

Sermon follow-up
1 Cor. 7:7-9, 25-40
“The Goodness of Singleness”
Rich Lusk
9-26-10

I have preached on singleness before, and did not try to traverse the same ground I have previously covered in more detail (see my sermons from Sept., 2008). This is a huge topic, and I simply want to offer some supplemental thoughts here.

I do not want to give the impression there is no “doctrine of singleness” in the OT. I mentioned Jeremiah in the sermon. We could also point to the women who served at the tabernacle (mentioned in Ex. 38) and Jephthah’s daughter who was ‘sacrificed’ to a life of permanent virginity in tabernacle service (Jdg. 11).

But on the whole, the old covenant was very family-centered. God’s promise to Eve and to Abraham centers around a seed. Israel existed to bring the promised messiah into the world. Laws like the Levirate institution were designed to protect family lines and insure heirs. The old covenant was basically a familio-centric arrangement.

In the gospels, we see Jesus transforming this order. He says his family consists of his disciples in Mark 3. He legitimizes singleness in Matthew 19. In Luke 11:27, he suggests a woman’s highest calling is not motherhood but discipleship. Jesus, like Paul, points to a time in the near horizon in which it would be easier to be single than married with children (Lk. 23:29; cf. 1 Cor. 7:17-40). Etc.

Some thoughts that may especially useful for young single men....

Is the mandate to "be fruitful and multiply" from Gen. 1 is still in force? Yes, but now fulfillment of that mandate takes on new forms with the coming of the kingdom.

Isaiah 54 and 56 describe single women ("the desolate woman") and male "eunuchs" becoming fruitful in the kingdom age. I think the NT spells out the way this comes to realization, e.g., Paul calling Timothy his son, telling the Galatians he gave birth to them, telling the Thessalonians he's like a mom and dad to them, etc. Paul was a very fruitful unmarried man; he multiplied himself in the churches he planted and the leaders he mentored. There is a kind of "Spiritual" fulfillment of the dominion mandate that a single person can participate in.

That being said, in our culture we need to beware that some Christians are abusing the gift of singleness, or resisting God's gift of marriage. This is another important nuance we need to bring into the discussion about singleness in the present day, as people like Al Mohler and Debbie Maken have done. Why do so many more people seem to be getting the gift of singleness today, or having it for a longer time, than just a couple decades ago? Is it odd that this shift in "gift demographics" corresponds with the breakdown of the family (e.g., rampant divorce, kids growing up in broken homes, etc.), widespread fornication and porn use (even by Christians), etc.? Plus, it's rather obvious that boys have a very hard time transitioning into manhood in our society. They seem to want to delay taking on the responsibilities of mature adulthood so they can play and keep their independence longer. There are a lot of young Christian women who have been deprived by selfish and immature Christian "boys" who refuse to grow up and find wives for themselves. Calvin supposedly said that if a man does not possess the gift of continence, but fails to secure a wife, he actually robs a woman of a husband (himself). This is a real problem, and young Christian men need to be exhorted accordingly.

To put it another way, there is certainly a "gift of singleness," but a lot of people seem to misunderstand what's involved in that gift. It certainly includes sexual self-control, but there's more. The gift of singleness is not a license to extend adolescence, but a mandate for special forms of kingdom service. Gifts are given for the purpose of edifying the body, after all, and if

a man's use of singleness doesn't do that, then I think we have the right to call it into question (just as we would if he is not chaste). A lot of guys stay single longer than they should and fall into grievous sin because of it -- not to mention the damage done to the women they should have pursued with integrity and married. If most guys are honest, a lot of them are not just "feeling the heat" (as Calvin put it) but actually "burning" with sexual desire, and should "strike out on their own and find a wife" (in Luther's words). But many of our young single males, whether remaining virgins or not, are also just living generally selfish lives, using the freedom and flexibility of the single life not for the purpose of mission and ministry, but to play xbox for hours on end. That's not what this gift is supposed to look like. I look at it this way: An unmarried man should pour as much of his time/energy/money into other people and into mission work as a married man pours into his wife and kids. If you're not married to a woman, you need to be "married" to ministry. If some guys were faced with THAT choice (e.g., serving their own families or serving in a homeless shelter), they'd probably be quicker to find wives!

