

1 CORINTHIANS 7:25-40

INTRODUCTION

There has been a great deal written over the years on the subject of marriage but there seems to be little on the subject of singleness. Those that I have read seem to give the impression that singleness is not desirable and indeed single people need help to cope with their singleness.

Now admittedly there are those who find singleness difficult because they find themselves in a single position due to no fault of their own. Sometimes one's life partner is removed leaving a hole in our lives. For others sadly divorce has left one in a single condition but for those who have the gift of singleness (v 7) then the single state has many advantages.

Indeed these advantages are true for all that find themselves single for whatever reason.

1. REASONS FOR REMAINING SINGLE

a) Because of persecution (vs. 25-28) – Now the principle here is that it is good to remain in the condition that you are in so if you are single it is good to remain single (v 26). Now Paul points out that Jesus did not give any direct teaching on this subject of singleness, yet Paul is not giving his opinion here either (v 25). Paul under the influence of the Holy Spirit is giving his considered judgement and because he is doing so under the Spirit's guidance it is as good as if the Lord Jesus said it. Now the first reason Paul gives for remaining single is because of the present crisis within Corinthian society.

It seems that as Christianity began to make an impact within society then the persecution of Christians increased and Paul seeing this beginning to happen within Corinth senses that things are not going to get any easier.

Therefore in his considered judgment it would be better to remain single in the current crisis for the pain and distress of persecution increases when one is in a married state because not only are you concerned for your own welfare but also for the welfare of your family.

When one member in the family is persecuted then the whole family feels the pain; married people carry a greater load during persecution, so because of the current climate Paul says it would be better for single people to remain single. However that is not a reason says Paul for married people to get divorced but it is a reason why a single person might chose to stay single (v 27). So there are advantages in being single during times of persecution.

However Paul makes it clear that it is not a sin to marry just as it is not a sin to be single (v 28). Marriage is a legitimate option for single people but Paul is simply saying the option of singleness and the advantages of the single state should be considered before marriage is considered.

Paul gives his reason why singleness should be considered because he knows that married people face many troubles in this life and Paul wants to spare the single people in Corinth those trials. Now Paul is not down playing marriage as if marriage is full of trouble without blessings. There are many blessings in being married but there are also many troubles.

Married people have to think about others in their family and they have to provide for others and live with other family members with all their sins and faults and they have to live with us. Family life can become very demanding and complicated although there are many blessings connected with marriage as well. There are some single people who think that marriage will solve all their problems it is true that marriage will solve some of their problems but marriage will also create many new problems as well. If people are going to get married especially when the heat is on

through persecution then they must go into it with their eyes open and understand that marriages bring problems as well. That of course must be true as seen by the number of divorces that there were in Corinth as in our day.

So marriage is not the answer to everything and single people must seek to weight up the options before committing themselves to marriage. Singleness must not be seen as second best and as Christians we must have the right attitude towards single people and we must help them to understand that marriage although good and blessed also has many problems attached to it.

Single people must be prepared for this before they enter into marriage, we must preach this in our churches and in private instruction and surely even marriage preparation classes ought to include something about the blessing and problems of marriage.

b) Because this world is passing away (vs. 29-31). Paul's second advantage of singleness is now stressed. This world in its present form is passing away therefore although God ordained and blessed marriage it is not an eternal relationship it is only for this world. Marriage will end with the passing of this world because it is designed only for this age it is not needed in heaven. Time is short at best even if we live until our 80's or 90's it is only a brief time compared to all eternity.

But in times of intense persecution time can be even shorter than expected. Therefore Paul teaches that we should live this life with our eyes firmly fixed on eternity and it is easier to do as a single person. We should live as if eternity really matters. This is what Paul means by these strange phrases like "From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none" (v 29).

Paul is not teaching that marriage is no longer binding on believers or that their marital responsibilities are reduced in some way. But Paul is teaching that marriage should not reduce a Christian's obligation and responsibility and devotion to the Lord and to His work. The obligations of marriage are no excuse for slacking in the Lord's work; remember marriage is only for this life whereas we will spend eternity with our Lord.

We have all seen some young people who appeared to be sold out in their service for the Lord and then they meet someone of the opposite sex. They get married and as their obligations grow the first thing that gets pushed out of their life is their commitment to the Lord and to His work. Once they were involved in the children's work but now they have no time.

Once they faithfully attended the prayer meeting but now they find other things to do. Once they were involved in evangelism of the church but now their marriage partner and their children takes up all their time. Now there must be a balance and each one of us who is married must try to maintain the balance between fulfilling our marriage obligations and serving the Lord in his work.

