

Singleness

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

This is a difficult passage to deal with. It's difficult because of the subject matter. For all sorts of reasons, singleness can be a touchy subject.

- Some people are single who don't want to be – and they're not particularly happy about that. Simply to remind them of it can be upsetting. But, it's in the Bible and it's where we're up to – so we need to deal with it.
- And we need to deal with it because, generally, Protestant churches have failings with this subject. We don't treat singles very well. We give them the impression they're second-class Christians – not yet complete until they get married – and that cuts across what the Bible says here.

But it's also difficult because it's not easy to work out exactly what Paul means. It's a struggle to get some bits to fit together in this passage. It's a struggle because, on the surface, it doesn't seem to have the fully positive view of marriage we encounter everywhere else in the Bible. I think I've got a handle on the main direction Paul goes with this – but I've still got one or two questions about some details. And I'll tell you about some of those later.

Reminder of the Context

Last week, we began that part of the letter where Paul answers the questions the Corinthians themselves asked in a letter they wrote to Paul. The first question was about physical relations in marriage. Some in Corinth followed Greek thinking. They suggested truly spiritual Christians would forego physical relations:

- Some thought you could stay married, but not have physical relations within your marriage.
- Some, it seems, suggested you should no longer stay married. You should divorce.

Paul disagrees quite strongly. To those already married, he says:

- Stay married. Don't get divorced.
- Fulfil your physical duties in your marriage.

This isn't sinful; nor is it unspiritual. It's godliness.

Paul then turns to a related question asked by the Corinthians. The beginning of verse 25:

Now about virgins:

You can tell it's a new question because it's the way he introduces his answers to each of their questions. Once again, we don't have the actual questions. We can only try to work out the question out from the answer. In this case, it seems the question was something like:

Now they've become Christians, should the unmarried go ahead and get married?

Who are the Unmarried?

That leads us to ask: which particular unmarried people? And which particular situation are they in? Three main possibilities are suggested.

First, some suggest Christian fathers in Corinth are asking whether it's right to marry off their unmarried daughters. Look at the NIV footnote to verses 36 to 38 – where it gives an alternate translation:

If anyone thinks he is not treating his daughter properly, and if she is getting along in years, and he feels she ought to marry, he should do as he wants. ...

Personally, I don't think this is the scenario here. Fathers

aren't directly mentioned in the entire passage. Nor does the passage look like it deals with the father-daughter relationship.

Secondly, some suggest there were *spiritual marriages* in the church at Corinth. A man and woman live together as husband and wife – yet, they have no physical relationship. Some of these spiritual husbands found this a bit difficult and were asking Paul if it was right to do something about that. There's evidence of such marriages in the church in the second century and so it's possible they also existed in the first century. Paul already dealt with that issue in verses 2 to 5. And this passage deals with the question of whether or not to get married – not whether to have physical relations within marriage.

Thirdly, some suggest Paul refers to engaged couples – people preparing to get married. They now faced pressure from some groups in the church who said it was more spiritual not to get married – the people behind the statement in verse 1. And so these engaged couples wondered whether they should go ahead with the marriage. I think that's the likely scenario behind Paul's answer.

Three Straightforward Bits

So then, what's Paul say about this issue. **First**, his basic stance is the same as last week: stay as you are. Verses 26 and 27:

Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife.

That hasn't changed. Your marital status isn't something that has to change now you've become a Christian – now

you're under the new management.

- You can be single and a Christian.
- You can be married and a Christian.

Either's OK. So you don't have to get married.

Secondly, if you're unmarried when you become a Christian, and you decide to get married (that is, you decide to change your status in this way), you haven't committed a sin. Verse 28:

But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned.

And again in verse 36:

If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married.

The way Paul stresses this so strongly suggests some in Corinth claimed otherwise.

This was a real problem for these engaged couples. They wanted to be faithful to their new Lord. They wanted also to get married. But some suggested those two things were inconsistent.

- A real Christian didn't get married.
- A really spiritual Christian didn't get married.

They weren't sure what to do. Paul assures them that getting married isn't sinful. They won't be struck down with a bolt of divine judgment if they get married; nor will they forfeit heaven. Marriage is one of God's gifts to humanity – including Christian humanity. Paul may be unmarried, but he's not an ascetic. He doesn't share the Greek view that the physical world is evil in itself.

Yet, **thirdly**, Paul's personal preference is they remain

single. We saw that last week in verse 7. It permeates this passage. It's also in the conclusion – verse 38:

So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better.

What's he mean by *better*? It's important to emphasise it isn't morally better, nor spiritually better. Ashley Callus is a better swimmer than me. Now, I know he trains a lot harder than I do – but even if I trained as much as he did, he'd still be a better swimmer than me.