We cannot be legalistic about this, of course. After all, some are called to permanent singleness, so we need to make room for that in our churches, and help train them in how to use their special gift for the common good. We don't want to make people feel guilty for being unmarried; we want to stress the opportunities their situation provides. And I also think it's inevitable that some people will marry later in life (as did the several of the patriarchs did, e.g., Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph) without falling into any of these traps I've mentioned. We need to let people figure out their personal callings before God, as Paul did in 1 Cor. 7. But I think in our society many young men dangerously and detrimentally delay marriage. It hurts them and it (understandably) frustrates a lot of young Christian women.

To set it in more pastoral terms, I would say we need to warn single people of both over-desiring marriage ("I can't have a meaningful life and be happy unless I'm hitched!") and under-desiring marriage ("I love to call my own shots and keep my options open!"). We can idolize romance and family, or we can idolize individual freedom and personal independence; neither is healthy. We need to remind people of these dangers on both sides as we encourage them to prayerfully sort through God's calling on their lives.

Historically, the Roman church has tended to overly favor the celibate life, while Protestants have perhaps over-emphasized the family and marginalized singles. In reality, the church has to make room for both lifestyles, and provide teaching and support for both. Statistically speaking, there is no question God desires the vast majority of us to marry and raise children. But those who are not so called should not be made to feel like second-class citizens in the kingdom; instead, they should be given encouragement to use their singleness for kingdom purposes.

Martin Luther praised marriage:

Chastity is not in our power, as little as are God's other wonders and graces. But we are all made for marriage as our bodies show and as the Scriptures state in Genesis 2. "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him."

I fancy that human fear and timidity stand in your way. It is said that it takes a bold man to venture to take a wife. What you need above all else then, is to be encouraged, admonished, urged, incited, and made bold. Why should you delay, my dear and reverend sir, and continue to weigh the matter in your mind? It must, it should, and will happen in any case. Stop thinking about it and go to it right merrily. Your body demands it, God wills it, and drives you to it. There is nothing that you can do about it...It is best to comply with all our senses as soon as possible and give ourselves to God's Word and work in whatever He wishes us to do.

Let us not try to fly higher and be better than Abraham, David, Isaiah, Peter, Paul and all the patriarchs, prophets, and apostles, as well as many holy martyrs and bishops, all of whom knew that they were created by God as men, were not ashamed to be and be thought men, conducted themselves accordingly, and did not remain alone. Whoever is ashamed of marriage is also ashamed of being a man of

being thought a man, or else he thinks that he can make himself better than God made him.

Calvin went so far as to say that a man without a wife is only “half a man.” He constantly points to the greatness of marriage as a divine institution ordained for our good and his glory.

Calvin on Gen 1:27:

When he soon afterwards adds, that God created them male and female, he commends to us that conjugal bond by which the society of mankind is cherished. For this form of speaking, God created man, male and female created he them, is of the same force as if he had said, that the man himself was incomplete. Under these circumstances, the woman was added to him as a companion that they both might be one, as he more clearly expresses it in the second chapter. Malachi also means the same thing when he relates, (Malachi 2:15,) that one man was created by God, whilst, nevertheless, he possessed the fullness of the Spirit. For he there treats of conjugal fidelity, which the Jews were violating by their polygamy. For the purpose of correcting this fault, he calls that pair, consisting of man and woman, which God in the beginning had joined together, one man, in order that every one might learn to be content with his own wife.

On Gen. 2:18, he writes:

Many think that celibacy conduces to their advantage, and therefore, abstain from marriage, lest they should be miserable. Not only have heathen writers defined that to be a happy life which is passed without a wife, but the first book of Jerome, against Jovinian, is stuffed with petulant reproaches, by which he attempts to render hallowed wedlock both hateful and infamous. To these wicked suggestions of Satan let the faithful learn to oppose this declaration of God, by which he ordains the conjugal life for man, not to his destruction, but to his salvation.

