

# The Good News of Singleness

Jeremy Tam | November 11, 2018

## Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 7:7-9, 25-35

<sup>7</sup> I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. <sup>8</sup> To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. <sup>9</sup> But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

<sup>25</sup> Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. <sup>26</sup> I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. <sup>27</sup> Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. <sup>28</sup> 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. <sup>29</sup> 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, <sup>30</sup> 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, <sup>31</sup> 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.

<sup>32</sup> I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. <sup>33</sup> But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, <sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

## Background

We are continuing our series on "God's beautiful design for relationships and sexuality." Last week, we looked at how God designed marriage, and even though it became broken and corrupted by sin, God is in the process of redeeming and restoring it. Today, we are going to go through a similar journey, but we'll be looking at it through the lens of singleness.

Obviously, there are many singles in our church, and this sermon is very much intended for you. For those of us who are married or engaged, before you start daydreaming, I want to say that this sermon is absolutely for you as well. As with all aspects of God's Word, there is inherent value in understanding how He sees things, even if it does not seem to apply directly to you. However, with singleness, there are at least two very practical ways that it also applies to married people:

Firstly, unless you and your spouse somehow pass away at the exact time, I would venture to guess that about half of all couples will be single again at some point in the future. I am not trying to be morbid or a downer here, but that is the reality – this life is fragile, and God may take us home at any moment. So when you become single again, will you know what you are supposed to do? Will you know God’s plan for you as a single?

Secondly, every person in the church has a role to play in shaping our culture. There are many married people in Watermark, so we need you to know how to help create a culture for singles that is honouring to God and His Word. Parents, if you have single children, this culture also shapes how you parent your kids. How are you going to teach them God’s views on singleness, rather than your personal views or society’s views? I have been married for a couple years now and it has been really amazing, but one thing that God prompted me about before I got married was to not forget my singleness – to not forget the goodness of singleness and lose my ability to relate to singles.

Whether you are married or single, it is so easy to get wrapped up in our personal lives and forget that we have a whole church family around us. Today’s passage has been a great reminder for me, and I pray that it will be for all of us as well.

## Introduction

Singleness: What do you think about when you hear that word?

Just to clarify, when we say “singleness,” we do not mean that you are just unmarried but still having tons of sex and obsessed with your love life. As we learned earlier in the series, God’s design was for sex to be experienced within the lifelong commitment of marriage. Biblical singleness is a complete shift away from the fixation with sex and romance that you see in popular culture and the world all around us.

I think we know what our world thinks about it: It is *everywhere*. When we look at culture, how many songs are about falling in and out of love? When’s the last time you heard a pop song about being single and content? How many TV shows or movies have you watched that had absolutely no romantic plotline? What still surprises me when I watch movie trailers is this: No matter how nonexistent the theme of romance is in the actual movie, they still find a way to squeeze in at least one shot about something romantic going on with the main character. If the slogan is “sex sells,” then “celibacy doesn’t sell.”

Looking inwardly, for many of us in the church, singleness is like purgatory – something that is not terrible, and you just need to endure it or make use of it before you finally get to the heavenly bliss of marriage and romance. For some of us, singleness is like hell – we want to do whatever we can to get out of it, to stop the aunties and uncles from asking when I am getting married, to stop trying to set me up, and to stop people from asking about my love life. I remember when I was wrestling with my own singleness, and it seemed like romance was a mandatory topic in social circles. There were seasons when I was the one that pushed the conversation, but even when I was not, I was hearing about it so much that I often ended up thinking, “Well, I guess I should be focused on my love life. I guess that’s just normal.”

As we look at today's passage about singleness, if we are honest with ourselves, we may come with a lot of emotions, a lot of preconceived notions, and a lot of "baggage." My prayer is that God's truth will really stand out from all the other voices. As we work through this passage, I believe God will tell us at least three key points about singleness:

1. Singleness is God's gift
2. Singleness is God's design
3. Singleness is for God's glory

## Singleness is God's Gift

To provide some background on the passage that we just read, the apostle Paul is writing a letter to the Corinthian church, answering some questions that they have about marriage and sexuality. In the process, he writes this: *"I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am"* (1 Cor. 7:7-8).

Take a moment to let that sink in.

