

LIFE WITHOUT MARRIAGE

by Ray C. Stedman

Previous messages in this series have touched upon biblical marriage principles as viewed against the dark background of increasing unfaithfulness and skyrocketing divorce rates. But there are still some fifteen million bachelors in the United States, and thirteen million unmarried women and girls. Many of these are what are called "unclaimed blessings," but many of them of both sexes will probably never marry. Among this group, as among the married, moral anarchy is running rife. Encouraged by books such as *Sex and the Single Girl*, and the many lurid movies of today, single young people find it increasingly difficult to stay off the toboggan slide of sexual looseness. Scripture does not leave these unguided. In its character as a kind of handbook that goes with man, the Bible speaks to every class, every condition, unveils every basic problem of human life, and sheds light on every circumstance. We should expect, therefore, to find it has something insightful and perceptive to say to those who have never married.

The Holy Spirit, in his selection of instruments through which to impart the Word of God, has chosen those best suited to his task. The Bible's advice to the married was through Peter, the married apostle, who was used to unfold most fully the divine intent in marriage, so the words to the unmarried are given through two men who were not married -- the Lord Jesus Christ himself, and the Apostle Paul. They both begin at the same point, with an appraisal of the value of single life -- an especially reassuring word to any who are inclined to view singleness as subnormal or freakish.

We shall hear from Paul first, in the seventh chapter of First Corinthians. The apostle is here answering questions written to him from the Christians at Corinth. Among other matters, they asked about the value and conduct of married life and certain questions as to single life. There were bachelors and spinsters in those days also, and certain questions had arisen concerning them. In Chapter 7, he says,

I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do.
{1 Cor 7:7-8 RSV}

The single life, Paul says, is as much a gift and calling of God as is the married life. This is where he begins. He says celibacy is a divinely approved status, and there is nothing wrong with it at all. In fact, Paul thinks so highly of it that he recommends it to everyone. He suggests they might all be like him. Some scholars feel from certain suggestions in the Scriptures that Paul was once married, although he certainly is not married at the time he wrote this letter, and probably had not been throughout his Christian experience. But some feel that perhaps Paul had been married and that this statement recommending single life for all is a case of sour grapes, like the old familiar saw, "I never knew what happiness was until I got married -- and then it was too late." But this seems doubtful. He is only indicating his approval of singleness as a perfectly acceptable and proper mode of life.

The Lord Jesus starts in exactly the same place, in a very illuminating passage in Matthew 19, the only time he speaks specifically to this question of single life. His comment also arose out of a question addressed to him this time by the Pharisees, who came to him with a question about divorce. For the most part, their question centered on the problem of whether divorce could be granted on the grounds of what we could call today "incompatibility." Is there ground for divorce simply because people cannot get along with each other? The Lord's answer is recorded in Verse 9 of Chapter 19:

"And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery." {Matt 19:9 RSV}

He had previously pointed out that, in the beginning, God did not envision divorce at all. He had said,

"and [God] said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.' So they are no longer two but one. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." {Matt 19:5-6 RSV}

They challenged that statement, saying, "Why did Moses then allow divorce?" He said, "It was simply because of the hardness of your hearts!" {cf, Matt 19:7-8 RSV}. Because the human heart had grown callous and indifferent, therefore, to prevent women having to live under extreme and difficult circumstances, Moses had permitted divorce. But Jesus makes very clear this was never the divine intention. He said that marriage was expected to be permanent, and that there was only one thing that could break it and that was sexual infidelity. When the disciples heard this, they said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry," {Matt 19:10}.

One wonders what kind of wives they had! They are almost shocked by our Lord's suggestion that even though marriage may have its difficulties, even though it may be very difficult to get along with one another, still the marriage is to be preserved. They say, "If this is the case then it would be better not to marry at all." And to this Jesus says, "Not all men can receive this precept, [i.e., about not marrying] but only those to whom it is given," {Matt 19:11 RSV}.

Thus he begins on the same note the Apostle Paul sounds. Single life is a calling from God; it is given to some to be single. God has so arranged life that for most people, as they grow into adulthood, marriage is the rule, and single life is the exception. It is good that it is so, for the race would never have been propagated successfully had it been otherwise. Imagine the difficulties we would be confronted with if this were not the case.

