

“Being Single”

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

1/23/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

At the beginning of Paul’s 7th chapter in this Corinthian letter, he says, “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” And when I first heard that verse pulled out of its context of chapter 7, I was in middle-school. The preacher in our church went on to elaborate that if you, as a male, saw a beautiful woman walking down the street, you weren’t supposed to look twice because “the second look was sin.” It was then, at that point in my life, that I developed a particular “Christian” life-style decision when faced with such a moral circumstance. I decided, then, that I was always going to take a very long look the first time around.

That phrase from Paul’s writing and this entire section about singles, married and widowed people in that church, seems strange – at the least to us today. But Paul wrote this letter to the people in the Corinthian house church in answer to a letter they had sent him that was full of questions. You can easily tell this because in his writing, he says “now concerning this” or “now about this matter about which you wrote” and so on.

Paul had started this house church in Corinth and it was now in the early 50s. No gospels were written yet and Paul had only written a couple of letters to the church in Thessalonica a few years before. These people had nothing in writing on which to run a church except word-of-mouth stories about Jesus.

This congregation at Corinth had all kinds of problems. One of the problems was that a group of them got so emotionally and physically into the phenomenon of speaking in tongues in worship, that they started insisting that you weren’t really ‘a true believer’ unless you participated in that experience.

Another problem was the “Gnostic” heresy and it had some effect on the church communities for the first three centuries. There isn’t time to describe much of this branch of Christianity but they taught that if you had “secret knowledge” about God and Jesus, you could live out Christianity with more

power and excitement than others. The Gnostic heresy had unorthodox views about God and Jesus as well as a sense of mysticism in its spirituality that attracted many followers. Ultimately, though, it was considered to be out of character with Jesus’ teachings. So there were Gnostic Christians in this Corinthian church.

On one hand, this heresy taught that they could live any way they wanted – anything goes. They thought that since they were all in the new kingdom of God, nothing else mattered. They could eat, drink and be merry and since Paul had previously told them that they didn’t have to “earn” their way into heaven by following the old Jewish law – they had it made. Paul was very upset about how far off the track this group had gotten, (in his opinion) because there was one man married to a woman who was technically his step-mother and others who were getting drunk during their common “agapae” meal worship services.

On the other hand, another group in the church, who had also been influenced by the Gnostic teachings, ended up going in the opposite direction. They became aesthetic, like monks and nuns, because they bought into the Gnostic teachings that spiritual and “heavenly” matters are good, and anything else (having to do with the human body and this earth) is evil. So they became celibate, avoided anything to do with human sexuality (similar to our Puritan ancestors) and they taught that people ought to say single. That’s why they were teaching in their Sunday School classes that ‘it is not good to even touch a member of the opposite sex. This group was so adamant in teaching their ideas about “purity” that some others began to wonder whether or not they should reframe from sex – even if they were married. Word got out that everyone ought to be single and celibate ‘for Jesus.’

The people from these arguing factions in that church ended up getting everyone upset and the whole church seemed as if they were adrift in their spiritual pilgrimage. There were many unresolved disputes. A pretty interesting gathering of Christians.

So Paul was responding, in writing, to the questions these people had asked while he was away. He devoted this entire section of the letter to trying to straighten out this mess caused by the Gnostic believers, some of whom were saying, “anything goes” while others were demanding that everyone ought to live like monks and nuns.¹

If you read through all of chapter seven, you’d see that Paul, obviously recommends (or prefers) being single to being married. But he doesn’t say that married life is bad – he just looks at it as a matter of gifts or talents.

Today, do we hear many people speaking in favor of being single? Not really. In fact, single folk know that this is a couple’s oriented (and prejudiced) society, in many ways. It drives them up the wall when people say things like: “Who’s your boyfriend (or girlfriend) these days?” Or “Aren’t you married yet?” “Confirmed bachelor, are you?”

Single people hear things like this from family members but what these unthinking relatives are actually doing is putting pressure on them to fulfill their expectations. Those who are married ought to remember that the growing number – perhaps soon the majority of people in our society – are not married. One of these days people may say to a married person, “How come you’re un-single, . . . are you codependent or something?”

In verse 25, Paul is careful to tell his readers that what he’s saying is *not* some dictate from God, out of the sky but just his personal opinion as a brother in the faith. And his personal opinion is this. People ought to stay single if they’re single now; and people ought to stay married if they’re married now. In other words, don’t make any big changes in your relationships.

‘Don’t make big changes (here in the 1st century Roman Empire) because things are so distressing and society is shifting with such turbulence, that it would save a lot of hassles if we could just make it through

¹ This group also tried to teach that there was no resurrection from the dead, so Paul devoted chapter 15 of this letter to that issue.

the regular troubles in front of us. Don’t further complicate your life by changing your relationship status.’ And here he was speaking against those who were suggesting that married people ought to split up in order to live a more focused and “pure” Christian life.

At the same time, Paul was careful to add, “If someone does want to get married, it’s OK – there’s nothing wrong with it.” Clearly he was speaking against those who were insisting that celibacy was a better spiritual practice. It happened that Paul, personally, preferred the single life but not for their reasons.

Why would Paul be recommending being single – back then in the first century? Probably for a couple of reasons, one having to do with the larger things going on in the empire. He saw how there was mounting friction between the Romans and the Jews in Palestine – who knows what they’d end up doing to the Christians? The fact is that after he wrote these letters to the Corinth house church and then to the Galatians, he wrote the Romans letter. That was a major attempt to explain, to Roman citizens, what Christianity is really about and how it ought to be embraced by society as a religion that is respectful to the God-sanctioned government.