Paul is saying that marriage and singleness are *both* gifts from God. Some of you may feel that it is obvious that marriage is a gift – we learned that it was part of God's design for creation in Genesis. But singleness is *also* a gift. How is that possible? Hasn't Paul read Genesis? Hasn't Paul ever watched a rom-com? Hasn't Paul been to high school? Some of you are thinking, "Sure, it's a gift. It's just one of those gifts like socks from grandma that I wanna re-gift to somebody else, but I can't, because it's from grandma."

When I was growing up, I had heard about the gift of celibacy or singleness in the Bible, so I could not deny that it existed. However, I was basically taught that it was a really special gift, one that only really special "super Christians" had. So, that was like Jesus, Paul, and Mother Teresa; everybody else who is "normal" sticks with marriage. Not only that, but you literally had to have the voice of God saying from heaven, "Jeremy, you have the gift of singleness; you will supernaturally love the idea of not having sex."

But is there any biblical basis for that? The word for *gift* here (χάρισμα, *charisma*) is the same word that Paul uses for spiritual gifts, and even to describe the benefits of salvation. Gifts are a normal part of being a Christian. When Paul uses the word *gift*, there are two things that are constant: (1) Gifts are graciously given by God; and (2) gifts are given to build up God's people, the church. So, the gift of singleness does not just mean the state of singleness and celibacy. The gift is actually in using your status for God and to serve His people. When you are single, you have the gift of singleness. If you marry, you have the gift of marriage. If you become a widow or widower, you will again have the gift of singleness. The consistent purpose throughout every stage is to build up the body of Christ.

This is not some casual use of the word *gift*. God's gifts are valuable and purposeful, and as Paul writes, it is good. That is pretty surprising to our sex-crazed culture, isn't it? To give you a sense of just how radical these statements are, you have to understand that it would have been even more radical for Paul to write that as a Jew living in the first century.

Marriage was so ingrained in Jewish culture that teachers of the law, as Paul was trained to be, were basically required to get married. Some even say that Jewish men in *general* were obligated to get married. When you look up the term *singleness* in a Bible dictionary, you might see a sub-entry that says, “the unwelcome prospect of not getting married,” or “the undesirability of not getting married.” It might point you to a character in the Old Testament, Jephthah’s daughter. Basically, Jephthah’s daughter knows that she has to die. So what does she do? She asks for some extra time to grieve and mourn. But grieve and mourn what? The fact that she will die single, a virgin. Think about that: She is saying, “Okay, I’m going to die. But die single?! Come on, God!”

It is against this backdrop, a backdrop that Paul would have been abundantly familiar with, that he still says, “Singleness is a *gift*. Singleness is *good*.” Paul wasn’t just trying to make himself and other singles feel better. The gift of singleness isn’t just something crappy that God rebranded and repackaged to help singles get through life. The next point tells us that singleness is actually God’s design.

## Singleness is God’s Design

To understand how singleness fits into God’s creation, we need to pick up on a few phrases that Paul uses in the next section of the passage. “I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is” (v. 26) “The appointed time has grown very short” (v. 29). “For the present form of this world is passing away” (v. 31). When you look at these statements as a whole, Paul is saying that we are living in a situation, a time period, that is unique. It is a time when the present form of this world is passing away.

Paul is referring to the fact that Jesus has come: The Kingdom of God has already broken into our reality, and we are looking forward to the time when all things will be fully restored and made new. If you recall the sermon last week, we talked about the big story of the Bible: Creation, Fall, Restoration, and Consummation. Paul is saying that Jesus has brought redemption. Now, the present form of the world is passing over to a new form, as we await the consummation of God’s great plan.

What does this have to do with singleness? To understand that, we first need to look at God’s three-fold design for relationships and sexuality. We will then look at how Jesus transformed that design when He ushered in this new form of the world.

### The Present Form of this World

**Family:** *Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him”* (Gen. 2:18). When God created the world in Genesis, He said that it was not good for man to be alone, so He created Adam and Eve. There is a fundamental need for humans to be in a family.

**Procreation:** *“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it...”* (Gen. 1:28). God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, so part of our design involves sexuality and procreation – to raise children.

**Illustration:** *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church (Gen. 2:24, Eph. 5:31-32). All throughout Scripture, we see that marriage is an illustration of God’s relationship with His people. Biblical marriage is meant to be picture to the world of how much Christ, the bridegroom, loves His church, the bride.*

For singles, aren’t those the very things that we yearn for, things that seem exclusive to marriage? That relational intimacy that couples have as they marry and form a new family. That ability to enjoy our sexuality to bring children into the world. That fulfillment of living out God’s purpose of marriage, showing the world how great His love is. Marriage seems like the very epitome and embodiment of God’s design.