Calvin seeks to reconcile Gen. 2:18 with 1 Cor. 7:1ff:

But here another question presents itself, for these words of Paul have some appearance of inconsistency with the words of the Lord, in Genesis 2:18, where he declares, that it is not good for a man to be without a wife. What the Lord there pronounces to be evil Paul here declares to be good I answer, that in so far as a wife is a help to her husband, so as to make his life happy, that is in accordance with God's institution; for in the beginning God appointed it so, that the man without the woman was, as it were, but half a man, and felt himself destitute of special and necessary assistance, and the wife is, as it were, the completing of the man. Sin afterwards came in to corrupt that institution of God; for in place of so great a blessing there has been substituted a grievous punishment, so that marriage is the source and occasion of many miseries. Hence, whatever evil or inconvenience there is in marriage, that arises from the corruption of the divine institution. Now, although there are in the meantime some remains still existing of the original blessing, so that a single life is often much more unhappy than the married life; yet, as married persons are involved in many inconveniences, it is with good reason that Paul teaches that it would be good for a man to abstain. In this way, there is no concealment of the troubles that are attendant upon marriage; and yet, in the meantime, there is no countenance given to those profane jests which are commonly in vogue with a view to bring it into discredit, such as the following: that a wife is a necessary evil, and that a wife is one of the greatest evils. For such sayings as these have come from Satan's workshop, and have a direct tendency to brand with disgrace God's holy institution; and farther, to lead men to regard marriage with abhorrence, as though it were a deadly evil and pest.

But this very positive view of marriage is not the whole story.

Luther could also make place for permanent singleness, and warned against enticing those so gifted away from their calling and into marriage. He did not disparage celibacy even if he saw it as inferior:

My purpose was only to enumerate those which a Christian can have for conducting his married life in a Christian way, so that, as Solomon says, he may find his wife in the sight of God and obtain favour from the Lord [Prov. 18:22]. In saying this I do not wish to disparage virginity, or entice anyone away from virginity into marriage. Let each one act as he is able, and as he feels it has been given to him by God. I simply wanted to check those scandalmongers who place marriage so far beneath virginity that they dare to say: Even if the children should become holy (I Cor. 7:14), celibacy would still be better. One should not regard any estate as better in the sight of God than the estate of marriage. In a worldly sense celibacy is probably better, since it has fewer cares and anxieties. This is true, however, not for its own sake but in order that the celibate may better be able to preach and care for God's word, as St Paul says in I Corinthians 7 [:32-34]. It is God's word and the preaching which make celibacy, such as that of Christ and of Paul, better than the estate of marriage. In itself, however, the celibate life is far inferior.

Calvin, from the *Institutes*, II.8:

That continence is a special gift from God, and of the class of those which are not bestowed indiscriminately on the whole body of the Church, but only on a few of its members, our Lord affirms (Matth. xix. 12). He first describes a certain class of individuals who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake; that is, in order that they may be able to devote themselves with more liberty and less restraint to the things of heaven. But lest any one should suppose that such a sacrifice was in every man's power, he had shown a little before that all are not capable, but those only to whom it is specially given from above. Hence he concludes, "He that is able to receive it, let him receive it." Paul asserts the same thing still more plainly when he says, "Every man has his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and the other after that" (1 Cor. vii. 7) ...

Virginity, I admit, is a virtue not to be despised; but since it is denied to some, and to others granted only for a season, those who are assailed by incontinence, and unable to successfully war against it,

should betake themselves to the remedy of marriage, and thus cultivate chastity in the way of their calling.

I do not think Calvin is suggesting a man has to actually fall into sexual sin before he concludes that he does not have the gift of singleness. But he is saying we should check ourselves: if we do not sense an ability to resist the lure of fornication or to practice long term self-control, we need to “make no provision for the flesh” by seeking marriage.

While Calvin’s doctrine of singleness may not be all we would desire it to be, we must remember his conclusion: “Virginity, I admit, is a virtue not to be despised.”

From Calvin’s commentary on 1 Cor. 7:

We must also notice carefully the word continue; for it is possible for a person to live chastely in a state of celibacy for a time, but there must be in this matter no determination made for tomorrow. Isaac was unmarried until he was thirty years of age, and passed in chastity those years in which the heats of irregular desire are most violent; yet afterwards he is called to enter into the married life. In Jacob we have a still more remarkable instance. Hence the Apostle would wish those who are at present practicing chastity, to continue in it and persevere; but as they have no security for the continuance of the gift, he exhorts all to consider carefully what has been given them...