So times were hard and dramatic things were happening but Paul also realized that married life had additional responsibilities. With Paul’s constant traveling and sometimes the dangers he faced from hostile audiences in his missionary work, he knew that he couldn’t carry on his kind of work if he had a wife and children. Paul was so compelled to spread the gospel from country to country that he really wanted to keep moving. But imagine being married to a guy like Paul.

“How was work today hun?” To which he might have responded, “Oh, bad day at the office, actually. I got arrested and thrown in prison. Some angel got me out and the jailer was so freaked out about the angel that he converted to the faith. And in the next town, they tried to tar-and-feather me and I barely escaped. I think I lost all feeling in my left leg – it’s killing me!”

Imagine hearing that from your spouse as he came in the door, just after you’ve been stuck in the house

all day with a two year old. You've made thirty-seven trips up and down and stairs from the washer to the bedrooms. The repair person hasn't come to fix the stove, so you've actually been trying to get this rusty camping stove to work but the baby has just learned to climb up the crib end and you can't afford a trip to the ER with a head contusion because the car hasn't been starting too well lately. Your two year old has flooded the bathroom floor and the ceiling of the kitchen is about to cave in from the accumulated water pressure. And if that isn't enough, there's an entire container of talcum powder emptied out all over your bedroom

. . . and now he's coming in the door with an angel rescue story, a likely infection coming (which he'll whine about for three weeks) and a brilliant idea to write another book to the people in Rome.

So in his advice to those people in that troubled church, Paul gives several illustrations about being cautious in making any changes in their relationships.

Married people 'ought to live as if they're not married' – and he's not talking about ignoring marriage vows. People who are married should keep in mind that the institutions of this world – marriage, employment, being a coach or a teacher, – relationships and positions in this world are only going to be around as long as this present world is around. So just remember that something else is coming along – namely the next life in God's kingdom. Therefore, people should not act as if being married is the ultimate thing to achieve in the entire universe.

He moves on. In a similar way he says that people, who are desperately sad about something, ought to keep in mind that things will move on – that there are bigger things ahead – other than their disappointment. And people who are really exuberant and overwhelmed by some latest wonder of the Roman Empire, should also remember that bigger things are yet to come. Those who are merchants or dealers, no matter how demanding business gets, should remember that everything on this earth is temporary. That our lives on this earth are only a small part of the span of eternity in God's kingdom.

What Paul is teaching is a Confucius-like Golden Mean outlook on life. 'Keep it together; don't do anything rash; be moderate in everything.' And Paul clearly thinks Jesus will be returning soon, so we shouldn't worry about all these every day lifestyle and life situation predicaments. But Paul was wrong because Jesus wasn't coming back as soon or in the way that he personally anticipated.

So at least, from this section written to that troubled church, we would be wise to heed Paul's general perspective. As Christians, we should remember that whatever our situation might presently be, this is the way it is now, at this point in our life. But God is real and God is here and there's nothing around – in the entire universe – that's ever going to change that.

Even Jesus once said to His followers that it might be better not to be married because of what is coming but He quickly added that not everyone could receive this. Monasticism did creep into the life of the church by the third century. In the church circles where monasticism came to be honored, it was thought that these people would be able to practice a more involved spirituality – by being a monk or nun. This thinking gradually moved to center stage in the Roman Catholic expression of the faith so that in 1079, Pope Gregory made it mandatory for priests to be celibate. I suspect, though, that what Gregory failed to see is that being single does not have any spiritual advantage – it doesn't make anyone *closer* to 'God or *more* holy. It only has advantages for ministry in particular situations.

A single person, as Paul points out, is freer to lead a more unusual life-style, . . . not so conscious of hours, sleeping schedules and meal times in general. A single person can travel or stay away longer from home. If the person has the gift of being single, they can be more effective in some areas than one who is not single. It is no disgrace to be single and we need look only at single people like Paul, Augustine, Florence Nightingale, Mother Theresa and others who have made substantial contributions to the world. If you have the gift of being single, God has a ministry in mind for you and you will make a life-changing difference in the lives of others for God.

Institutionally, we know the traditional church has

to make some adjustments – especially since more and more in our culture are living in single-adult-headed households. We ought to refocus our programs to more easily include single people.

Some of us ought to upgrade our attitudes – to make sure we aren't speaking to single people as if they are teens with no present life and only the future to hope for – somehow hinged on getting “Mr. or Ms. Right.” Just like we've got to be sensitive enough to stop asking couples when they're going to have a baby (as if they are somehow incomplete until they do); we ought to stop asking single people if they're dating anyone (as if they are somehow incomplete until they do). One church, I remember, thought they were being hip in calling their “couple's club” “pairs and spares.” How would you like to be considered a spare?

Most of all – and this point really deserves an entire talk to develop on its own – whether single or married, we should live in community with one another in a generous, interconnected and compassionate environment of caring and giving. Somehow we should be forming relaxed, non-stereotypical relationships between singles and couples. Sometimes it's complex to maintain a healthy self concept and keep your sense of boundaries when you get close to others. It takes a lot of personal maturity and a serious and sustained mindfulness of your own limitations. But if we can do the work of creating a community where we make people feel truly safe with one another – then, somewhat *like* a monk or nun – we can take in and absorb some of the intense pain and heartache of another. We can heal each other because we mysteriously sense that this very human being (who is clearly in a different situation than us) is indwelled with the very Spirit of God and we are going through the joys and the serious pain of this life – somehow together. The extent that you risk helping another feel safe around you – will be the extent that you can help heal them. Do people around you – single or married – feel safe just from being in your presence?

You can't really be there for another if you watch 36 televised football games a week. If you do, you

should be declared legally dead and have your estate probated.

So the take home question for today is this. What is it like to be near you? Have you slowed down enough for the other person to truly experience your inner Spirit? Are you in there? Is there any way they're going to know that they have a place in your heart? ■