

Marked by Eternity

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

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One of the main problems in Corinth was that the people in the church thought that they'd already been resurrected and that as a result they were now "super-spiritual" – that they'd achieved the pinnacle of Christian maturity. They took Jesus' teaching that after the resurrection we'll be like the angels in terms of no longer being male or female or being in a married state to the point that some of them who were married, but denying sex to their spouses and some of them were even going so far as to seek divorce – all in the name of Christian maturity. But consider what these ideas about sex and marriage meant for those in the church who weren't married or who were engaged to be married. Should they even look for a spouse or should they go through with the marriages they had planned? Paul turns to them starting in 7:25.

Now concerning the betrothed [literally, the Greek says "virgins"], **I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.**

It's not clear if Paul is speaking specifically to those who are engaged to be married or if he's talking to single people in general who have never been married. Either way, what he's going to say applies. The problem was that they were being advised to remain single – not to get married, because the Corinthians saw marriage and sex as something defiling.

Paul addresses these singles differently than he did the married people. For the married people seeking divorce it was a clear moral issue. Paul brought Jesus' teaching on marriage to bear on the situation to show them what was right and what was wrong. But in the case of the choice of a single person to marry or not to marry we're not dealing with a moral issue. There's no command in the Bible that specifically addresses this as right or wrong – so Paul offers his Spirit-informed apostolic advice to them.

You see, the Corinthians *had* turned it into a moral issue. Now Paul steps in and he's

going to say, "You guys are right to a point. You're right that it is, or that it can be, a good thing to remain single – but your reasons are all wrong." What he stresses is that as we make major decisions in life, like whether to marry or not, what needs to underlie our thinking is a kingdom perspective. Remember: it's always about the cross. Are we indulging ourselves and just gratifying our earthly desires, or are we truly living for Jesus? It's about priorities. As we've already seen, singleness and marriage are gifts that God has given us. We need to be asking if we're using the gift or wasting it. It's easy for someone gifted with celibacy to cave into societal or family pressure and give up that gift. And all spiritual issues aside, Paul also gives what's just plain practical advice too. So he says to these singles:

I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. (1 Corinthians 7:26-28)

The first thing he says is that while it's not a moral issue – not a sin issue – and that while marriage is a perfectly good state to be in, if you're single, don't get stressed thinking you have to get married. His reason at this point is practical: remain as you are "in view of the present distress." Some translations read "in view of the *impending* distress" which I think is probably better. Some people have taken him to be referring to some kind of crisis that was going on in Corinth at that time, like a famine or an economic problem, but that doesn't quite fit the context. In a few verses he's going to put this all in terms of eternity when he says in verse 31 that "the present form of this world is passing away." He's talking about the urgency of the Christian life and the return of Jesus. There are two sides to that.

First, the reality of living in the "End Times" or the "Last Days" does mean real crisis. Somehow we've lost sight of this. Evangelicals have, over the last century-and-a-half adopted so many goofy and unbiblical doctrines about the "Last Days" and the second coming that we've stopped thinking of the "Last Days" in terms of the here and now and instead we tend to look at them only as something that's going to happen in the future. We hear people talk about the "Tribulation" as if it's some future event. Maybe we can get away with these ideas because we live in a part of the world where

we don't experience persecution for our faith – where Paul's words about a present or impending crisis don't fit our situation. And yet Jesus and the Apostles are clear when they talk about the "Last Days" and the "End Times" as being inaugurated by the first coming of Our Lord and when they talk about the whole of the time between his first and second comings as the Tribulation. The early Christians understood that. Christians in places like China and the Sudan understand that. Our call to Christ is also a call to persecution – a call into a crisis situation – and singleness, just practically speaking, means greater flexibility and a lack of familial responsibility. When persecution hits and when things get difficult, Paul's saying, being single has its advantages.

But second, Paul puts our married or single status in light of the urgency of the Gospel call and in light of the ministry for the Kingdom to which every one of us is called. The culture around us tells us to gratify our desires and to do what we think is best for us. The world's motto is to put "Number One" first. And yet, as we've seen over and over these last few weeks, Jesus calls his followers to put the Kingdom first. The Christian has more to think about than his own desires; the Christian is called to fulfil the Great Commission – to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. The Christian is called to be a part of the body of Christ to use the gifts he's been given in the Church. And so as the Christian makes decisions about his life, he needs to always consider his calling and remember that his life is not his own to live as he pleases, but belongs to God – and that there is an urgency to it all.

Being single or being married isn't the moral issue the Corinthians made it out to be, but that doesn't mean it's not important. Like other big decisions in life, the issue that's really important is that we make these big decisions in light of who we are before God. Paul calls us to remember that there's a lot more to life than just our short time here on earth. Instead of thinking like the pagans do, we need to start thinking like people with an eternal perspective. He goes on in verses 29-31:

This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For

the present form of this world is passing away.

