

The Savior's Superlative Single

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

Introduction: In an article entitled “Single and Satisfied in God,” my friend and New Testament scholar Tom Schreiner raises the question, “What do the Scriptures teach us about being single?” He then follows up with an all too familiar response about singleness: “Many in Christian culture encourage everyone to marry, suggesting that those who are unmarried are strange, or at the very least are not filling their calling.” He then adds, and correctly so, “We see in 1 Corinthians 7:25-40 that the apostle does not agree” (“Expository Insights,” in *Towers*, 2-18-02). Indeed, he doesn't! Paul, like our God, is very pro-single!

Paul has already informed us in 1 Corinthians 7:7 that God gifts some people for marriage and some people for singleness. Jesus said the same thing in Matthew 19:12. Now, in 1 Corinthians 7:25-40 we have the most developed and sustained argument in all of the Bible for the many benefits and blessings of a single lifestyle. We learn in these verses that the God who gave us the gift of marriage also gives us the gift of singleness. Further, singleness is not some kind of lack-luster 2nd best in God's kingdom. You are not less spiritual if you are single. Indeed, God favors the single state for the Christian in a number of ways. Paul makes this abundantly clear in these verses.

I. The Spiritual Single Can Expect Less Distress

7:25-28

Paul addresses “virgins,” “the betrothed,” or those who are single. He notes “I have no command from the Lord, but I do give an opinion (*ESV*, “judgment”) as one who by the Lord’s mercy is faithful” (v. 25). His point is Jesus did not give a specific command about singleness. Therefore, he is simply making a distinction between the inspired words of Jesus and his own inspired judgment which is assured to be truthful by the Lord’s mercy and faithfulness. He reinforces this in verse 40 writing, “And I think that I also have the Spirit of God.” Kistemaker puts it well, “Paul writes his epistle by divine inspiration and not human insight (II Peter 1:20-21). He knows the Lord has given him apostolic authority to speak and to write for the benefit of the church” (*I Cor.*, NTC, 237).

1) Singleness can be a good life

7:26

Paul informs us that the single life is good, especially when there is a “present distress” (v. 26). What Paul means by this phrase is unclear and debated. Some believe Paul has in view the imminent or soon coming again of the Lord Jesus. Fee notes, however, “the word distress literally means “necessity”... and “that Paul has in view the larger “distress” that is the common lot of those who believe, which was perhaps also being intensified by some present realities. In this case their own “present distress” is but a

part of the larger experience of suffering that the church is undergoing until its final redemption at the coming of Christ” (*1 Cor.* NICNT, 364). Life is filled with difficulties and troubles. Sometimes, as it was for the Corinthians at this very moment, it is extreme and intense. In light of this reality, why add the additional burden and weight of marriage? Remaining unmarried is a good thing and lessens your obligations, pressures and responsibilities.

2) Singleness can avoid troubles in this life 7:27-28

Paul builds on the point he made in verse 26. His counsel is simple and filled with common sense wisdom. He begins in verse 27 with two rhetorical questions, while also providing the answer to each question as well. Question 1: “Are you bound to a wife?” Answer: “Do not seek to be released.” Question 2: “Are you released (*ESV*, “free”) from a wife?” Answer: “Do not seek a wife.” In other words, if you are married stay married, and if you are single stay single. Both relationships are pleasing to the Lord. Verse 28 reaffirms this but with a word about the practical value of singleness. “However, if you do get married, you have not sinned, and if a virgin (*ESV*, “betrothed woman,” *NIV*, “virgin”) marries, she has not sinned.” Ascetics need to understand that marriage is not a sin. It is a good gift from a good God. “But” on the practical level in this fallen and broken world, “those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to

spare you this.” Marriage is good, but let's be honest. There are troubles that will attend it because that is the way real life works. Remaining single does avoid those types of concerns, responsibilities and troubles.