Is it any wonder that singles feel loneliness, especially when they look at couples? That they are fundamentally missing something? That they will not really be complete until they find “the one”? That maybe they will not really be able to fulfill God’s purposes until they marry? Maybe this helps us understand why Jephthah’s daughter was so distressed.

But this is not what God wants. God *designed* singleness, and even in the Old Testament, we get a foreshadowing of this. God makes this amazing promise to singles: *For thus says the LORD: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off (Isa. 56:4-5).* There is a heavenly hope, an eternal honour for faithful singles.

## The New Form of this World

When we get to Jesus, the promise is fulfilled. God comes to us as a human being, and this embodiment of human perfection lives as a single, dies as a single, and resurrects as a single person. Jesus ushers in a radical new way to understand our design:

**Family:** *While Jesus was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt. 12:46-50).* This is a complete reorientation of who our closest relations are. It is no longer centred around the biological family. Jesus establishes the new form of family; the spiritual community of God is now central.

**Procreation:** Jesus tells us that our physical birth is not ultimate, but we must be born again (John 3:1-8). Earlier in the same letter, Paul writes this to the Corinthians: *I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord (1 Cor. 4:14-17).* This is not just a metaphor. In God’s kingdom, spiritual children are the ones who are born into God’s family. Can you can imagine Paul looking at the Corinthians with the the same love, responsibility, and burden as if they were his own children? They were his own children!

**Illustration:** What about the illustration of marriage? Jesus tells us that in heaven there will be no human marriage (Matt. 22:29-30). Why? Because in heaven, we will be experiencing the ultimate marriage: God and His people, face to face. In the book of Revelation we see this picture: *Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb [Jesus Christ] has come, and his Bride [the Church] has made herself ready... And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband* (Rev. 19:7, 21:2). Now, as the present form of this world passes away, singles are the ones who uniquely point us to this new reality. Human marriage is passing; we look forward to our eternal marriage with God.

With the issue of singleness, when Paul says that the present form of the world is passing, he is essentially saying something like this: When you get engaged, you often take wedding or engagement photos. Those photos can be wonderful: You dress up, find a beautiful location, look for a photographer, and you might even argue about how much to pay for them. Then, you finally get those beautiful prints, you frame them, you put them up, and it is amazing... and “the end.” Is that it? No, of course not!

The photos are literally illustrating the actual wedding that you are looking forward to. It would be absurd for us to just pine after those photos and not think about the wedding. But that is exactly what so many of us do when it comes to singleness. All we see is human marriage, but not the ultimate reality. We yearn after the temporary, when it was meant to point us to something greater. The photos are not ultimate. We do not worship our engagement photos. We look to the real wedding.

Because of this, Paul writes: *“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”* (v. 29). Are we to literally ignore our spouses? Just tell people who are mourning to “stop it”? Of course not. Love your spouses. Mourn with those who are grieving. Celebrate with those who rejoicing. However, Paul is saying that the present form of the world is passing to this new reality, so we need to prioritise our lives accordingly. We do not put ultimate hope in our present circumstances, whether it is our feelings, our possessions, or our marital status.

Jesus gives us a completely new lens through which to look at our purposes of family, procreation, and illustration. Here is a great quote that summarises this: “If marriage shows us the shape of the gospel, singleness shows us its sufficiency. It’s a way to say to a world obsessed with sexual and romantic intimacy that these things are not ultimate, and that in Christ we possess what is [ultimate].” – Sam Allberry<sup>1</sup>

We have gone through a lot of theology so far, but if there is one thing I want you to remember today, it’s this: Singles, in Christ, you are whole. You are complete. Your singleness, whether for a season or a lifetime, is not a surprise to God. It is actually God’s design for you to glorify Him. You have absolutely no disadvantage in fulfilling God’s purposes simply because you are single. In fact, you have some unique advantages.

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Allberry, “How Celibacy Can Fulfill Your Sexuality,” *The Gospel Coalition* (August 26, 2016), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-celibacy-can-fulfill-your-sexuality>.

## Singleness is for God's Glory

This is our final point. Singleness is for God's glory, and this is where we will get really practical. In verses 32 to 35, Paul explains that singles have a unique freedom to serve God, to be anxious for the things of the Lord. It's not that married people cannot, but their way to glorify God is inseparable from loving and serving their spouses. Singles, on the other hand, do not have that responsibility. However, your singleness is not for your own personal enjoyment or to extend your adolescence into your twenties and thirties. Are you using your singleness as God designed? Let's take a look at the three purposes again.