What Paul's saying applies to *all* of us, single or not, and it applies to us as we make all sorts of life decisions. We need to remember: the time is short. Whether it's short because Jesus could come back at any time or just because our time on this earth is short in comparison with eternity, we need to remember that we have a limited amount of time to do the work God has called us to. The world gives us all sorts of distractions. Being single is a state that allows a Christian to devote himself or herself to the cause of God's kingdom – and that's why God gifts some people with celibacy. If we're married, we have certain obligations to spouse and to family. Those things are obligations and it would be a sin to ignore them, but it's also true that we can't let spouse or family distract us from God's calling. Paul uses the examples of mourning and rejoicing and of dealing with the things of this world.

When you mourn you mourn and when you rejoice you rejoice. That's natural, but you can't let it consume you and distract you from the Kingdom. Every one of us has to buy and sell – we have to deal with the things of this world – but Paul says, don't let the things of this world consume you. "By all means," he says, "take care of your worldly business, *but keep it in perspective*. As you go about your business in the world, remember that none of this is going to last. Use the short time you have for eternal purposes. Make sure that the aim of your life isn't just on making a living, but on making a life that counts in God's kingdom."

Again, he's not calling us to neglect our wives or husbands or families or even our worldly affairs, but to keep them in a proper kingdom perspective – he's calling us to remember that as God's people we are marked for eternity. And it's for that reason that even marriage, God-given as it is, as beautiful as it is, isn't necessarily the highest choice in every circumstance.

There have been times and places when the Church has denigrated marriage or held it up as the lesser of two alternatives. The Roman Church taught that those who were truly spiritual were celibate and that marriage was a consolation to those who lacked self-control. I think that modern Evangelicals have swung to the opposite extreme, often looking at singles as if there's something wrong with them. Whereas Rome rules out marriage for her clergy, I've known a lot of evangelical churches that refuse to hire

clergy who aren't married. But if we really understand what Paul says here, it means that we need to honour our brothers and sisters who choose not to get married, despite all the societal pressure to do so, so that they can make use of the gift that God has given them and devote themselves to the Kingdom. Again, remember, sorrow and joy are going to look very different from the viewpoint of eternity. Success in business is not the greatest aim in life and never should be for the Christian, because all the things of this world are passing away.

I sit in my office here at the church and look out the window at the cemetery. I notice that the older graves that are close to the church building rarely receive any attention. In fact, lots of them are covered in moss and lichen. In some cases the lettering on the headstones is almost completely worn away. And yet as you go up the hill, to the other side of the crematorium, every day I see people coming to bring flowers, to clean the headstones and to clip the grass around them. There's one grave I walk past every day and someone keeps two oil lamps on it, burning all the time. That means they come every day to fill them and to relight them if necessary. The older graves – the ones with the big fancy monuments on them – don't get that kind of attention. Even those graves from the 1970s and 1980s rarely seem to get any attention. It doesn't take long. The big monuments outside the window there at one time meant something. They commemorated the lives of local pioneer heroes. And yet today they stand almost forgotten. Brothers and sisters, the greatest glory the world has to offer will not last and can never compare with the glory we find as believers in Jesus Christ. We need to ask ourselves which kind of glory we're pursuing. We need to remember Paul's words here, "For the present form of this world is passing away." Is your glory going to be limited to a crumbling tombstone or is your glory eternal and in the heavens?

St. John wrote in his first epistle:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

This is what Paul is calling us to. What are you living for? It has to be more than to

have a nice house and a retirement plan and to cram your retirement with a bunch of activities before you die. We need to consider that what waits for us on the other side of eternity is wonderful beyond description and that we need to pursue the things of God. We can waste our time and resources on things that won't last *or* we can make the wise choice and invest in God's eternal kingdom.

Paul goes on in verses 32-35:

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, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you [the Greek literally says "lasso" – not "to lasso you", not to tie you down], but to promote good order and to secure your *undivided devotion to the Lord*.

Single life makes it possible to devote yourself to a level of dedication that's out of reach for most married people. Again, it's not that it's wrong for a husband to seek to please his wife or for a wife to seek to please her husband – that's what marriage is all about. What Paul's saying is that if you have a gift of celibacy – of singleness – then for you it's better not to be married. For others it's better to be married, but for you it's not. Your highest fulfilment in regard to the things of God is going to be found if you remain single and take advantage of God's gifting to you.

