

1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-11; 25-35

9: SINGLENES, DATING, MARRIAGE



Context & Historical Background

In response to a letter received from the church in Corinth, Paul wrote the first Corinthian letter to address issues within the church and answer specific questions the church sent him. Paul had previously visited Corinth to bring the good news of Jesus Christ and now the church needed guidance for juggling inside and outside influences. Not only were there false prophets within the church causing confusion, but the believers in Corinth were too easily becoming like the culture around them. Corinth was both highly influenced and highly influential as it was a very prosperous trading center that served as an intersection for international trade. Citizens of Corinth were known to indulge in their desires. To 'Corinthianize' was even a popular Greek phrase for 'go to the devil.' With their obsession with sexual fulfillment, idolization with physical strength, pursuit of wealth, and willingness to surrender to any of their desires, the ancient Corinthian way of life can in many ways sound like the current culture on campus.

Paul spends the first six chapters of the letter confronting sin within the church that is leaking in from the surrounding worldly culture. The last sin he confronts before moving to the next purpose of the letter is sexual immorality, which transitions into Paul's answering a specific question the church asked him about marriage and singleness.



Related Passages

Matthew 19:1-12 - Jesus addresses the question of marriage and singleness.

Genesis 2:24 - A marriage in the context of creation.

1 Corinthians 6:12-20 - Our bodies are a temple and are defiled by sexual immorality.



Key Terms

Present Crisis: It is believed that Paul is referring to a famine that hit Corinth at this time and may have given him reason to believe the end was coming. Paul encourages people to remain single in this present crisis so that they could focus on the matters of the Kingdom rather than matters of this world, such as supporting a household during a famine.

The 11th hour: In marriage, a husband yields the authority of his body to his wife, and vice versa, as a part of the one flesh union. They give themselves to one another, but the authority is never something to be abused.

Fulfilling marital duty: Marriage is a covenant union between a man and a woman, and with-

in this union individuals are responsible to and for each other sexually. By saying this, Paul is suggesting something radical. Paul was rejecting an ideology of sex and marriage that was male-dominated and, in its place, offering a vision of mutual submission between husband and wife.

Virgin: The reference to female virgins is not indicating that a woman's (or man's) value comes from her sexual purity. Paul was giving a specific answer to a specific question sent to him by the church. If anything, the reference to unmarried women and virgins was meant to be inclusive of everyone.



Key Themes

Singleness & Celibacy: As a culture we have become obsessed with marriage to the point that being single causes a deep social anxiety with roots in the fear of loneliness and rejection. Although it is a beautiful gift from God, marriage has been overemphasized by the church, to the point that we forget to cherish the examples of Jesus, Paul, and so many others who exemplified a celibate life that focused on God's Kingdom. Whether we are single for a period of time or our whole lives, there are a number of benefits to this way of living, which is what Paul is alluding to. Singles have an opportunity for devoting more time to serving the Kingdom. Married people are committed to devoting significant time to their spouses and raising children (all great things!), but single people can uniquely focus on their lives for and service to God.

Because of this, singleness should be seen as a gift and not a curse. When single, it is easy to get lost in distractions to disguise your loneliness—video games, Netflix, social media, or fantasizing about relationships. Time is a valuable resource, and single people have more of it. The time, when used well and in service to Christ, can be a great gift from God. The light at the end of our tunnel of singleness is Jesus, not marriage. If someone comes alongside us in that pursuit, then great, but they are not an absolute need in the journey nor is it the prize at the end. Jesus is the prize. Singleness is a necessary vocation for many within the church, a high and honorable calling. Whether or not we marry, we are called to be fruitful and multiply by witnessing to and discipling others, and singles have a very unique opportunity to do so.

Dating & Marriage: Although Paul encouraged singleness in this passage, this does not mean that dating and marriage is somehow worse. Marriage was created by God to honor him. Paul says singleness and marriage are both gifts from God that should be cherished as such, and he even indicates that marriage is the norm. The problem, as mentioned before, is that our culture (especially the church culture) is obsessed with dating, marriage, and sex. The expectation is that you will search—and pray!—for a “soulmate”—the perfect, idealized person God has set aside for us. But this is not the vision for marriage found in Scripture. Marriage is instead an everyday choice to commit to someone, not a perfect relationship we discover or fall into. And singleness isn't a kind of purgatory we're praying—and have others praying on our behalf—to exit.

