

Being Single: Living for Christ in a world full of couples

Jan. 10, 2016

Brian R. Wipf

Today's message is entitled, "Being Single: Living for Christ in a world full of couples." My title highlights some assumptions that I am working with. My first assumption is that this is a couple's world. We were at *Applebee's* not too long ago and guess where I ordered from? The 2 for \$20 menu. You can order off the 2 for \$20 menu with your kid brother, but that's not their angle, is it? The message is: this is for couples.

Coupling up seems to be the norm that our culture works with. It's normal to be married, to be dating, to be cohabiting (which is not God's design for a couple) or to have a date for prom (instead of going stag). There's this presumption that if you're not coupled up there's something wrong with you. A single person is much more likely to be asked, "You're not married yet?" than a married person being asked, "Why did you get married to *him*?" Even in the church, it seems that being coupled up is normal. That's why I say it's a couple's world. If this is the case, there's a unique challenge to being single. Do I fit?

The second assumption I have for today's message is that you single folks want to live for Christ. Obviously, not every single individual does; those that are unconcerned with this goal won't like the message much. So, my encouragement today is unapologetically focused on helping single people live and honor God in their singleness. I want to point out God's truth so single people live for Christ.

My final assumption is that being single is really hard. Most single people I talk to don't want to be single. They hoped for something different; it's not what they imagined for their life. If that's true that means a single person's desire doesn't match his or her reality. Now, I'm using the word "single" in a pretty broad way this morning; I'm not just thinking of those of you who are in your 20's or 30's and still looking to get married for the first time or to be in a relationship that leads to marriage. We use words like "widowed" or "divorced" to describe the reality of individuals who have lost a spouse or who've gone through a divorce. If that's your experience and you haven't reconciled with your spouse or you have not chosen to get remarried after being widowed, then you share some of the same experiences of other single individuals. You don't have a partner to share your life with; you have fears, triumphs and yes, even intimate moments that you don't get to share. You go to bed alone and, as I shared before, most of the single people I talk to wish it wasn't so. It's hard to be single.

Here's what I want to do: I want to provide for us a foundation as to how we should think about singleness as followers of Jesus. What do we know from the scriptures about how to live as single individuals? God has revealed his wisdom concerning singleness in his word. So, let's first see what God has said in his word about being single. After that, let's try and apply the scriptures as best as we can.

The main text we have in the Bible concerning being single is 1 Corinthians 7, so let's first open our Bibles to that passage. Not only does Paul, the author, address being single in 1 Cor. 7, but he also addresses marriage and, even importantly, foundational truth that we are all meant to stand on regardless of our status.

The first thing I want to mention this morning is that the Bible promotes singleness just like it promotes marriage. Look at vs. 6-8 (READ). Paul says remaining unmarried, remaining single, is good. In vs. 7 he even says he wishes all were single as he was. That's a strong endorsement. Jump with me to vs. 38. Look what Paul says here; "So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better." What an interesting thing to say! To refrain from marriage is better than to be married (we'll talk about why Paul says that in a minute). But right now, notice from the inspired Scripture: being single, remaining unmarried is not something to be ashamed of or rejected by followers of Jesus; it should not be viewed as odd or second class. It's good; it's desirable. I'm fully aware that it may not feel that way especially to those of you who struggle with loneliness and long to be united to someone in marriage. That's why we need to keep studying; why does he say this? Paul is driving to something specific, but to see that we need to read more. So, let's read starting in vs. 17 and go through vs. 38 (READ).

I'm guessing you could hear in Paul's writing his strong presentation of the "remain as you are" principle. He spells out the "remain as you are" principle in vs. 17-24 and then applies it in the following verses. And what is this principle? Remain in the condition, in the relationships, in the situations you were in when God called you, when God made you a follower of Jesus. When we get saved, there's absolutely a way in which everything changes. Our allegiances and loyalties change; what we value, what we love, what makes us smile, what makes us sad, how we use our money all change. We are new creatures; we now belong to the family of God in a new kingdom having been rescued and ransomed from the domain of darkness. That's some radical change! But, Paul says, there are some things that ought to stay the same unless God calls you out of it.

Were you an engineer when you were saved? Stay an engineer. Were you a school board member when you got saved? Don't think you have to give that up when you get saved; remain! Do you work at the Co-op? Keep working at the Co-op. Are you married, single, widowed, divorced? Becoming a Christian doesn't mean you need to change that state. Working for the county or the Co-op, being married or single, being a nurse or an engineer isn't what's most important. In fact, these earthly realities are of such little consequence in comparison to the new reality that God has called you into just stay, remain, as you are even though your life has been changed for Christ. Instead of focusing on making changes to these earthly realities and situations, focus on what's most important. And what's that? Look at vs. 19 (READ).