II. The Spiritual Single Can Encounter Fewer Distractions 7:29-31

Verses 29-31 are a clarion call to radical Christianity. They are a call to be heavenly minded so that we can be of earthly good. Paul puts forth two important principles for careful consideration and reflection.

1) Cultivate the proper priorities 7:29-31

Christians live in the eschatological tension of the now and not yet. The kingdom has come but it is not yet here fully and completely. But, it is on the way. We must live in the reality of the wonderful truth that the end could come anytime, any moment. It is imminent. So, here is Paul's counsel, “This is what I'm saying (*ESV*, “mean”) brothers and sisters: The time has drawn short. From now on, those who have wives should be like people who don't have them. Those who are sad should be like people who aren't crying. Those who are happy should be like people who aren't happy. Those who buy something should be like people who don't have possessions. Those who use the world should be like people who aren't preoccupied with it.” Now, we must not over-interpret or under-interpret these verses and draw harmful and unbiblical applications. The phrase, “The

time has drawn short” or “the appointed time has grown very short” (*ESV*) in verse 29 provides the controlling principle, along with the proper perspective which we see at the end of verse 31, “this world in its present form is passing away.” Paul’s point is this as Schreiner notes, “believers should constantly live in the light of the end (Rom. 13:11-14) [*1 Cor.* TNTC, 156]. Marriage is temporary (v. 30), mourning and rejoicing over the things of this world are temporary (v. 30), possessions in this life are temporary (vv. 30-31). None of these things are enduring or eternal. One day they will all be gone. So, make sure you have the proper priorities. Understand the value of these things and enjoy them, but do not get glued to them. None of them will last forever. Calvin puts it perfectly, “All things that are connected with the enjoyment of the present life are sacred gifts of God, but we pollute them when we abuse them.... The sum is this, that the mind of a Christian ought not to be taken up with earthly things, or to repose in them; for we ought to live as if we were every moment about to depart from this life” (*1 Cor.* Calvin’s Commentary, 257).

2) Cultivate the proper perspective

7:31

Proper priorities will grow out of the proper perspective, seeing all of life with kingdom eyes. Paul provides this as just noted at the end of verse 31, “this world in its present form is passing away.” *The Message* reads, “This

world as you see it is on the way out.” There is a popular saying, “this world is not my home, I’m just passing through.” For the Christian, that saying is spot-on! This world is not our home. This world is not our home because we will die. This world is not our home because it will die, it will pass away. What we should long for is an eternal home, a New Heaven and New Earth (Rev. 21-22). What we are to pine for is a “kingdom that cannot be shaken” (Heb. 13:28). In Colossians 3:1-2 Paul says, “So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things.”

Having been transformed by the gospel, we have a new set of affections, desires and passions. This world has lost its attraction. It no longer controls me. Christ does. It no longer sets my agenda. Christ does. The Lord Jesus Christ and His kingdom will last forever. This world and its stuff will not.

Why would I give my life to this? I want to be heavenly minded that I might be of some earthly good.

III. The Spiritual Single Can Enjoy Greater Devotion

7:32-35

Her name was Anthusa. She lived in the 4th century, the exact dates of her birth and death unknown. Widowed at the age of 20, cultured and attractive, she would choose not to remarry that she might pour her life into her only son. His name was John Chrysostom (c. A.D. 347-407). He is considered by many to be

the greatest Christian preacher outside of the prophets, apostles and the Lord Jesus. Chrysostum would praise his mother for nurturing his “enthusiasm for the good, his moral energy...his zeal for justice and truth and his steadfast faith.” Though he would receive a classical education, he would say that he “drank still more deeply of the things of the Spirit from his mother at home” (“Anthusa,” *Encyclopedia.com*). What a gift this devoted widow, this devoted single, gave to the world of her day. What an example she is of the truths we discover in verses 32-35.