There is a time during childhood when the two sexes are highly incompatible. They will hardly speak to one another. Boys gather with boys and girls with girls and both groups look with mutual disdain upon each other. Suppose that condition were carried over into adult life. Imagine the shenanigans we would have to employ to get a couple together. What fringe benefits we would have to offer! But God solves the problem with the greatest of ease. An alarm clock goes off within the human system at a preappointed time of life, certain little glands pour out hormones and other secretions, and the two sexes run into one another's arms. Wild horses cannot keep them apart.

But not all! There are some who remain uninterested or who are pushed out to the edges of the melee and end up not married. But Paul and the Lord Jesus, speaking by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, make it very clear that such individuals are not abnormal, they are not freaks. This is a designed area of life. God did not intend that all should get married, therefore, it is not failure or a mark of defeat to remain unmarried. It is a special calling of God.

Our Lord went on, in Verse 12, to indicate what factors should determine who would remain single.

"For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it." {Matt 19:12 RSV}

There are two groups here:

First he indicates that single life may be necessary because of circumstances. "There are eunuchs," he says, "who are so from birth." The word "eunuch" in its narrowest, technical sense means an emasculated male, but here it is evident that our Lord uses it in a wider sense, including any who for any reason at all find it impossible or unwise to marry. There are those who are sexually impotent, there are those who are mentally retarded, there are those who have experienced certain forms of physical disability that make marriage most unlikely or unwise. These, the Lord Jesus says, are not to be regarded as misfits or hopeless cases. They find a special niche in God's thinking and programming. He recognizes them as having a special function to

perform.

Also under this classification of those who are single by circumstance are those who, he says, were made eunuchs by man. This was a very common thing in Roman times. There were those who were physically emasculated, such as slaves and temple priests. But there are also other circumstances that demand single life: accidents, imprisonments, and perhaps we might group under this classification those who are simply never asked to be married. Whatever the circumstance may be, something beyond their control has made it impossible for them to marry. Again this is not unanticipated in God's thinking. He finds room and place for such; they are not excluded from his grace and his activity.

Then our Lord speaks of a third class who are not forced by circumstances to be single, but who do so wholly by choice. He says there are those who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God. Because of commitment to some special work within the great overarching dome of God's rule over men (the kingdom of heaven), there are those who choose to be single. As with the others, this is a perfectly proper mode of life. But now our Lord gives a word of counsel to these groups. These words are important, for they are the only words he addresses specifically to the single. He says, "He who is able to receive this, let him receive it."

Not only does he give the basic reasons for remaining single but, he says, if you fall into this classification, then be content with it, receive it, accept it. Accept your circumstances fully -- do not fight them, or resent them; do not constantly battle against the solitary life and feel embittered. Accept it, receive it as men receive gifts from God everywhere.

Now it is interesting that Paul picks up this whole matter exactly at this point and says the same thing. If we turn back to First Corinthians 7, we shall find that he devotes a complete section to expounding and developing this word of our Lord's concerning accepting the single state. In a very helpful passage, beginning with Verse 25, we have Paul's advice to the single.

Now concerning the unmarried, I have no command of the Lord [i.e., the Lord has not spoken directly on this] but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that in view of the impending distress it is well for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek marriage. {1 Cor 7:25-27 RSV}

Two words stand out in that passage, "seek not," he says, "do not seek." Do not seek either to be free from marriage or to be married. He too is saying, "accept the single state, stop this frantic, almost frenzied search for marriage; do not adopt a marriage-at-all-costs attitude."

These words are clearly addressed to those who have passed beyond the stage in which they might normally expect to be married. Perhaps they have gone beyond their early twenties into their thirties and have already begun their life's work. This is evident in the context here. In the early adult years it is never wrong for individuals to seek marriage if they are thus inclined. This is the normal thing, as we have seen in previous messages. But if the normal processes of meeting a partner have passed you by, then the counsel of both the Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul is: "Accept this, do not fight it, put out of your mind this constant desire to be married, but give yourself to that which God has marked out for you for the present." This is very impressive advice coming from such an impressive source. The word of the Holy Spirit to those who are single is to stop any frenzied activity to correct what seems to be an abnormal situation, and simply accept it. This is God's will for you.