Obedying God is what matters. Fearing him. Believing him. Following his words; aligning yourself with the demands of the gospel, that's what matters. So, whether you are rich or poor, healthy or sick, married or single, a renowned surgeon or one of many at Abbyland, your earthly

condition, the earthly assignment the Lord has given to you pales in comparison to obeying the Word of the Lord.

God expects obedience in where he's placed you: that's a key phrase - where he's placed you. Look at vs. 17; "Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called you." We believe in the sovereignty of God around here. That means you are who you are, you work where you work, you are married, single, widowed and divorced because of the sovereignty of God. He's given you this condition; this is his current assignment for you for his glory and for your good. Too often, I believe, when we are discouraged about the circumstances of our life, we spend far too much time asking and wanting God to change our circumstances to match our desires rather than wanting God to change our desires to match our circumstances. We know what we want; we know what is best for us (so we think) and when God doesn't come through we start to lose faith. Friends, God, our loving, kind, gracious Father, assigns for us circumstances. Some are pleasant; some, quite frankly, are miserable. But he gives them both to us because he knows what's good for us. And God is asking us to trust us just like we want our children or grandchildren to trust us when we say, "I know you hate them, but eat your vegetables."

Look at vs. 7 again, "But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another." God has given some of you singleness; he's given others of you marriage. These are his gifts. But that may change. My mother was given the assignment of a widowed-single woman at 57 years old after having the gift of marriage for 36 years. Things changed. And that's true for every person here. God's word tells us not to place a priority on our earthly state, but instead find contentment in the assignment God has given to us - that's his gift. And we can be content when we believe that our Great and Sovereign King knows what's best for our souls.

Now, what's the main idea? Why does Paul say remaining single is better; why does he say he wishes everyone would be single? The answer is in vs. 32-35 (READ). Did you know marriage is a worldly thing? It's certainly a good thing, but it belongs to this present age. There is no marriage in God's coming kingdom. Do remember when the Sadducees tried to trick Jesus with a story and said, "Jesus, imagine this one woman was married to 7 different brothers. In the resurrection, Jesus, when God's kingdom is established, whose wife will she be?" What does Jesus say? (Mt. 22:30) "In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven." Marriage is good; there is a unique way we glorify and honor God in our marriages as God has patterned the marital relationship after Christ's sacrificial love for his church. And when we get the marital relationship right on this earth, we give people a living parable of God's grace for them to see, understand and, hopefully, believe. But the institution of marriage is for the present age, not for the age to come. It's going to pass away; it's not going to be found in God's kingdom. And Paul is saying when you marry, you automatically have divided concerns and loyalty. On the one hand, being a follower of Jesus, you're focused on God and his coming kingdom - the coming age; how to please and serve him. But when you are married, you also have earthly concerns, rightly and honorably pleasing and serving your wife or your husband. An unmarried man can focus on the things of the Lord and how to please him

undistracted by the needs of a spouse; but a married man has divided interests and loyalties. And what is Paul trying to encourage? He's trying to encourage the disciples in Corinth to be wholly devoted to the Lord. Being single, he says, gives you a better opportunity to have undivided loyalty to the Lord. It actually gives you an opportunity to hold onto this world with a looser grip. What a gift!

Here's the big take away for us: when we are single we have a unique opportunity to serve the Lord and be devoted to him. Obviously, couples can serve and honor and magnify the Lord as they live faithfully to God's word. And there is absolutely something good and right about marriage that should be celebrated and promoted. That's why he says either way, in the Lord, you can't go wrong. If you're married in the Lord, you're doing well. There's no sin. In fact, it's really good to be married if you struggle exercising self-control with your sexual desires. Paul says in vs. 8 that a person should get married if he or she can not exercise self-control. But singleness, Paul says in vs. 38 is better because it frees us to live for Christ without divided loyalties.

We all should aspire to live that kind of life. We all should live with this singular passion for Christ and ultimate allegiance and priority to our God. Married or not. With children or not. Retired or not. A big-time, important executive or not. Live for Christ. But how can we? Paul has just been telling us that when we are married in particular, we have these earthly concerns that divide our loyalty where we can't live for Jesus. Look how he addresses that starting in vs. 29 (READ vs. 29-31).

