

Singleness and Eternity

1 Corinthians 7

When preparing for this sermon, I read a book entitled “Single Ever After” by Danielle Treweek. When I heard the title of this book, as an unmarried person my immediate response was, “NO!!! That's not what I want! May it never be! I want someone to share my travels. I want to cook with someone and enjoy meals together. I want to come home at the end of the day and have someone say, ‘welcome home, I missed you’.”

I want someone to affirm me in ways that only a spouse can.

Yet when I got into the book, I found that Danielle was exactly right. Jesus said, “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.”
(Matt 22:30).

Whether we are married or unmarried, in heaven all of us will be single. So, this raises some very interesting questions around marriage and singleness in the present. How do we understand marriage and singleness in the light of eternity? Particularly when we get to verses like 1 Cor 7:8–9:

“To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”

I must have heard these verses a hundred times as a Christian. Each time I read those verses, I hear Paul saying, “if you can't control your sexual urges, get married.” But there's a few problems with that interpretation. Primarily, it makes marriage something that it's not. Marriage cannot take away sexual temptation or sexual sin. Your spouse is not responsible for managing your desires. There will be times within marriage when self-control is essential—through sickness, pregnancy, separation, or simply when your spouse says, “not tonight.” So if we need self-control within marriage, marriage cannot be the solution to a lack of self-control.

There is only one person who can take away your sexual sin and that is Jesus. This is why Jesus died and rose again. He absorbed your sin into himself and nailed it to the cross. The solution to sexual sin is Jesus and enjoying new life in him. Finding our identity in him. Don't expect someone to do what Jesus has already done for you.

So why does Paul tell married couples not to deprive one another (v. 5)? Because marriage changes the nature of sexual expectation. If I see a nice car, I might want it and think nothing more of it. But if someone promises me that car, expectation develops. Marriage involves something infinitely more significant: another person has promised themselves to you, and you to them. So, it is entirely appropriate that husband and wife deeply desire one another. Marriage creates a sexual expectation that singleness does not have.

As unmarried people, no one has made that promise to us. And we haven't made a promise to anyone else. So, we should not expect that our sexual desires and expectations will be anywhere near our married brothers and sisters.

Hallelujah! We do not live with that tension. We might like to live with that tension. But we need to recognize that it's a tension that comes with a cost.

This is why Paul says in v. 7,
“I wish that all men were as I am.”

That is, unmarried. But not because he's down on marriage. Paul has just encouraged those who are married to enjoy marriage (vv. 4–5). But he understands that married life is very different to unmarried life.

So, he encourages those who are unmarried to stay that way (v. 8). And it's not because remaining unmarried is any better than being married. Remaining unmarried doesn't give you any more status as a Christian. By the same token, neither is being married any better than being unmarried. He says that if an unbeliever wants to leave the marriage, let them (v. 15)! Being married doesn't give you any more status as a Christian.

The reason why Paul wishes that everyone was single is because he recognizes that marriage comes with particular concerns and tensions (v. 33–35). As good and proper marriage is, it can be all consuming. Even the relationship leading up to marriage can be all consuming.

I remember when I was dating, my relationship became all consuming. Because this relationship was so good, I wanted to pour every waking moment into this relationship. And sometimes it was difficult deciding to do what was right by my partner or to serve Christ. And knowing that doing what was right by my partner meant doing what was right by Christ first added to that tension.

I can only assume that in a good marriage, this tension becomes all the more intense as we struggle with serving Christ, serving our spouse, serving our kids, and providing for our own needs. It's a tension that is experienced as expectations need to be negotiated and renegotiated as we pass from season to season. This is the concern that Paul would like us to be free of (v. 32). So as unmarried Christians, we have an inherent dignity. Marriage says, "Look at Christ's love for his church." Singleness says, "Look at the sufficiency of Christ and the world that is coming."

So, it turns out that married people actually need unmarried people. As good and wonderful as marriage is, it's only temporary. It will pass with the world. And so, unmarried people have the dignity of demonstrating what it is to live eternally in the present. To remind married people as good and proper as it is to invest in your marriage, and you should, don't be all consumed by it. Your marriage needs to be lived out with Christ at the center. Marriage is something to be received as being temporal with the context of eternity in mind.

John Piper published a book entitled “This Momentary Marriage”. It's a very appropriate title, because marriage is momentary. Christ is not. It's another book that I recommend.

So, let's return to v. 9. What does Paul mean when he says, “it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”

It is at this point I need to do something that I don't like to do in the pulpit. And that is to pick on the translation. The words "with passion" are not there in the Greek. Paul is simply saying, "it is better to marry than to burn". Paul could be referring to final judgment. If that is the case, he is talking about something that is far more serious than not being able to control your sexual desires. And neither is he talking about being judged because of a lack of control of sexual desire. Lacking control is certainly part of the issue. But it's not THE issue. So, what is Paul talking about?