Before marriage, however, it is customary to date a person. This is the stage most college

students are in. But dating well is more than just learning how to be a proper gentleman or lady on a date. Learning how to live without a spouse can be an important part of dating and marriage, even if those are your future. This is not learning how to “find yourself” but “content yourself.” Particularly in college, some students are so focused on finding a spouse that they fail to be good friends, good students, and good disciples. But equally it’s a bad idea to wait so you can “find yourself” or “figure out who you really are.” The average age of marriage is drastically climbing, because people want to be independent before committing (though not before having sex). Human beings are always dependent on others. But for the Christian, dependence on Christ and the church must precede any kind of dependence on a spouse.

Although Paul does encourage people to remain single, he recognizes that marriage was designed by God and within a Christian relationship can be used to honor him. Although celibacy was Paul’s preference for the believers in Corinth, Paul encourages believers to marry if they were not given the gift of celibacy so that they are not distracted by sexual desire.

Sexuality & the Power of Sex: Marriage, and specifically sex within marriage, is about giving rather than getting. Paul says a radical thing: a husband’s body belongs to his wife, and a wife’s body belongs to her husband. This means that a spouse has exclusive rights—right to their time, help, work, sex. This is a terrifying notion because we assume this means we’re allowing, or even encouraging, abuse of another. This is absolutely not the case. In the Biblical view, sex is not something to use toward your own ends and pleasures, but something to steward well and care for, to give yourself to. Paul’s vision here is of a self-giving relationship: self-giving, that is, in the most literal sense of the term. Husband and wife are giving themselves—their bodies, their ambitions, their desires—over to their spouse. This had two immediate effects for Paul: spouses couldn’t just refuse to have sex with each other, kind of celibacy in marriage (an oxymoron); and a spouse cannot go off and sleep with whomever they want. In both of these the spouse violates the marriage bed by ignoring the extent to which they belong exclusively to their spouse.

This idea of mutual submission was a foreign one to the Corinthians, and it is for us today as well. Sex is something seen as about my pleasure and my desires. So sex becomes, primarily, about personal fulfillment. When sex is about personal fulfillment, all bets are off. And this is the great irony: in Paul’s vision for marriage when spouses are each other’s property, using and abusing the other is literally not an option. In our culture’s view, where sex is about my own personal fulfillment, using and abusing the other is inevitable. According to Paul, sex is only actually fulfilling, mutually fulfilling, when done in its proper context—marriage.

Paul is telling the people of Corinth that marriage is about equality and mutuality, they are becoming one flesh and are therefore no longer their own but belong to each other which was counter to the sexual immorality of the Corinthianized culture. Treating sex so casually is not recognizing how powerful it really is. It is good in the right context, yet it can be dangerous outside of its proper boundaries. Paul is straightforward when he says that it is better to marry than to burn with passion. He recognizes the dangers of sex outside of marriage. Marriage can be a good, and holy, thing, but, as with everything in this world, they will pass away and it would be unwise, Paul reminds us, for believers to idolize them.

☞ Quotes & Illustrations

"Scripture says fulfillment (sexual, or otherwise) does not come by marriage. Fulfillment comes by Christ and His Body, and our dependent participation and thus transformation, waiting, watching and abiding in relentless love herein."

ABBIE SMITH

"The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty -- it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There's a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God."

MOTHER TERESA

There is a famous scene in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when Susan first hears about Aslan the lion, the Jesus figure in the story. Mr. Beaver needs to disabuse her of any misunderstanding about what this lion is like. 'Aslan is a lion,' explains Mr. Beaver, 'the Lion, the great Lion.' 'Ohh!' says Susan. 'I'd thought he was a man. Is he--quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.' 'Safe?' says Mr. Beaver. 'Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.' Our culture often makes the same mistake as Susan. It confuses good and safe, assuming that because something is good, it must be safe. And so it asks, 'Sex, is it--quite safe?'...But mere sexuality takes sex seriously and offers a realistic answer--graciously, yet honestly. 'Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course sex isn't safe. But it's good. It's God's blessing to us, I tell you.'