We must, however, define what is meant by burning; for many are stung with fleshly desires, who, nevertheless, do not require forthwith to have recourse to marriage. And to retain Paul’s metaphor, it is one thing to burn and another to feel heat. Hence what Paul here calls burning, is not a mere slight feeling, but a boiling with lust, so that you cannot resist. As, however, some flatter themselves in vain, by imagining that they are entirely free from blame, if they do not yield assent to impure desire, observe that there are three successive steps of temptation. For in some cases the assaults of impure desire have so much power that the will is overcome: that is the worst kind of burning, when the heart is inflamed with lust. In some instances, while we are stung with the

darts of the flesh, it is in such a manner that we make a stout resistance, and do not allow ourselves to be divested of the true love of chastity, but on the contrary, abhor all base and filthy affections.

Hence all must be admonished, but especially the young, that whenever they are assailed by their fleshly inclinations, they should place the fear of God in opposition to a temptation of this sort, cut off all inlets to unchaste thoughts, entreat the Lord to give them strength to resist, and set themselves with all their might to extinguish the flames of lust. If they succeed in this struggle, let them render thanks unto the Lord, for where shall we find the man who does not experience some molestation from his flesh? but if we bridle its violence, before it has acquired the mastery, it is well. For we do not burn, though we should feel a disagreeable heat — not that there is nothing wrong in that feeling of heat, but acknowledging before the Lord, with humility and sighing, our weakness, we are meanwhile, nevertheless, of good courage. To sum up all, so long as we come off victorious in the conflict, through the Lord's grace, and Satan's darts do not make their way within, but are valiantly repelled by us, let us not become weary of the conflict.

There is an intermediate kind of temptation when a man does not indeed admit impure desire with the full assent of his mind, but at the same time is inflamed with a blind impetuosity, and is harassed in such a manner that he cannot with peace of conscience call upon God. A temptation, then, of such a kind as hinders one from calling upon God in purity, and disturbs peace of conscience, is burning, such as cannot be extinguished except by marriage.

Paul here expressly declares, that every one has not a free choice in this matter, because virginity is a special gift, that is not conferred upon all indiscriminately...

Now, since natural feeling and the passions inflamed by the fall make the marriage tie doubly necessary, save in the case of those whom God has by special grace exempted, let every individual consider how the case stands with himself ...

We now see, that in deliberating as to this, one must not merely consider whether he can preserve his body free from pollution: the mind also must be looked to, as we shall see in a little...

Virginity, I acknowledge, is an excellent gift; but keep it in view, that it is a gift.

Hence, though virginity should be extolled even to the third heavens, this, at the same time, always remains true — that it does not suit all, but only those who have a special gift from God.

Most notable, I think is Calvin's desire to be pastorally sensitive and flexible. Each individual is responsible for working out his calling before God, whether with regard to marriage, job, living location, etc. While this must happen in the context of the church community, Calvin, like Paul, does not dictate to individuals, but leaves them free to seek the Lord's will and be persuaded in their own minds of their particular vocation.

Two alternate views of the value of singleness can be seen in comparing Al Mohler and John Piper.

Mohler, reflecting on some previous teaching he had given, and the response it elicited

(<http://www.boundless.org/2005/articles/a0001244.cfm>):

Drawing from the creation account and other significant biblical passages, I sought to demonstrate that the Bible presents a conception of marriage that goes far beyond what most persons have even imagined. According to the Bible, marriage is not primarily about our self-esteem and personal fulfillment, nor is it just one lifestyle option among others. The Bible is clear in presenting a picture of marriage that is rooted in the glory of God made evident in creation itself. The man and the woman are made for each other and the institution of marriage is given to humanity as both opportunity and obligation.

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible assumes that marriage is normative for human beings. The responsibilities, duties, and joys of marriage are presented as matters of spiritual significance. From a Christian perspective, marriage must never be seen as a mere human invention — an option for those who choose such a high level of commitment — for it is an arena in which God's glory is displayed in the right ordering of the man and the woman, and their glad reception of all that marriage means, gives, and requires.

This generation of young Christians must lead the way in the recovery of the biblical vision, and build a Christian counter-culture that puts marriage back at the center of human life and Christian living. The young people who attended the New Attitude Conference represent a great hope for such a recovery. The heart-felt yearning for marriage so movingly communicated by those who have sent me such pointed responses to my message indicates that these young Christians are also committed to be agents of such a Christian recovery...