Do you see what he's doing? He's saying, "Because the time is short and because God's kingdom has already begun, if you're married, don't live like you're married. If you have goods, live like you don't have any." If he was writing to a church in 2016 he might say, "If you're retired, don't live like you're retired. If you've got a nice vacation home, live like you don't have one. If you love basketball or softball, live like you don't." What's he getting at? I think he's saying, Don't live like these things are ultimate. Don't live like nothing's better marriage, children, grandchildren, vacations to Hawaii or your favorite hobbies. Something is better: the Lord.

And I think if we are honest, my brothers and sisters, there are far too many things that are of this world that we cling to much too tightly. Some of you married folk cling to your family, cling to your children or grandchildren like there's nothing better. I hear that sometimes: I only have so many years with my kids at home so I'm going to make the most of it and what I'm afraid we're really doing is saying, "my kids, my family will be my highest allegiance. My children's fun, my children's activities. At least for this season, it's going to be my greatest prize." Let me tell you, my brothers and sisters, if you're not willing to sacrifice every earthly possession for Christ, including family, you are not worthy of him. This is what Jesus means when he says (Lk 14:26), "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." Jesus isn't advocating for neglectful and abusive parenting; he's not telling couples to

ignore their relationship. What he's saying is, "Where's your loyalty? What do you love and value the most? What is your prize?"

Those of you who are married with children and grandchildren, examine your loyalty and your allegiances. Be careful not to call a glorious and tremendous gift of marriage, family, job or whatever and turn it into a goal that supersedes Christ. You will be found unworthy of Jesus if you do.

If you're single, I'm wondering if those verses help you do a double check on your desire for marriage and companionship. As soon as you find a companion, Christ calls you to live as if you don't have one. You would, of course, have one and would have both the blessings and the responsibilities of a spouse. But there's something bigger for you to live for: live for Christ. Just like a spouse who loves husband or wife more than Jesus is not worthy of him, so is a single person who longs for a spouse more than he or she longs for Jesus is not worthy of him.

Maybe you're thinking, "But Brian, I don't know what I'm supposed to do. My days, even hours, are spent in loneliness and my desire for companionship is so strong it's hard for me to control it. I spent 40 years with my husband and he's gone. I don't want another man, but I'd love to have him back. I want to be reconciled to my wife. I want to taste the goodness of marriage like my friends, like my brothers and sisters. What am I supposed to do?" Friends, I believe your heartache is real. Here's the direction God's word points.

First of all, believe God's words today. You are assigned the condition of singleness right now by your God; I don't know how long it will last, but it's God's gift to you now. And in this condition, he's calling you to a unified devotion to him and his kingdom and being single you have a unique opportunity to live your life for Christ. Marriage is not the goal; in fact, it's so not the goal that it doesn't even exist in heaven. Therefore, use the time God has given you to do that which you couldn't if you were married. Serve God, serve his church today in a way you couldn't if you were married. Your condition may change soon and then your loyalties will be divided; you will have earthly anxieties that distract you from serving the Risen Christ. Don't waste the opportunity now to live for Christ with an undivided life.

Secondly, cultivate a heart of contentment in God. Believe me, marriage does not solve the problem of contentment; contentment is a matter of the heart. Without a heart content in the Lord your prayer today might be, "God, give me a husband; give me a wife." But tomorrow, with the same heart discontent in the Lord your prayer will be, "God, change my husband; change my wife." Why would that be your prayer? It's because you still haven't found what you're looking for.

Contentment needs to be cultivated. What I mean by that is you won't automatically have contentment. Contentment is the result of you setting your mind continually on the things that are above and preaching God's word and truth to yourself regularly that God is the strength of your heart and your portion forever. That's a fight of faith, so pick up the sword of the Spirit and fight.

Next, submit to God's training as you wait on him. Tim and I ask God regularly to supply our single friends with a spouse or to restore or reconcile marriages. We want that for you; marriage is good. And if God isn't giving you that and he's making you wait for his provision, that's on purpose. He's training you through the waiting. Listen (PIC) to how Paul Tripp puts God's work for you in the waiting in his book *Broken-Down House* (READ pg. 117).

God has not forgotten you, my dear friends. Tell yourself the truth of God's word that you've heard today. Honestly share your struggles with some close friends; don't struggle alone. And believe that God will answer your prayer, not necessarily for a companion, but for grace so you can live for Christ in a couple's world.

Key verse: 1 Corinthians 7:35 ~ I say this to your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

Questions for the week

- Share with a friend your experience of singleness (your own or what you've observed from a family member). What are some of the unique challenges that you know of?
- What's one new thing you've learned today from God's word?
- How have you seen God give grace while you've waited on him?