1) You are freed from worldly anxieties 7:32

Paul wants us “to be without concerns (*ESV*, “anxieties”). Singleness provides a practical advantage. Why? The unmarried man is concerned about the things of the Lord – how he may please the Lord.” Obeying Matthew 6:33, “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” is easier for the single person because they can have a single focus: Christ and his kingdom. There is a spiritual freedom from the anxieties, concerns and cares of this world that is simply not possible for a married person with a family.

2) Your interest remains undivided 7:33-35

Verses 33-35 are the flipside of Paul’s argument in verse 32. Here it states plainly, “But the married man is concerned (*ESV*, “anxious”) about the

things of the world – how he may please his wife -” (v. 33). Paul then drives home his point, “and his interest are divided” (v. 34). It is hard to improve on the paraphrase of *The Message* in terms of a brief commentary, “Marriage involves you in all the nuts and bolts of domestic life and in wanting to please your spouse, leading to so many more demands of your attention.” Paul continues the same line of argument but now moves from addressing men to addressing women. His reasoning is the same: “The unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the things of the Lord” (v. 34). He then adds a specific point of application, “so that she may be holy both in body and in spirit.” David Garland is helpful in grasping what Paul is saying here, “Being holy in body does not mean that she is pure because she avoids the sexual relations that marriage imposes., All Christians are to be holy in body, whether married or not (1 Thess. 5:23; cf. Rom. 6:12, 19; 12:1; 1 Cor. 6:13, 19-20; 2 Cor. 7:1; Phil. 1:20; 1 Thess. 4:4). The combination of body and spirit describes the whole person and means that she strives to be holy in every way and is totally devoted to the Lord” (*1 Cor.* BECNT, 335).

In contrast to this blessing a single woman (and man) enjoys in her devotion to the Lord, “the married woman is concerned (*ESV*, “anxious”) about the things of the world – how she may please her husband” (v. 34). Paul

recognizes this is simply unavoidable for the married, as it should be! A godly husband and a godly wife will rightly be concerned about their mate. God intentionally designed marriage this way. Paul's point is that singleness is a blessing from the Lord in terms of responsibilities, concerns and undivided devotion.

Paul summarizes these verses by telling us in verse 35 that "I am saying this for your benefit." In fact, he uses a picturesque metaphor informing us he has no desire to "put a noose around our necks," to "restrain" us (*1 Cor. Fee, NICNT, 382*). His goal is only "to promote" what is proper (*ESV, "good order"*) and so that you may be devoted to the Lord without distraction." I love the way Fee explains what Paul is after here: "By these words Paul does not want to restrict them, as the ascetics would do, but to free them for whatever is appropriate in their case (apparently either marriage or celibacy), so that they may have constant and unhindered devotion to the Lord. For the gifted celibate that would mean celibacy; but for the betrothed, whose gift is not celibacy but whose devotion to the Lord has been hindered by the ascetics' demanding that a person be so, what is appropriate is marriage...Paul has not argued that celibacy is the way of life that is most appropriate or seemly. Rather, he has given eschatological reasons for preferring it. A betrothed person, who is anxious about whether or not to

marry, is hardly living appropriately or with unhindered devotion. Thus, at the end, despite his setting out to give new grounds for preferring celibacy, Paul again places that preference in a context that equally affirms the “rightness” of marriage, which is what he will once more spell out in detail in the conclusion that follows.” (p. 383).

IV. The Spiritual Single Can Exercise A Better Decision 7:36-40

Paul will now bring everything he has been saying to a conclusion. There are some interpretive landmines in these final verses of chapter 7, though his basic meaning is clear. Find God’s will for your life as a single person or a married person and rest in that calling. Both are right and good, but there are practical advantages to being single.

1) Getting married is not sinful 7:36

Ascetics, like some Roman Catholic monks and nuns, believe a celibate, single life is morally and spiritually superior to getting married. Paul says “not so!” “If any man thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to (*ESV*, “his betrothed”), if she is getting beyond the usual age for marriage, and he feels he should marry – he can do what he wants. He is not sinning; they can get married.” An engaged man is possibly acting inappropriately toward his fiancée because of sexual passion. It is evident he does not have the gift of celibacy and singleness and neither does she (v.