There is one significant qualification about marriage found in the Scriptures. In 1 Corinthians chapter seven, the Apostle Paul writes specifically about the gift of celibacy, offering a clear teaching for those who are given this special gift in order to be liberated for strategic Gospel service. Paul's point is clear. The obligations that are part and parcel of marriage are a matter of deep spiritual responsibility. A Christian who is married is, under the obligations of that sacred institution, less free to seize some opportunities for ministry that would be open to one who is unmarried.

Paul celebrates the gift of celibacy for Christian service, but he says nothing about those who simply would choose singleness as a lifestyle option. His concern was to see the Gospel preached throughout the world, even as the moral reputation of the Corinthian congregation was restored on matters of marriage and sexuality.

Furthermore, Paul speaks very specifically about the sexual aspect of marriage and instructs, "it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Cor. 7:9, NASB). I appreciate Paul's apostolic candor. He

did not condemn sexual desire and sexual passion, but he directed the Corinthians — and us — to marriage as the proper arena for such passion to be expressed.

With all this in view, it would seem that the Bible offers two specific teachings about marriage that should frame our understanding and our engagement in the current debate.

First, marriage is presented as a sacred institution, a covenant made between the man and the woman before their Creator, and an arena in which the glory of God is demonstrated to the watching world through the goodness of the marital relationship, the one-flesh character of the marital bond, the holiness of marital sex, and the completeness that comes with the gift of children.

Second, the Bible presents celibacy as a gift — apparently a rare gift — that is granted to some believers in order that they would be liberated for special service in Christ's name. Paul's discussion of celibacy indicates that this gift is marked by the absence of lust and sexual desire that would compromise or complicate ministry as an unmarried person. Accordingly, those who have been given the gift of celibacy find in Christ the satisfactions others are given through marriage.

Paul privileges this gift of celibacy, stating that he would have many of the Corinthians demonstrate this gift and "remain even as I" (1 Cor. 7:8). Yet, most Christians in every age have been married — not celibate. Marriage has represented the norm for adult Christians in every generation since the time of Paul's writing. This is consistent with the purposes of marriage as laid out in the biblical pattern, and is acknowledged by Paul in numerous passages dealing with husbands and wives, parents and children, and qualifications for church leaders. Celibacy is a wonderful gift — a gift the whole church should celebrate — but it is a rare gift....

Now, to the hard part. Demographic trends, cultural shifts, and a weakening of the biblical concept of marriage have produced a situation in which marriage is in big trouble, even among many Christians. Divorce must be listed first among the ills that have

befallen marriage in recent decades, but at the New Attitude Conference I was asked to address young singles who had not yet married. While the problem of divorce must always be acknowledged and confronted with biblical truth, in speaking to never-married single Christians my purpose was to point them to the glory of God in the comprehensive goodness of marriage. Speaking to that audience, I addressed a problem much closer at hand.

By any calculation, the statistics indicate that young adults are marrying much later in life than at any time in recent human history. As a matter of fact, demographers have suggested that this new pattern of delay in marriage has established a statistical pattern that in previous generations had been most closely associated with social crises like war and natural disaster.

Here are the plain facts: According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the first marriage for the average male is now at age 27. For white females, the age is slightly lower. This amounts to a delay that often has devastating consequences. With puberty coming at earlier ages than ever before — certainly in the early teens for most Americans — the period of time between sexual maturity and marriage is now stretching out into something like an average of 10 to 15 years. The accompanying statistics related to premarital sexual activity parallel the statistics related to the delay of marriage. Can anyone be surprised?

Other problems are closely associated with this delay of marriage. Speaking to this group of Christian young people — an outstanding group of young Christian disciples and leaders — I pointed to what sociologists now describe as "extended adolescence" — a period of life that now is extended well into the 20s and even early 30s by many young adults, often young men, who have trouble making the transition to adulthood.

I urged these young Christians to seize the biblical concept of marriage and all of its glory, to understand that God has set this covenant before them as expectation, and to channel their energies toward getting married, staying married, and showing God's glory in those marriages.

I shared with those who attended the conference my concern that this delay — the deliberate putting off of marriage even among some who intend some day to be married — was "the sin I think besets this generation." Continuing, I also made clear that this is primarily a problem that should be laid at the feet of young men. While some young women may neglect the call of marriage, a far greater problem is the unwillingness of many young men to grow up, take responsibility, lead, and find the woman God would have them to marry. As a rule, young women show far greater commitment to marriage, far greater maturity about marriage, and far greater frustration about the fact that marriage has been delayed. I thought I had made that point clearly — but perhaps not....