Paul lists certain reasons for this advice in Verse 35:

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. {1 Cor 7:35 RSV}

I am not interested, he says, in simply putting you under a vow of celibacy; I am not trying to make monks or nuns out of you; I am not interested in founding monasteries, but I am saying this for your own benefit. It will

be to your advantage if you follow this counsel -- that you do not seek marriage, that you do not make this the end and all of life, and there are two very good reasons why this is true:

First of all, to promote good order. What does he mean? He seeks to prevent the distress caused by this pathetic panting after marriage on the part of those who are single. It is unquestionably true that much social wreckage has been caused by the predatory female, or the housekeeper-hunting male. There are some individuals, unfortunately, who seem to devote their whole lives to seeking marriage. As a result, they cause endless confusion, not only in their lives, but in the lives of others. It is pathetic to see how desperately eager they are for marriage.

I heard of a spinster maiden who answered the phone one day and a male voice said, "Will you marry me?" and she said, "Yes! Who is this?"

The danger in this is not that they will not find a partner, but that they will. They are so set upon getting married at all costs that they ignore the danger signs that would indicate that the marriage would be most unwise. This is why so many who marry later in life make such poor marriages. They have not heeded the advice of the apostle, and have sought so desperately for marriage that they have lost perspective and are no longer able to judge the character of those they meet.

The second reason Paul gives for this counsel is, he says, "in order that I might secure your undivided devotion to the Lord." Now let me make one thing immediately clear. When he speaks of devotion to the Lord, he does not mean a call to the ministry. These words are not designed for ministers and missionaries only, but they are for everyone who is single, no matter what his work may be. Paul is simply recognizing what the New Testament recognizes everywhere, that all life callings are to be fulfilled as unto the Lord. We do our tasks before God, whatever work may be involved. He then develops two reasons for remaining single in order to give undivided attention to what God wants us to do. He has already mentioned one of them in Verse 26, where he points out a special condition that makes single life especially needful: "I think that in view of the impending distress it is well for a person to remain as he is." He enlarges that in Verses 29-31; if you want to know what he means by "impending distress," read these verses:

I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short: 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, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away. {1 Cor 7:29-31 RSV}

Unusually troubled times are indications that opportunity is passing away. This was particularly true in Corinth, to which this letter was written. Conditions in Corinth were notorious. There was moral decay on every hand. It was a city given over to the worship of sex. Ten thousand priestesses of the Temple of Aphrodite were there, and their worship was conducted in the pagan manner involving sexual immorality. The whole city was given over to shallow, pleasure-mad living. Paul says when those kind of conditions prevail, it means the fabric of civic life is growing rotten, that disintegration and ultimate destruction is very near at hand. The time, he says, is growing very short, and any who live in conditions like that are to realize that if they really want to make their lives count it may be much the wiser thing to remain single.

He views here the whole pattern of life: marriage, sorrow, joy, business life, commerce and industry, all the things of the world. He does not mean that we are to be callous or indifferent toward these, but the fulfillment of our calling before God must come first. Sometimes the comfort of home and the joys of marriage may tempt us to spend more time in enjoying these than we ought, and, if so, Paul says, these are to be denied temporarily, laid aside for a time, that our work might not be threatened. Sometimes sorrow comes into our hearts and we are tempted to go aside and hide from life for awhile, but Paul says this must not be; sorrow must not call us from our duty, it is not to be allowed. Sometimes thrilling and joyful circumstances come, and these may tempt us to turn aside to seek more of the same, but if they conflict with the call of God, the apostle says, these too must be swept aside.

Nothing must hinder obedience to what God has called us to do. That is what makes life meaningful. If

business life threatens, you cannot stop your business but you must hold it loosely so it does not interfere with what God has given you to do. The great values for which God has placed us here are to be seized right now; the time is passing, life is short, the end can come suddenly and unexpectedly, so first things must come first. Do not miss God's best by mooning over marriage. Give yourself to the task God has called you to do.