Have a look back at v. 1 where Paul writes,

"Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry."

This is an issue that the believers in Corinth have raised. There were those in Corinth who were denying the goodness of sex and marriage. Now why would anyone deny the goodness of marriage? The most likely explanation is because they thought they had already arrived. They thought they had already entered into heaven.

Earlier in the letter, Paul writes,

"Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings—and that without us!" (4:7)

No one does sarcasm quite like the Apostle Paul. As he continues,

"How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you!"

You see, because they believed they were already in heaven, they believed that marriage was no longer necessary. And so, to show their spiritual status, they would deny marriage. But here's the thing. Some of those who denied marriage were still sleeping around.

So, here's the point that Paul is making in v. 9. If they are trying to show the spiritual status by denying marriage while they are sleeping around, they are only deceiving themselves. They are having themselves on. Their spiritual status is not determined by their marriage status.

What determines spiritual status is Christ and remaining faithful to Him. And that applies if you are married or unmarried. If some of them were still sleeping around, this would suggest they thought that sex was still good and important. If that was the case, rather than setting a standard that they have set for themselves, and not meeting it because of a lack of self-control, they are better off just getting married. Rather than trying to hold to a false status symbol, they should just enjoy marriage. Otherwise, their self-deception will incur God's judgment, unless they repent.

That's the real issue here. Trying to be one thing, whereas in reality you're something else.

So, how does this apply to us today?

The immediate application is that if you are dating and having sex with your partner, you obviously think that sex is good and important. So why are you delaying marriage?

If you are pursuing a sexual relationship more than you are pursuing a marriage relationship, and you think it's appropriate because you intend to marry, you're having yourself on. Because of the nature of sex, it can only be fully and appropriately

enjoyed within the promise of marriage. So I would strongly encourage you to stop pursuing a sexual relationship and start pursuing a marriage relationship.

Perhaps there is a deeper question to ask: what are you looking for in that sexual relationship? Is it intimacy? To know that you are wanted? To have someone choose you and accept you? Those are good things to desire. But sex cannot ultimately secure them for you. In Christ, you have already been chosen, known and loved. He has given himself for you, and nothing you do sexually can make you more loved by him. So you don't need sex to prove that you are worth loving.

Secondly, Paul doesn't go here, but I'm going to take this idea of self-deception and apply it to those of us who are unmarried. If we're looking at marriage as the solution to sexual desire and loneliness, or imagining that once we're married we'll finally become a 'real person', we too are having ourselves on.

Because what are we actually looking for in marriage? Perhaps we're looking to be known, loved and chosen. Perhaps we're looking for somewhere to belong. Perhaps we want another person to tell us that our life matters. Again, these are good things to desire, and marriage can be a wonderful expression of them. But marriage cannot give us our fundamental identity.

In Christ we are already known, already loved and already chosen. We already belong to God's family. Marriage may add something genuinely wonderful to our lives, but it cannot make us complete. Christ has already given us the thing we're asking marriage to establish: a place where we belong.

The skills we need as unmarried people are the same skills that we will need in marriage - should we have that opportunity. Self-control, initiating and fostering relationships, finding our dignity and self-worth in Christ. Marriage is a good and wonderful gift from God. But it's not the solution to life's problems. Remaining faithful to Christ is. So, we should learn to be content in him.

As an unmarried person, I may not have someone to share my travels with. But I've had the other privilege of joining others on their holiday.

I may not have a family of my own. But I've had the honour of being part of so many other families. It reminds me how I've been made part of God's family.

And I may not have someone to cook with and share meals. But on occasion I can and do share meals with others. For this I'm very thankful.

When I come home at the end of the day, I might not hear "welcome home". But I have a whole bunch of friends who will go out of their way to spend time with me.

I may not have the affirmation of a spouse. But I know what it is to be secure in Christ and affirmed by His people.

What I want us to see is that God has not forgotten unmarried people. It's not as though God has given married people something wonderful, and it's too bad if you're not married. It's not that at all. God has abundantly blessed unmarried people as well. So, to see marriage as something better than being unmarried is to deceive ourselves and overlook the abundant blessing that God has given unmarried people.

If you are unmarried and the opportunity comes to marry, by all means consider it. Marriage is a wonderful gift from God. But don't ask marriage to solve problems it cannot solve. Don't overlook the blessings Christ has already given you. Receive marriage, if it comes, as a momentary blessing within the greater and eternal blessing of belonging to Christ.