizing sympathy; they need friendship and rock-solid encouragement from God's Word.

In our culture singleness can be a strong counter-cultural witness. Of course, that witness depends on the fidelity (and specifically, the chastity) of Christian singles. To be able to resist the lure of sexual temptation in our culture is an amazing, unthinkable thing. Our culture laughs at sexual restraint because it does not believe such self-control to be possible (apart from some kind of physical or psychological problem). To say 'no' to such strong and almost universally indulged urges requires saying 'yes' to something even more powerful. Faithful singles thus have a very strong platform for proclaiming the glories of Christ and pointing to his kingdom as life's true *telos*. In short singles are in a position to put sex in its place by refusing to join in the "hook up" culture that surrounds us and by refusing to bow down to the idol of sexual pleasure.

As I said in the sermon, the gift of singleness reminds the whole church that we are to be one big happy family. How well do we carry out family responsibilities towards one another? Do we live like family should? If you are married, think of your family as one little snapshot – but the church as a whole is a mural, made of up of families and singles drawn together into a whole. God likes the snapshot,

but it's really the mural he's after (cf. Ps. 87). But we need to make sure the singles are painted in; the church is more than just a family of families, because it is family to many people who have no other family. Jesus spoke of our 'abiding' in him, and him in us – that is, taking up residence and dwelling in him, even as he makes his home in us. As the body of Christ, the church needs to be a place where singles can 'abide' – that is, where they can make a home and dwell in security.

What of those who experience their singleness as a terrible burden? Some people are ridiculously unhappy about their circumstances. But discontentment cannot be fixed by changing circumstances. Contentment is always a matter of the heart (cf. Phil. 4). It is easy for singles who want to be married to become full of resentment. But when such people get married they are just as miserable (only now they have inflicted their misery on someone else). If you idolize marriage before you get married, the marriage god will do nothing but disappoint you after you get married. Marriage cannot save us. Or, to put it another way, only a marriage to Christ can save us – that's the one and only marriage truly "made in heaven."

So what is a single person to do if they really, really desire marriage, but it isn't happening? It really comes down to trusting God for what is best. Only God can carry the burden of singleness and make the single whole. I think those who struggle with singleness are analogous to married couples that want children and cannot have them. (I know the analogy breaks down since those couples can still hope to adopt if they can afford it.) In both cases, something the Bible describes as a good gift, a natural desire in the best sense of that term, is being withheld. Who can say why? And it's quite different than losing a loved one – in the case of singleness and barrenness, the ache not for a lost loved, but for an empty space that was never filled. Your ache has no name, no face to put with it. It's just there. It's a void.

Why doesn't God give the single person what they desire? It is true that God gives us our desires when we delight in him, he grants the prayers of his children, etc. However, we *also* need to look at those passages that talk about how to suffer faithfully, how to receive hard providences, how to be content in all circumstances, etc. The fact is, many of our lives do not turn out as we hoped/dreamed/planned. That's true for *all* of us, to varying degrees (as married people and parents would be quick to point out). But we have to trust that God is

making us mature and Christlike through it all. Everyone suffers – what counts is how we respond. I have done more than enough marriage counseling to know that many people would gladly trade the misery of a difficult marriage for a life of singleness, even with its problems. I know more than a handful of people who would consider their marriage the worst mistake they ever made – and yet they're "stuck." The truth is, every calling, whether married or single, whether pastor or teacher, has its thorns and thistles, its crosses to bear. This is a fallen world – how could it be otherwise? In whatever situation we find ourselves, we are called to faithful, not happy. Yes, happiness should come, and it does in fits and starts. But holiness is the higher priority.

It's ok to scream at God, provided you do it in faith. The Psalms are full of that. David screams at God all the time – but it is a scream of faith. Whenever we see a gap between what God has promised and what we experience, we need to be crying out to God to close that gap. If singleness is a terrible burden, it should be a goad to prayer.

But we have to avoid overly simple pseudo-solutions.

David wrote Psalm 37, but do you think he got all the desires of his heart?! A life of lonely singleness might have been preferable to the disaster his family became. Life is not simple. We do not know why God does what he does. But here are some things we can count on:

- God loves the single Christian just as much as the married Christian. He is good to all his children – and he's good to them everyday.
- God's plan for the single's life will ultimately be beautiful, even if there are many dark threads woven into it.
- God hears the single's prayers and feels his/her pain.
- God's Son has experienced an even greater loneliness than any single when he died on the cross, abandoned by all those he loved, even his own Father.
- God calls singles to make the most of their situation, trusting him and serving him and, yes, rejoicing in him, even when we are at our weakest and most frustrated moments.
- God calls singleness a "gift" in his Word, and esteem the single life highly, if that singleness is used for his glory.
- God promises to compensate for whatever earthly blessings are withheld from us, e.g., he is your wealth, your husband, your father, your comfort, etc. No one who serves God misses out on anything good!