Singleness is not a sin, but deliberate singleness on the part of those who know they have not been given the gift of celibacy is, at best, a neglect of a Christian responsibility. The problem may be simple sloth, personal immaturity, a fear of commitment, or an unbalanced priority given to work and profession. On the part of men, it may also take the shape of a refusal to grow up and take the lead in courtship. There are countless Christian women who are prayerfully waiting for Christian men to grow up and take the lead. What are these guys waiting for?

The delay of marriage has caused any number of ills in the larger society, and in the church. Honesty compels us to admit that this is indeed tied to levels of sexual promiscuity and frustration, even as it means that many persons are now marrying well into their adult years, missing the opportunity of growing together as a young couple, and putting parenthood potentially at risk....

Given this commitment and hope as articulated by these thoughtful young women, it should be clear that when I spoke of a pattern of sin in the delay of marriage, I was certainly not attributing that sin to them. To the contrary, as one who believes wholeheartedly in the biblical pattern of complementarity and in the male responsibility to lead, I charge young men with far greater responsibility for this failure. The extension of a "boy culture" into the 20s and 30s, along with a sense of uncertainty about the true nature of male leadership,

has led many young men to focus on career, friends, sports, and any number of other satisfactions when they should be preparing themselves for marriage and taking responsibility to grow up, be the man, and show God's glory as husband and father....

Sensitivity demands that we understand the grief, frustration, and concern of Christian young adults struggling with this issue. They are the inheritors of a culture that has minimized marriage and has sent mixed messages concerning sex, gender, marriage, and all the rest. The full biblical vision of marriage was not, in the main, held before them from their earliest years at home, and was not encouraged and enriched as they grew through adolescence into adulthood. Many of them — especially many young women — feel victimized by this pattern, and they are frustrated by the reality.

Now is the time for the church to take this conversation to the next level. This generation of Christian young adults has the opportunity to seize the moment, reverse cultural trends, and show their elders the glory of marriage as God intended it from the beginning.

Piper's sermon on singleness (<http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/resources/single-in-christ-a-name-better-than-sons-and-daughters>):

My main point is that God promises those of you who remain single in Christ blessings that are better than the blessings of marriage and children, and he calls you to display, by the Christ-exalting devotion of your singleness, the truths about Christ and his kingdom that shine more clearly through singleness than through marriage and childrearing. The truths, namely,

1. That the family of God grows not by propagation through sexual intercourse, but by regeneration through faith in Christ;¹
2. That relationships in Christ are more permanent, and more precious, than relationships in families (and, of course, it is wonderful when relationships in families *are* also relationships in Christ; but we know that is often not the case);

3. That marriage is temporary, and finally gives way to the relationship to which it was pointing all along: Christ and the church—the way a picture is no longer needed when you see face to face;
4. That faithfulness to Christ defines the value of life; all other relationships get their final significance from this. No family relationship is ultimate; relationship to Christ is.

To say the main point more briefly: God promises spectacular blessings to those of you who remain single in Christ, and he gives you an extraordinary calling for your life. To be single in Christ is, therefore, not a falling short of God's best, but a path of Christ-exalting, covenant-keeping obedience that many are called to walk....

Let's start in the middle of the Bible at Isaiah 56:4-5,

Thus says the Lord: "To the eunuchs [those who cannot procreate but turn their lives into a unique service instead of marriage] who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument² and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."

God promises to bless obedient eunuchs with blessings that are better than sons and daughters. In other words, God promises those of you who remain single in Christ blessings that are better than the blessings of marriage and children....

But to see this more clearly we need to get the bigger picture. In the created order that God put in place before sin was in the world, and in the covenantal order that God put in place with the Jewish people from Abraham to the coming of Christ, "God is primarily building his covenant people through the mechanism of procreation." God was focusing his covenant-keeping faithfulness mainly on an ethnic people. Therefore, being married and having offspring was of paramount importance for one's name and one's inheritance and for the preservation of God's covenant people.

So in Genesis 1:28, the first thing God says to Adam and Eve is, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” And in the account of Genesis 2:18, when woman was not yet created, God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.”