That is not an easy balance to keep but we must always wrestle with ourselves so that we manage to keep life in perspective. We can neglect our marriages because of our service for the Lord but we can also neglect the Lord because of our service to our life partners. Ask God to help those of us who are married to keep that balance.

Our minds need to be set on things above not on earthly things and when our minds are on heavenly things then we will be able to keep the balance. Our priority must be with eternal things not temporary things like marriage but if our minds are on eternal things then we will be good husbands and Fathers for that is what it means to be heavenly minded. However single people don't have that balance to keep and therefore there are great advantages in being single.

Just as married people must focus on what really matters so it is with those who mourn etc (vs. 30-31). If we have a true perspective in life then life will be in balance in all these areas mentioned. So that when we lose someone through death we do not cave in or fall apart yes we mourn and

rightly so but because we have our priorities right we do not fail to continue to follow and obey the Lord.

We do not slacken off in our commitment to Him. This is because when we have a true perspective in life our hopes and motivation in life come from loving, knowing and serving God not from anyone in this world. Our priority should not be in serving our earthly partners but in serving the Lord. In serving the Lord we will as an outworking of that serve our earthly partners as well.

Our focus should not be with this world or with anyone in this world but it should be on the Lord and on eternity. Likewise if we are happy because of a success that we have gained then it is so easy to get carried away with celebration that we take our eyes of eternity and begin to neglect our spiritual obligations. How many Christians have gained promotion at work and one of the first things that they neglect is their service to the Lord through His church.

Such people have life the wrong way round what matters is eternity not this life. We can get life out of perspective when it comes to possessions in this world as well. So we are to live as if our possessions are not ours to keep. The Corinthian Christians were in as much danger in this area as are we today. The accumulation of possessions and wealth is sadly a preoccupation of many Christians in our western society.

Many Christians are more concerned about bank balances, houses and cars than they are about their relationship with the Lord. We can sadly be more concerned with outward things than we are with the Lord. This is seen when something in our home breaks down. It causes us great distress and anxiety yet we do not seem to get upset at all when our relationship with the Lord breaks down. We spend hours trying to fix one of our broken possessions and yet we spend so little time trying to repair our relationship with the Lord. Why is this? It is because we have got life round the wrong way, we are living for the here and now instead of living for eternity. Paul's advice to us is to live as if the possessions did not belong to us, live as if that success did not happen. The final area that Paul covers is how we use the things of this world (v 31).

In times of affluence and ease it is so easy to live for the pleasures of this world. It's so easy to set out targets in life. More leisure time, more holidays, earlier retirement date, more comforts in our homes in such a way that these things dominate our thinking at the expense of the things of God. We can be so strongly attached to this world even though it is passing away that we hardly have time for the spiritual things that really matter.

Now let's not forget Paul's overall point. None of the things mentioned in this section are inherently bad, all of them have a proper place in life and each thing mentioned is God's provision to us. However human relationship, emotions possessions and pleasure become sinful when they dominate our thinking and our behaviour especially when they detract from our relationship with the Lord and from His work. We must ultimately remember that this world is passing away therefore do not overvalue the things in this world whether it is marriage, death of a loved one, a success of some sort or financial stability or pleasure. Paul says that for single people the fact that the world is passing away is one reason why you might choose to remain single, what really matters in life is not marriage or any of these other things mentioned but serving our God.

c) Because of the preoccupations of Marriage (vs. 32-35) – Paul gives another benefit of singleness another reason why single people in Corinth might choose to stay single. Marriage brings a preoccupation that can be a distraction to our Christian lives. Both husbands and wives have to be concerned about the things of this world. They are concerned and rightly so about the needs of each other.

The husband has to spend time thinking about how to please his wife and the wife has to spend time having to think about how she can please her husband. Now there is nothing wrong with

those things and Paul is not saying that we should not do so. Marriage means that these legitimate concerns will be placed upon married people.

However and this is Paul's point single people can be solely concerned about the things of God, they can focus their attention on thinking how they can please their Lord. Unmarried peoples' whole aim in life should be to be totally and absolutely devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit (v 34). Paul is not saying that single people are more holy or more faithful or more devoted simply because they are single.

Paul's point is that single people because of fewer family demands and obligations are able to spend more time in the Lord's work. A married person's interest is divided (v 34), he or she has to devote time to their partner and they have to think about legitimate matters that arise within families whereas single people can give their wholehearted attention to the Lord. But let's be clear about what Paul is saying and not saying here.

Paul is not saying that married Christians have divided spiritual loyalties, nor is he saying that the unmarried are more committed and devoted to the Lord than married people. Many married couples are highly committed and devoted to the Lord and His work. There are sadly many single believers who are divided in their interests and are less committed and devoted to the Lord than they should be.