So the question for the single struggling with contentment is this: "Given that I might never get married, given that that longing might never get fulfilled, how can I deal with it? How can I use my singleness to serve God? How can I respond to this trial in a way that matures me? How can I make the best of the hand God has dealt me in his wise and loving providence?" You shouldn't lie and say, "I don't really want to be married." So long as that's your desire, be honest about it, with God and others. But don't be ashamed about the fact that God has not given you what you desire. At some point, you just have to get comfortable with who you are. You have to ask, "Ok, what is God trying to teach me in my circumstances?"

Practical advice for singles:

- Use the opportunities that come with singleness to serve.
- Try to build friendships, not out of a lack, but out of excess. Don't get your security from friendships, but use them to give security to others. Don't try to make friendships because you are lonely and need them to prop you up and make you feel "important." Make friendships because you love people, because you have so much to offer them. Give until it hurts, and then ask God for more to give.
- Ask good friends if they see any character flaws that might be keeping you from getting married. This may be painful, but could open the door to marriage in the future. There is nothing wrong with doing what you can to improve yourself and make yourself a more attractive candidate for marriage. There is nothing inauthentic or disingenuous about trying to change for yourself for the better.
- Remember that the kind of contentment Paul describes in Phil. 4 does not "just happen." It takes effort and commitment. Just as Paul could be content with provisions and without, commit to being content with a spouse or without one.
- If you come to church or go into any other social situation feeling awkward, like "I'm the only one here without a husband, without kids. What am I going to do? What am I going to talk about with people?" you'll find that quickly becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Go into situations saying to yourself, "As a single person I have freedoms and abilities and insights none of these tied-down married people have. How can I use those gifts to help them?" Be "real" about your pain with people – but also recognize that your singleness is not the most important thing about you, it does not mean there is something wrong with you, it does not mean everyone is thinking negatively about you, it does not define you, it doesn't mean you're doomed to a life of failure and insignificance, etc. Just stop worrying and throw yourself into life. Worry/anxiety = unbelief, and we know that's wrong.

-- Remember, as long as you're thinking about your singleness, you're thinking about yourself. It's easy to get so curved in on yourself, you can't help but be miserable. Be an "outward facing" single person, be single with a purpose/mission. Use your singleness to teach people that the kingdom of God does not depend on flesh and blood families. Use your singleness to display the supernatural mission of the church. Use your singleness to teach people what resurrection life will look like, when none of us will have spouses in the way we do now. Recognize that your singleness is a privilege, an opportunity to make your life an eschatological foreshadowing of what is to come for *all* God's people. Make your singleness a sign to all those married people who (mistakenly) think the kingdom of God is centered around their family. Use your singleness to build the kingdom in ways married people can't or won't. Use your singleness to show people that the "first family," the ultimate family, the only eternal family, is the church family. That is every bit as important as a married couple using their marriage to show forth the Christ/church relationship. Singles have an important lesson to teach the church – don't miss out on that!! A church without the presence of singles is a *greatly* impoverished community. Singles bring balance and authenticity to the ministry of the church.

-- Find your significance in Christ and the lifework he has given you. Having a family is great, but having a family is not "ultimate." Family is a good gift, but it's not the only way to do things for God and his kingdom. As a single person, your significance might be more "intangible" but it's still there.

-- Remember that you *do* have a wedding day coming. The groom proposed and you accepted. You're part of the bride of Christ and you'll be at the center of the happiest marriage the cosmos has ever known. Your job between now and then is to prepare to meet your husband, which means living as he's called you to live, even if your life is full of aches and pains. Whatever you give up now for the sake of the kingdom will be paid back many times over.

-- Remember that 99.9% of married people end up basically where you are now. Kids grow up and move away, leaving an "empty nest." A spouse dies, leaving the other without a companion – and then that person has to learn all over again how to relate to people as a single person. So singleness is a gift that most everyone has to embrace and deal with sooner or later.

-- Consider the wisdom of a roommate situation. This is a great way to ward off loneliness and create built-in accountability. But make sure you find a roommate who is godly and mature and wants to use singleness for the sake of the kingdom. It's fine for singleness to share the pain of their singleness together, and their desire to be married. But a roommate situation will not help if it degenerates into two people simply feeling sorry for themselves and moping

around together instead of actively pursuing community involvement and service.