There is a second factor he mentions which demands undivided devotion, and that is that certain tasks require complete concentration. His comments on this are these:

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman or girl is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband. {1 Cor 7:32-34 RSV}

He does not mean that it is wrong for married people to want to please each other. He is simply indicating that they will find much more of their life taken up with their need for fulfilling each other before the Lord. It is a perfectly proper relationship, God-approved and blessed, but their time to give themselves to work is limited by the pressures and problems of married life.

Who of us that is married will deny this?

But, he says, there is a special privilege single persons have in which they can find an even higher fulfillment in their work before the Lord. They can be wholly for him in whatever they do, as no married person can. They can give to their work before God an intensity of concentration that no married person can give.

The other night my family and I went up to San Francisco to attend a concert by Van Cliburn, the young Christian pianist. It was thrilling to listen to his music. Here is a young man, thirty-one years of age, who, as far as I know, is not married. He has devoted his whole life to his work unto God as a Christian. He has spent hours and hours of practice perfecting his art to a degree impossible had he been married. On the program it said he does his practicing from midnight to three or four o'clock in the morning. What wife would put up with that? But here is a living example of what Paul is setting before us -- the fact that in God's program of human achievement there are forms of work and aspects of labor in every field of human endeavor which he especially wants single people to do. They can fulfill them as no married person can.

What the world owes to the dedication of single men and women before God is impossible for us to assess.

- There is Paul himself. His own marvelous ministry would never have been possible had he been married.
- I think of Henrietta Mears, that remarkable woman in Hollywood Presbyterian Church. Through the years she picked out young men whom she felt the Spirit of God was calling to the ministry and worked with them, taught them, and encouraged them, and has sent out scores of young men trained for an effective, powerful ministry. What a blessing she has been to thousands in this way.
- There is David Brainerd, that hot-hearted young missionary in the early days of our country, praying in the woods of New England, dedicating himself to reaching the Indians of America and becoming the instrument of God by which a tremendous revival broke out among the Indian tribes.
- Robert Murray McCheyne in Scotland; Florence Nightingale's great work of healing the sick; Tom Dooley in our own day -- these men and women have given themselves with an intensity of concentration impossible to those who are married.

These all confirm the fact that single life need not be lonely, boring, unrewarding, if it is committed fully and unreservedly to Jesus Christ. It can be a daily adventure of dedication and achievement that surpasses anything possible to those who are married. Thank God for those among us whom God has called to this ministry.

There is one further word that the apostle gives. It is apparent through all his discourse to the unmarried, both implicitly and explicitly, that, in the will and purpose of God, this pattern of single life can be changed. Celibacy is never necessarily permanent. No lifelong vows for a celibate life are ever recognized in the Scriptures. Perhaps certain men or women intending to remain single and desiring to do so start out life on this basis, but they may find, the apostle says, that their passions are too strong.

If any one thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry -- it is no sin. But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. So that he who marries his betrothed does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better. {1 Cor 7:36-38 RSV}

He makes it very clear that there is no moral wrong in marrying, even though it comes later on in life. Yet there is to be no sexual license on the part of those who remain single. How clearly this answers some of the implications of much literature that is being widely distributed today. Single people are to keep their passions under control, if not, then let them marry. "It is better to marry," Paul says earlier, "than to burn with passion," {1 Cor 7:9 NIV}.

Or perhaps marriage comes later, after the work of life is well under way, simply because God has accomplished his purpose already. It is wonderful to watch the Lord work in bringing two people together who have sought nothing but his perfect will, and later in life he brings them to the partner of his choice. To such, Paul says in Verse 28, "if you marry, you do not sin, and if a girl marries she does not sin."

What a tremendous thing it is to receive this gift like Paul and to determine that in purity of heart and life and body you will dedicate yourself to the work that God has given you to do, that you might fulfill the whole calling of God, all the expectation that God has for you. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, "that I may so lay hold of Christ that he may lay hold of me for all that he wants me to do." What a mighty calling! May God fulfill this in the life of any of you whom he calls to go through life single.

Prayer

We thank you, our Father, for the clarity with which the Word teaches us that our relationship to you is the supreme thing of our life; everything else must find its focus in that, must center in that. Whether married or single, then, help us to ever keep in mind this one supreme thing. We live our lives before thee, and can only find meaning and fulfillment as we do so by means of thy activity in us. We thank thee for this word and pray that it may be of help to those to whom it is particularly addressed. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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