- Does that mean he's morally better?
- Does it mean he's spiritually better?
- Does it mean he's a better person?

No – it simply means he's a better swimmer.

The person who marries doesn't sin. It isn't morally wrong to get married. It's not spiritually wrong to get married. It doesn't put you into some inferior class of Christian. There's nothing morally or spiritually superior about not getting married. And yet, says Paul,

he who does not marry her does even better.

Better in what sense?

Think about it in terms of spiritual gifts. In 1 Corinthians 12:31, Paul writes:

Eagerly desire the greater gifts.

That suggests some gifts are greater than others – or better than others. Again, it isn't a moral or spiritual issue. A person isn't morally better than others because they have one gift rather than another. It doesn't make them spiritually better. Morality and spirituality don't come into the equation. Gifts are gifts. Either you're given a particular gift or you aren't. You can't boast as if you somehow morally earned that gift or as if it now

makes you spiritually superior. Nor can you be morally blamed if you aren't given that gift.

It seems Paul thinks of the gifts of singleness and marriage along similar lines. God gives these gifts to different people. Paul made that point back in verse 7. I think it's also behind the language he uses in verse 37:

- The man who settles the matter in his own mind.
- The man under no compulsion.
- The man with control over his own will.
- The man who makes up his mind not to marry.

Four similar ways of saying much the same thing. You get the impression Paul wants to stress this point. If you decide not to get married, make sure you really do have the gift of singleness!

- Don't just do it because some people say marriage is a less spiritual state.
- Don't just do it because you think you'll earn brownie points with the church leaders or God.
- Don't just do it because you mistakenly think physical relations are unspiritual or evil.

Make sure you're convinced you actually have the gift of singleness. It'll be very tough on you if you have the gift of marriage and want to pretend you have the gift of singleness!

Paul does state the gift of singleness is better – and we'll look at his reasons in a minute. In this preference for singleness, he appears to agree with the Corinthians. That's what they say. But Paul says it for very different reasons. And he rejects their reasons. They think it's because physical relations are wrong. That's their Greek thinking that thinks of the physical world as unspiritual and evil. Paul strongly disagrees with that. The physical

world is God's good creation. We humans are physical beings. Marriage is one of God's good gifts to us. Their reasons for preferring singleness are wrong.

Three More Difficult Bits

But what are his reasons? This is where the struggle to understand his exact meaning gets serious.

Living in the End Times

Let me start with verses 29 to 31 – because I think this shows the perspective that's the foundation for Paul's advice:

What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

Now, I think the meaning of those verses is fairly clear. Christians are citizens of God's kingdom – we belong to the age to come. That's our certain future. What does that imply for our ongoing life in this world?

- We know this world is passing away.
- We know the material things we gain in this world won't be transferred to the next.
- We know the values of this world aren't permanent.
- We know the important thing is God's kingdom and our participation in that.

Because of that knowledge, we no longer see ourselves with an ongoing attachment to this world – for our real attachment is to the world to come. So we should stand fairly loosely to the things of this world. It's the values of

God's kingdom that determine what's important now. That's fairly common New Testament teaching.

That's the bit I think we Western Christians struggle with getting into our hearts. It's so easy for us to become very attached to this world and its material trinkets. Our lives are comfortable. We're tempted to think these are the things that really matter. That's what our culture tells us day after day. It's easy to forget we're in a war. We wonder: If war conditions are this good, can peace be any better? We must keep focusing on the right perspective. We must bring the gospel to bear on all our thinking.

Paul says this same attitude applies to how we think of marriage. It's also part of living in this world. As with other things of this world, Christians are to have a loose attachment to it. It isn't what determines life. It doesn't dominate life. It's not the prime goal in life. That doesn't mean Christians simply ignore their marital responsibilities or divorce at the drop of a hat – Paul said no to that in the first half of the chapter. They're important responsibilities. Those who are married must take them seriously. But marriage remains part of this world which *in its present form is passing away*.

And so, for these people contemplating whether to go ahead with marriage: they should consider it from that perspective, just as they should consider all other aspects of their lives from that same perspective. From the perspective of eternity, the decision's not that big a deal. It's not something they need to be uptight about. He's not putting restrictions on them. He wants them to be free from concern.

Being Free from Concern

Yet, his preference is singleness. He explains why in verses 32 to 35. He draws a contrast between the unmarried person and the married person:

- The unmarried Christian only has to worry about the things of God. They aren't distracted by a spouse. They aren't distracted by caring for children. They can devote themselves to fully pursuing God's purposes in their lives.
- The married Christian has to worry about the things of God and the things of this world. They have to worry about serving God and their spouse and family. They're divided in two different directions.