! Three Main Points

1. Whether for a period of time or your whole life, singleness is a gift from God that provides greater time and opportunity for intimacy with the Lord and outreach than if you were to marry.
2. Marriage is also a gift from God that should be sought after out of a desire to honor the Lord in a covenant union, not out of a place of loneliness or desperation.
3. Sex is powerful and we should strive to keep it within the boundaries of God's good plan while also not demonizing it.

? Discussion Questions

- What can we learn from Jesus and Paul's model of singleness?
- If you are dating or married, in what ways do you idolize your relationship? If you are single, do you idolize the potential for relationships? How much time would you estimate that you

spend on this?

- If you are in a relationship, how is it reflecting Christ?
- Do you have a healthy view of sexuality, singleness, and marriage? Have you ever lost sleep over anxieties surrounding dating or marriage?
- If Paul says that marriage is good because there's so much immorality, does that mean if we're not terribly tempted by sex, porn, etc. that we shouldn't marry?
- What does Paul mean when he says our bodies belong to our spouses? Does that mean they own us?
- In what ways does Paul look different than a typical 21st century American Christian? Are there differences between Paul and what we often hear in taught or preached in churches? Are there similarities?
- Do you think being single or married is better?
- Have you ever spent an extended amount of time fantasizing about a potential relationship with someone? How can you actively turn the time spent in fantasy into time where you are seeking a deeper relationship with the Lord?
- How can relationships or a desire for relationships be a distraction from your fuller purpose of service to the Kingdom?
- Are you wasting your time as a single person? Where do you use your excess or free time?
- If you are dating, how do you use your free time? How do you use your time together as a couple?
- What are some physical boundaries you will establish in your current or future dating relationships in order to keep Christ in the center of your relationship? How will you seek accountability outside of it to keep these boundaries?
- Does the goodness of singleness change how you see relationships? How?
- How can you honor yourself and your friends of the opposite sex well? How will you ensure that you are not overtly flirting or leading them on?
- Whether or not we are married or single, we are all called into a life of community. How will you invest in your current relationships to build this?
- Is there anything you need to repent of and receive grace for in regards to past relationships and sexual immorality?
- How have you seen the power of sex play out in your life or in the lives of those around you? How do you see it play out on campus?
- Do you see the goodness of God in your sexuality?
- What does holy sexuality look like played out in your own life?
- There is a spectrum between fantasizing about sex and demonizing it. Where do you think Christians should fall on this spectrum?
- What similarities do you see between the Corinthians and our current culture?
- What is one step you can take to start living out a holier sexuality?
- Do you often feel lonely because of a lack of a romantic partner? How can you transform this into good reflections on singleness and a life in community?
- What are your expectations for a relationship? What are your expectations for what the Lord can do in your life? Do you hope in or focus on one more than the other?
- Paul celebrates both singleness and marriage. How can you celebrate your own and other's singleness while also celebrating your own and other's relationships?

Application & Practice

Journal: Take 30 minutes this week to journal about what healthy boundaries in a dating relationship look like and how you can bring accountability into those relationships.

Read a Gospel. Pick a gospel to read through. As you are reading, contemplate how Jesus did all that he did as a single person and what that means for you. (Hint: Mark is the shortest.)

Time Log. Keep a time log for a day of how you are spending your time. Look it over to see where you can increase time with the Lord or loving others while decreasing the time spent on unnecessary things.

Going Deeper

Podcast: "The Controversial Jesus - Controversial Singleness" - Jon Tyson

Podcast. "The Controversial Jesus - Sexual Formation" - Jon Tyson

Book. Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* - Tim Keller

Book. *Celebrating the Single Life* - Susan Muto

Book. *Redeeming Singleness* - Barry Danylak