Consider how much we owe to those men and women who have chosen to remain single for the Lord's sake. I was reading this week – looking up some of the great saints of the last couple of hundred years to see who was single and who was not. I was surprised at some of the names I found on the "single" list. One of my favourite Christian writers, John Stott, one of the greatest contemporary Anglican preachers and Scripture commentators is single. I've heard him say that he spends two to three hours every morning in prayer, worship, and Bible study – now I understand how he can do that.

As a married man I find that hard to do. The best I can usually manage to work into my day is an hour, or on a good day, two hours.

I have other responsibilities. And yet I'm thankful that there are men like Stott out there who can spend so much time with God and who then pass onto the rest of the Church the deep spiritual benefits that arise from their devotion. Consider C.S. Lewis who was a bachelor until his sixties. His devotion allowed him to enrich the Church with his brilliant writing and philosophic probings of the depth of Christian truth. Margaret Clarkson, who was single and one of our modern hymn-writers, who wrote great songs of devotion to God, once wrote, "To know God, to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that he is sovereign and that my life is in his care: *this is the unshakable foundation on which I stay my soul*. Such knowledge has deep significance for the single Christian." She goes on to talk about her struggles and how it took her a long time to accept singleness, but that she finally came to understand that this was God's choice for her, and how grateful she ultimately became for his leading in her life and how she gloried in the knowledge that she was never alone because of his presence.

St. Paul himself is one of the greatest examples. He travelled back and forth across the ancient world for the sake of the Gospel. Out of his dedication of spirit and devotion of heart he not only took the Church from Judea to the rest of the world, but left behind most of the epistles of the New Testament for our benefit. And yet Paul reminds us again: singleness is a high and holy calling, but so is marriage, especially when we realise that singleness is not our gift or calling. He goes on in verse 36:

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

Paul is clear that singleness – the ability to control your passions – is a gift. We're all called to sexual purity if we're not married and God expects us to exercise self-control. What Paul's getting at here is that one test of whether or not we have this gift of singleness is whether or not we can exercise that self-control long-term. If it becomes obvious that celibacy is not our gift, then it's right to get married. The key is the phrase

"determined this in his heart." Like Margaret Clarkson, he has put his life in God's hands and has learned to be not merely content to know that God is with him, but that he glories in the devotion to God that his singleness allows. If that's who you are and where you're at, Paul says, then you do well to remain single, because you have doors open to you that most married people can never walk through.

I think we see this in verses 39-40. Paul isn't specific, but what he does say here ties into some things he says elsewhere that sort of makes this all fall into place. He explains how this all applies to the widow, who's probably older, whose husband has died and is facing the last years of her life. She misses the companionship, she misses the fellowship of her husband, and in that emptiness she's tempted to jump back into marriage just for the companionship. Paul says to her:

A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

Paul says that it's okay to remarry. He reminds this woman that if she does, she obviously needs to marry another Christian. But he says that she'll probably be happier single. This ties directly into his advice in Titus for older women who are mature in the faith and have found their happiness in the Lord Jesus. How much more for the widow? His view all along is that singleness allows greater devotion to the cross, and so why shouldn't a Christian widow be happiest if she now has the ability to devote herself to the cross in a way that she has never been able to before. He says in Titus 2:3-5:

Older women likewise are...to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.

He's giving a specific example of devotion, but it's not just the "older women." We all need to look at our lives this way – sharing our lives in Christ with others to help them grow. That needs to be our priority. Again, the problem in Corinth was that they had taken their eyes off the cross. They were thinking for and about themselves and when you do that your perspective completely changes. St. Paul's dealing with the issues

of singleness and marriage in these verses, but the principle that he teaches here goes far beyond just whether or not we're married; it applies to how we live our whole lives. We need to stop every once in a while and ask ourselves if we're living like this life is all there is or if we're living with eternity in mind. We live in the world and we have to deal with the things of this world. But as Paul says here, "the present form of this world is passing away." As followers of Christ we have a greater hope. God has put us in a time of tribulation so that we can learn to lean on him, and to trust him, and to love him, but as we grow closer to him our lives are changed by his grace and not only do we start to show a new face to the world, but we start seeing the world more and more as a place in need of God's grace – and realising more and more that we're the ones to show it to them! Instead of withdrawing, our natural action should be to want to go out and share the love and grace and mercy of God with people who are dying and for whom Jesus Christ is the only hope. One of the signs of Christian maturity is then the desire to live our lives – and to make decisions – based not on what has the most benefit for me, but on what has the most benefit for the cause of Christ.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, thank you for the challenges you give us through St. Paul's teaching. Help us all to see how you call us to live our lives in the perspective of eternity. That's this isn't just a message about being single or being married, but that it's a message about the very principles that need to underlie how we choose to live our lives and make decisions. Let us always seek to put you and your kingdom first in what we do. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.