And when Abraham was chosen as the father of God’s people, God took him out and showed him the stars and said, “So shall your offspring be” (Genesis 15:5). And when Abraham could not have a son because of Sarah’s barrenness, Abraham said, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” But God answered, “No, . . . Sarah your wife shall bear you a son.” In other words, the physical offspring mattered. And it would come in God’s way.

God reaffirms the same to Isaac in Genesis 26:3: “I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to *your offspring* I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father.” Again physical “offspring” are crucial for the covenant.

These offspring are crucial not only for the preservation of the covenant but also because a person’s name would end without children. So Saul asks David to swear that he will not cut off his offspring for the sake of his name. First Samuel 24:21: “Swear to me therefore by the Lord that you will not cut off my offspring after me, and that you will not destroy my name out of my father’s house.”

Remember the whole elaborate system of Levirate marriage—that is, the marriage of a man to his deceased brother’s wife so that the name of the deceased brother would not be lost. The rule was that the first son born would bear the dead brother’s name.

Deuteronomy 25:6: “The first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.” That’s an amazing provision for the perpetuation of the name through physical seed.

The most famous instance of this is when Boaz agreed to marry Ruth to preserve the name of Elimelech her father-in-law and Mahlon her husband. Boaz said, “Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have

bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day” (Ruth 4:10)....

All of this is the background that makes Isaiah 56:5 shine like the sun to eunuchs and others without marriage and children: “Thus says the Lord: ‘To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.’” So without marriage and without children, these covenant-keeping eunuchs get a name and a memorial better than sons and daughters.

Where did this amazing promise come from? What’s the basis of it and what is it pointing toward? Turn back to Isaiah 53. This is the great prophecy of the sufferings of Christ who “was wounded for our transgressions [and] . . . crushed for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5). In this chapter, we sometimes overlook these words in verse 10: “It was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, *he shall see his offspring*; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.”

He shall see his offspring. Here is a great prophecy: When the Messiah dies as an “offering for guilt” and rises again to “prolong his days,” he will by that great saving act produce many children: He will “see his offspring.” In other words, the new people of God formed by the Messiah will not be formed by physical procreation but by the atoning death of Christ.

Which is why the next chapter (Isaiah 54) begins, “Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married,’ says the Lord” (Isaiah 54:1). And this is also why our text (Isaiah 56:5) says that unmarried covenant-keeping people will have “a monument and a

name better than sons and daughters . . . [and] an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.” In the true people of God formed by Jesus Christ, monuments, names, offspring, and inheritances do not arise through marriage and procreation.

So when we come now to the New Testament, Jesus makes clear that his people—the true people of God—will be produced not by physical procreation but by spiritual regeneration. So he says to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

And Paul says in Galatians 3 to the Jews and Gentiles alike, “Know then that it is those *of faith* who are the sons of Abraham. . . . In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, *through faith*” (Galatians 3:7, 26). In other words, it is not physical descent from Abraham that makes you part of the covenant people of God but faith in Christ.

And Peter says that our inheritance comes not through marriage and offspring but through the work of Christ and the new birth: “According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be *born again* to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:3-4).

So Jesus and Paul and Peter all say: Children are born into God’s family and receive their inheritance not by marriage and procreation but by faith and regeneration. Which means that single people in Christ have zero disadvantage in bearing children for God, and may in some ways have a great advantage. The apostle Paul was single in Christ, and he said of his converts, “Though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (1 Corinthians 4:15). Paul was a great father, and never married. And let him speak for single women in Christ in 1 Thessalonians 2:7: “We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children.” So it will be said of many single women in Christ: She was a great mother and never married.

Take heed here lest you minimize what I am saying and do not hear how radical it really is. I am not sentimentalizing singleness to make the unmarried feel good. I am declaring the temporary and secondary nature of marriage and family over against the eternal and primary nature of the church. Marriage and family are temporary for this age; the church is forever. I am declaring the radical biblical truth that being in a human family is no sign of eternal blessing, but being in God's family means being eternally blessed. Relationships based on family are temporary. Relationships based on union with Christ are eternal. Marriage is a temporary institution, but what it stands for lasts forever. "In the resurrection," Jesus said, "they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Matthew 22:30).

And when his own mother and brothers asked to see him, Jesus said, "'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!'" (Matthew 12:48-49). Jesus is turning everything around. Yes, he loved his mother and his brothers. But those are all natural and temporary relationships. He did not come into the world to focus on that. He came into the world to call out a people for his name from all the families into a new family where single people in Christ are full-fledged family members on a par with all others, bearing fruit for God and becoming mothers and fathers of the eternal kind.

"Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!" a woman cried out to Jesus. And he turned and said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:27). The mother of God is the obedient Christian—married or single! Take a deep breath and reorder your world.

"Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel," Jesus said, "who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life" (Mark 10:29-30). Single person, married person, do you want

children, mothers, brothers, sisters, lands? Renounce the primacy of your natural relationships and follow Jesus into the fellowship of the people of God.

What shall we say then in view this great biblical vision of the secondary and temporary nature of marriage and procreation? We will say what Jesus and Paul said. Jesus said in Matthew 19:12, “There are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and *there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven*. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.” We need not take this (“made themselves eunuchs”) to mean any kind of physical sterilization any more than we take Jesus’ words “tear out your right eye” to mean physically blinding ourselves. But it does mean that Jesus approves that some of his followers renounce marriage and sexual activity for the sake of serving Christ’s kingdom. “Let him who is able to receive this receive it.”

That is what Paul chose for himself and what he encouraged others to consider in 1 Corinthians 7. “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. . . . I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife I say this to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:8, 32-33, 35). In other words, some are called to be “eunuchs” for the kingdom of God. Paul speaks about each having his own gift: “one of one kind, one of another” (1 Corinthians 7:7). In other words, “Let him who is able to receive this receive it.”

So now we end where we began with all this Scripture in our mind. God promises those of you who remain single in Christ blessings that are better than the blessings of marriage and children.

If someone asks, wouldn’t it be better to have both? The blessings of marriage and the blessings of heaven? There are two answers to that question. One is that you will find out someday, and better to learn it

now, that the blessings of being with Christ in heaven, are so far superior to the blessings of being married and raising children and that asking this question will be like asking: Wouldn't it be better to have the ocean and the thimble full? And the second answer is that marriage and singleness both present us with unique trials and unique opportunities for our sanctification. There will be unique rewards for each, and which is greater will not depend on whether you were married or single, but on how you responded to each.

So I say it again to all singles in Christ: God promises you blessings in the age to come that are better than the blessings of marriage and children.

And with this promise there comes a unique calling and a unique responsibility. It is not a calling to extend irresponsible adolescence into your thirties. It is a calling to do what only single men and women in Christ can do in this world, namely, to display by the Christ-exalting devotion of your singleness the truths about Christ and his kingdom that shine more clearly through singleness than through marriage. As long as you are single, this is your calling: to so live for Christ as to make it clearer to the world and to the church

1. That the family of God grows not by propagation through sexual intercourse, but by regeneration through faith in Christ;
2. That relationships in Christ are more permanent, and more precious, than relationships in families;
3. That marriage is temporary, and finally gives way to the relationship to which it was pointing all along: Christ and the church—the way a picture is no longer needed when you see face to face;
4. And that faithfulness to Christ defines the value of life; all other relationships get their final significance from this. No family relationship is ultimate; relationship to Christ is.

To him be glory in the Christ-exalting drama of marriage and the Christ-exalting drama of the single life. Amen.

My point in giving these extended excerpts is not to side with either one (since I think they both score points and have valid concerns, but also miss some things), but simply to help us frame the issues. We cannot say that either married life or single life is better in the abstract; all we can say is that in a given case, one form of life or the other is better because it is the gift and calling God has bestowed on that person.

Here is a rather robust discussion of the Roman Catholic church's requirement of celibacy:

<http://biblicalhorizons.wordpress.com/2010/03/11/enforced-celibacy/>

I do think Paul's teaching that forbidding marriage is a demonic doctrine (1 Tim. 4) applies in this case – and the wicked results of the Roman church's policy and practice are not hard to discern. The Roman church wrongly forces men to choose between a call to marriage and a call to pastoral office. Paul manifestly did not do this, since he expected (though did not require) church officers to be faithfully married men with obedient children (cf. officer qualifications in 1 Tim. 3, Titus 1).

Here is one of the best articles on the gift singleness I have found:

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

Here is an encouraging story of two long-term singles who eventually ended up together, but want to share their lessons with others:

<http://spiritualklutz.blogspot.com/2010/08/singleness-suffering-and-christian-hope.html>