You're better off remaining single, because then you can more fully devote yourself to serving God. Yet, if you get married, you don't sin and you're not less spiritual.

Paul's point is good practical advice. For example, think of two men God calls to be missionaries.

- The first isn't married. He can go straight away. And because he hasn't supported a wife and children for the past ten years, he has savings put aside.
- The second has a wife and three children. What's he do with this missionary call? He goes home and says to his wife: "Guess what, honey: a funny thing happened to me in church tonight. I'm convinced God's calling us to be missionaries in Argentina". Not only does he have to convince his wife about the call, he also has to think about what they'll do with their three children.

And so, it looks like the single person has the advantage. He isn't divided in his loyalties.

We could multiply the examples. Many churches are

highly dependent on the ministry of singles. They teach the Sunday School. They run the youth group. They can be regular at Bible study because they don't have to stay home with sick children. Marriage brings with it many troubles or burdens that singles don't have. That's not to say those burdens are unwelcome or unwanted – but they result in what Paul calls divided devotion. Would Paul have been able to achieve what he did if he'd been married? Only if he grossly neglected his family.

Yet, does that provide the complete picture?

- Does the single person always have the advantage in ministry situations? Many congregations prefer a married pastor.
- And for the married person, isn't looking after their family part of being concerned for the Lord?
- Doesn't marriage often improve people's characters in a way not experienced by singles? And doesn't this sometimes improve their ministry? And isn't character what's important in God's kingdom?

That doesn't negate Paul's point in this passage. Singles have great freedom for ministry. Yet, marriage is not without its advantages as well.

I have one small concern about this interpretation. Look at the structure of verses 32 and 33.

- I wish you to be unconcerned – free from concern.
- An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs...
- A married man is concerned about the affairs of this world...

The statements about the unmarried man and the married man are parallel statements that seem to follow straight on from the opening statement: *I would like you to be free*

from concern.

The interpretation I've given you treats the two concerns differently:

- It says the first concern – the unmarried man's concern about the Lord's affairs – is a good concern.
- It says the second concern – the married man's concern about his wife – is a bad concern. Well, perhaps that's too strong – it's a concern Paul wants them to be free from.

Because the statements appear to be parallel, I wonder if it's right to treat them differently. Let me illustrate. Imagine a referee gets two teams together before kickoff.

- Now lads, I want you all not to have a bad game.
- You Cowra lads, I want you to have a good game.
- You Orange lads, I want you to have a good game.

Does he say something different to the two teams? Can you see my hesitation? Yet, I'm not sure what to do with that.

The Present Crisis

Paul may give another reason for his advice in verse 26:

Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are.

This may be just another way of referring to the fact we're now living in the last days. There's no other hint of some particular external crisis in Corinth in the rest of this passage – or in the rest of the letter. Perhaps the closest you get to that is some of them getting sick and dying because of their wrong attitudes to the Lord's Supper at the end of chapter 11.

Yet, it may be there was some other crisis going on also.

- Some suggest a famine at this time.

- Some suggest persecution.

Sometimes life throws up circumstances where it's advisable to postpone marriage until those circumstances change. Our culture's romantic approach to life disagrees – it says: Love conquers all. And that sometimes results in very difficult circumstances for people – things that could have been avoided with some wise forethought. But, in our culture, all sorts of unwise actions are encouraged in the name of romance and love.

Concluding Comments

So, what practical things should we take from this. Paul faced a situation where he argued that the married state is not inferior to the single state. He thought the single state preferable – but he had to defend the equal legitimacy of the married state. In our culture, and especially in our church culture, it's often the other way round. We've totally ignored Paul's advice and often treat singles as second-class or inferior or incomplete or as if there's something wrong with them. Paul doesn't do that – and so neither should we.

I suspect part of the reason is we've lost Paul's perspective. We see marriage as the goal – rather than remembering it's just one of the things of this passing world and the eternal reign of Jesus is the goal. That's not to say we can neglect our responsibilities in marriage or opt out of our commitments – yet, it's possible we've elevated the institution of marriage to a position it's not supposed to have. And, as Paul gives examples in this passage, it's not only marriage we do that with – it's also joys and sorrows and possessions and experiences. These things don't matter. What matters is serving Jesus – and you can do that whether you're married or single, rich or poor, on

top of the world or down in the depths.

Finally, for those to whom God's given the gift of singleness (and that's not all those who currently are single), we need to encourage them to see the advantages. It can provide opportunities for Christian service that married people don't have. Instead of bemoaning the fact they're single and throwing them a pity-party, we need to encourage them to celebrate the value of singleness in serving God.