But Paul is thinking about the matter practically and practically speaking the unmarried Christian is potentially able to set themselves apart from the things of this life in other that they might give themselves exclusively to the Lord's work. This is at least one reason why there are more single Christians on the Mission Field than married couples.

Single people have less cares and concerns in this world. They eat when they want, they sleep when they want and they, in general, only have to think about their own physical needs. Whereas a married couple have to think about the needs of the whole family and this potentially means that married people have less time than single people to be engaged in the things of God.

Now married Christians should not feel guilty about being married and unmarried people should not feel guilty about getting married. Paul is not trying to add to the burdens and cares that married people already have and Paul is not trying to force single Christians to stay single (v 35). But Paul wants the Christians at Corinth whether married or single to be devoted to the Lord.

Marriage does not prevent people from being devoted to the Lord and singleness does not guarantee it. But singleness has fewer hindrances and more advantages when it comes to being committed to the Lord. It is easier for single people to be single minded about the things of God. The married person cannot be as single minded for they have each other to think about, and they cannot be faithful and committed to the Lord without being faithful and committed to each other (1 Timothy 5:8).

Single people at least have to think about the preoccupations that marriage brings before they decide to get married and married people need to be careful that we do not let our marriage and its legitimate concerns detract from our commitment and devotion to the Lord.

2. THE IMPLICATIONS OF PAUL'S TEACHING (vs. 37-40)

Paul now spells out two implications of his teaching on singleness. First of all if singleness is advantageous then what about those who want to get married? Now we come to a textual problem in verses 36-38. The NIV is not a translation but an interpretation and this is because the Greek is very difficult. The problem is who is it that the word "anyone" (v 36) refers to?

The words “engaged too” is not in the Greek and our idea of engagement was foreign in Corinth in Paul’s day. The best way to make sense of these difficult verses is to take the “anyone” as talking about the fathers who were responsible for arranging marriages for their daughters in the first century.

In the light of what Paul has been saying perhaps some fathers had decided not to arrange a marriage for their Christian daughter because of the advantages of singleness. However having made that decision it seems that the fathers were having second thoughts. Did he act improperly towards his daughter in deciding not to arrange a marriage for her?

His daughter has reached her prime (“she is getting along in years” v 36) and probably now desires to marry. What should the father do? Should he change his mind and if he does is he sinning seeing that singleness has many advantages? Paul’s advice is: do as you want, the father is not sinning if he agrees to his daughter’s marriage. Yes singleness has many advantages but there is nothing wrong with marriage, for marriage has many blessings and advantages too.

However Paul says that the father who has made up his mind and presumably his daughter is in agreement with his decision (under no compulsion v 37) not to seek to arrange a marriage for his daughter then he does the right thing (v 37). If the father decides to arrange a marriage for his daughter then that is right if he decides not to arrange a marriage for her then that is better (v 38).

In the light of all that Paul has been saying about the present crisis, the passing world and the preoccupations that marriage brings. The application of what Paul is saying is that if you want to marry then that is right. If you do not want to marry then that is better you must have the gift of singleness and you will be able to live devoted to the Lord without feeling the great sexual temptations that singleness brings.

To all single people here today let me say that singleness is worth considering. But if you do not have the gift of singleness then get married for it is better to get married than to burn with passion (v 9). If you remain single then give yourself wholeheartedly to the Lord. If you decide to get married then give yourself totally to the Lord within that marriage.

The second implication of Paul’s teaching concerns a woman who has been married and her husband dies then she is free to marry as long as she is marrying a Christian. But in the light of what Paul has said in this chapter the question is should she bother? Paul gives his judgement in this matter, In the light of the benefits of remaining single then she will be happy if she remains in her single condition.

However if she wishes to marry she can do so as long as she is marrying another Christian. The point is simple you are free to marry or not to marry. As we have seen in this chapter there are blessings with being married. There are benefits in remaining single all of these things have to be weighed up but whatever a Christian does they are doing right as long as they marry in the Lord.

We have freedom on this point, no one should force single people to get married nor should we think they are abnormal if they decide not to do so for they have the gift of singleness. Single people should not think that married people are foolish for getting married for there is freedom to either get married or to remain single.

But this whole chapter at least ought to encourage single people to think the whole marriage issue through carefully before deciding to get married. This chapter ought to teach those of us who are married to be careful that we do not allow our marriages to blunt our service for God.

But instead our marriages ought to bring glory to our God by the way that we are devoted to our Lord, which will be reflected in our faithfulness to our spouses.

Amen