### Family: Spiritual relationships and community-building

How intentional are you in really investing into the people and community around you? Jesus said that the people sitting around you are your family. Do you treat them that way? I know it's not easy. I was single in Hong Kong for many years. I know the busyness, the transience.

I also know that it is possible to develop intimacy with the brothers and sisters that God puts in my life – where you do life together, love one another, and bear one another's burdens. But it does take intentionality. So who are the friends that you are pursuing and reaching out to? Community Groups are a great place to start, but we need to strive to go deeper.

If you are married, how often do you reach out to singles? What would it look like to involve singles in your family life, not in a patronising way because they are "sad and unmarried," but because you see how they can sharpen and encourage you? Are you encouraging singles to fulfill their design to glorify God, or are you just busy asking them about their love lives?

Please do not ever say to a single, "just wait until you're married" or anything that implies that they need to "graduate" from the state of singleness. Do not assume that they have to be married to relate. Yes, there are big differences, but they are not insurmountable – there are differences all across the church. Help singles to understand your life so that they can speak into your life. Try to understand their lives, so that you can do the same.

### Procreation: Spiritual parenting and discipleship

How about being a spiritual parent? If I ask a parent in here, "who are your kids," hopefully they can answer right away. Singles, can you do that? Who are the spiritual kids you are parenting? Who is the "Timothy" to your "Paul"? Who are the people you are investing your life into, listening to, praying for, and that you feel like a parent to? The Kids' and Youth Ministries are two great places to start, but there are plenty of people around who are younger in the faith that you can reach out to and invest your lives in.

By extension, if you are married and do not have biological or adoptive children, the same applies to you. You have no disadvantage in raising spiritual children.

## Illustration: Spiritual marriage with Christ is ultimate

We have not talked about dating, and that could be a whole sermon series, but let's go back to Paul's principle. If you do choose to date, what would it look like to "date as if you're not dating, because the present form of this world is passing"? In other words, even though you are already complete as a single person, you may still want to explore the possibility of marriage. But now, because of this new reality, you can date without the burden or feeling like that relationship has to succeed, or that you even have to be in a relationship to be fulfilled. How liberating would that be in taking the pressure off of the dating process and everyone involved? What would it look like for you to date as if dating was not ultimate, because the present form of this world is passing?

Whatever you do, do not make human marriage your idol. We point to our spiritual marriage with Christ as ultimate. The next time you want to ask someone about their love life, there is nothing wrong with that, but perhaps try asking about their spiritual life first. Singles, come to God with an open heart. Have you ever prayed and asked Him, "God, what do You want for me? Singleness? Marriage? God, I want to be open to You, because your plan is good. Your gifts are good. I want to continue being open to You."

## Conclusion

None of this easy. There are so many temptations and distractions that stop us from being anxious for the things of the Lord. Glorifying God is not easy, which is why Jesus called us to take up our crosses. It is an image of laying down our own desires because we see something greater. It is why Jesus promised us that we will have trials in this lifetime.

Godly singleness goes against everything that culture tells us about what is important in life. It even goes against what the church has often taught and encouraged. Singles, I want to apologise on behalf of the church, for how we have failed to uphold this beautiful, biblical vision of singleness, and how we may have created a culture where marriage is idolised and singles feel like second-class citizens. Today, God is telling you, "No. I don't see you that way. Your singleness is a good thing." Our vision for Watermark, and the whole church, is not for it to be a place where singles just go to find spouses, or get pressured into finding one. Our hope is for us to be a genuine family that loves singles just as they are, encourages them to embrace their gifts, and celebrates singleness. Singles, you are absolutely essential to God's design for this church. You are needed to show the sufficiency of Christ. Church, let's affirm them, support them, encourage them, and celebrate them.

Communion is the perfect way to conclude, because singleness begins, continues, and ends with Christ. If there was ever a fulfilled person who walked this earth, it was Jesus, a single. He is our example. When singleness is hard, look to Jesus. He walked your path as a single. He knew loneliness, rejection, and heartbreak. He even willingly died as a single. Then, when He resurrected as a single, He established a family of millions that has spanned two thousand years. Today, we are living proof that singleness is good. Jesus' resurrection also proves to us that our hope is not in this life, but in a new order of things. We will resurrect to the greatest wedding, for the greatest marriage that the world will ever see.