7). What should they do? The answer is simple: “get married!” And, I would add, do it sooner than later. Not only is it not sinful, it is the good and right thing for them to do. Paul told us in verse 2 marriage is one way God protects us from sexual immorality. Those who are gifted for marriage are gifted for sex. Therefore, enjoy both. It is God’s design and plan for you.

2) Remaining single can be even better 7:37-38

Once again Paul speaks of the practical values of singleness. However, he wants us to be sure this call is from the Lord! We do not want to talk ourselves into it or be pressured into it. The person who believes they have the call and gift of singleness must be one who: 1) “stands firm (*ESV*, “is firmly established”) in his heart, 2) “is under no compulsion,” 3) “has control over his own will” (*ESV*, “having his desire under control”) and 4) “has decided (*ESV*, “determined”) in his heart to keep her as his fiancée (*ESV*, “betrothed”). If all of these things are present in terms of remaining single, Paul says he “will do well” (v. 37). This is the right thing to do because it is a conviction of the heart carefully weighed and considered before the Lord.

Paul brings his discussion of singleness to something of an end in verse 38, with a small addendum in verses 39-40. “So, then, he who marries his

fiancée does well, but he who does not marry will do better (*ESV*, “even better”) (v. 38). Marriage is good. Singleness is good. However, there is no denying the practical advantages of the single life. This is especially true in our service to Christ in trying and difficult times of life.

3) Getting remarried must be in the Lord 7:39

Paul concludes chapter 7 with additional wisdom in the context of marriage and singleness, with specific attention given to the issue of remarriage.

Once more he reminds us of the permanence of marriage, “A wife is bound as long as her husband is living” (v. 39). Divorce is never the perfect and desired will of God. However, “if her husband dies, she is free to be married to anyone she wants (*ESV*, “whom she wishes”) – only in the Lord.” Paul’s point is clear. When a Christian’s mate dies they are free to remarry as long as they remarry another Christian. This is in keeping with the principle of not being of “unequally yoked” that we find in 2 Corinthians 6:14-15.

4) Remaining single can result in being happier 7:40

Paul concludes reiterating the practical advantages for those God gives the gift of singleness. Addressing widows in particular, he recognizes God had, for a season, gifted them for marriage. Now, he points out, our Lord may gift them for singleness. If so, don’t weep. Rejoice! “In [his] opinion (*ESV*, “judgment”), she is happier if she remains as she is.” Gardner says, “Paul

still gives the Christian woman a clear choice. He does not force his view of these matters on anyone but does remain concerned that people think through the practical issues of how best to serve the Lord and be devoted to him in stressful times” (*1 Cor.* 359).

Paul ends this section on a humble but authoritative note, “And I think that I also have the Spirit of God.” David Garland has a colorful take, recognizing others may have been claiming divine inspiration for their extreme views which Paul has corrected in this chapter. Paul’s point is clear and to the point, “The Spirit guides his counsel, and he is not shooting from the hip” (*1 Cor.* BECNT, 345).

Conclusion: Whenever I consider the value and worth of single persons I remind myself what I find in the Bible.

- The greatest person who ever lived was a single: the God-man Jesus Christ.
- The greatest person naturally born who ever lived was a single: John the Baptist.
- The greatest missionary and theologian who ever lived was a single: the apostle Paul.
- The greatest statesman who ever lived was a single: Daniel.
- The greatest prophets of Israel who ever lived were singles: Elijah and Elisha.

To this list who can add, at least for a season Joseph, Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, Jeremiah, Nehemiah, Anna, Martha, Mary Magdalene and Lydia. Oh how the people of God

have been blessed by single persons in the past. Oh, how the people of God can be blessed by single persons in the present and in the future. God knows exactly what He is doing when He calls us to marriage, and God knows exactly what He is doing when He calls us to singleness. Whatever God's calling is in your life, you can rejoice and be certain that it is His best for you.