

Homily for Pentecost 21, 2021

1 Corinthians 7:2,7-9,25-35

'Singleness'

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PRE-AMBLE

I'll be preaching today on the topic of singleness,
From portions of 1 Corinthians 7,
Which I'll read as we work our way through.

But for now I read you just one verse, 1 Corinthians 7:7,
Where the Apostle Paul is reflecting on his own singleness and he says:

'I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind'.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight. Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer, Amen.

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INTRODUCTION

Two weeks ago I preached on marriage from Mark chapter 10.

And I had an experience that week which I've had several times before in different settings,
Where people say,
*'thankyou for bringing us God's word on marriage and family life,
and it'd be great to hear more about singleness too.'*

Well, today's the day,
Let's do it!

What does God's word say to us about those who are unmarried?

We won't try to say everything,
But we'll draw out some key points from 1 Corinthians chapter 7.

But just before we get into it,
If you are married,
Don't think this means you have the week off listening to the sermon!

We are all **together** given this teaching as the family of God,
So that we can grow in love for each other,

And serve one another in the particular places in life God has called us to.

Single people need to hear God's word on marriage,

And married people need to hear God's word on the single life.

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Here's the four points we'll cover today on singleness from 1 Corinthians 7.

First, singleness can be good and God pleasing.

Second, singleness can be hard.

Third, marriage can be hard.

And fourth, singleness can be a source of blessing.

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SINGLENES CAN BE GOOD

So number 1,

Being single can be a good and God pleasing way to live.

By all accounts,

Jesus was single,

Jesus did not get married.

That in itself,

tells us a lot about the single life.

If Jesus Christ is the embodiment of what it means to be fully human,

Then one can be fully human without being married.

The Apostle Paul was single.

It's possible he was married at some stage,

We don't know,

But he speaks here about being unmarried at this time.

It's worth keeping this in mind,

as we listen to this teaching,

that it's coming from one with personal experience in the single life.

And it's this Apostle Paul who says:

*'To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is **well** for them to remain unmarried as I am.'*

Later on, to those he calls the 'virgins':

*'It is **well** for you to remain as you are.'*

The point here is very simple,

The unmarried single life,
Can be a good way of living from a Christian point of view.

Not bad,
But good,

Now, he doesn't **command** single people to stay single,

Because marriage too is good.
St Paul values marriage highly.

He says back in verse 2 of this chapter,
that the most common pattern for Christian life will always continue to be that *'each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband'* (1 Cor 7:2).

But **that** does not mean,
that singleness is somehow an inadequate way to live the Christian life.

This basic point is perhaps one of the most important things that needs to be said from this chapter on the topic,

being single does not mean you are an incomplete person,
It does not mean that you are of lesser value,
to God and in the Christian community.
The single life is not inferior in the Biblical worldview,

In fact,
It can be understood as a **gift** according to Paul.

*He says,
'I wish that all were as I myself am.
But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind'.*

Do you hear the implication of that?

If you're married,
Marriage is a gift.

But if you're single,
That too can be understood as a gift from God,
Both to you,

And through you, to others.

Now some people think that St Paul is here speaking of a special gift from God which enables particular people to live a content and celibate single life,
And that's a possible reading of it.

But it also seems likely to me that we can understand this more broadly,
And this sort of text can lead us to ask the question,

If I'm single right now,

How might there be a gift to me in my singleness?
Even if it's not a permanent calling.

For those who are married,
We might ask what the gift and goodness is of those single people in our lives,
In our congregation.

That's number 1 and fundamental,

Being single can be a good and God pleasing way to live.

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SINGLENESS CAN BE HARD

Number 2 for today,
Is that singleness does bring its *challenges*.

When St Paul says that there is something good and a gift in being single,
He's not naïve about the challenges single people face.

And one of the big ones,
especially for young single people,
is sexual desire,
sexual temptation.

St Paul says:

'...because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.' (v 2)

'...if they are not practising self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.' (v 9)

Now I know,
Or I'm told,
That this becomes much less of an issue when people are older and single.

But I think there's also a sense in which our sexual desire points to that more general need for companionship.

This week a number of single people told me that the biggest challenge in the single life is *loneliness*.

Even in everyday things many people take for granted,
Like having someone to eat a meal with regularly.

But in the text,
The specific challenge that's specified in the broader context of loneliness is sexual desire as a single person.

We do need to be clear that when the Apostle Paul speaks of the single life and the goodness that can be in it,
For him,
And in the Bible generally,

The single life means the celibate life,
It's simply assumed that the person not married will be not be having sex.

This is of course a big challenge for many people in their singleness,

And it's a radical vision of life for our modern world.

Because in our modern world,
People think the single life is good too,

But not the single *celibate* life,

In fact, they might mock Christian people who seek to live a God pleasing life as singles by reserving sex for marriage.

For many people the single life is good precisely *because* it's seen as a time when you can hook up and shack up as much as you possibly can without being permanently attached to marriage and children.

Single Christian people can have this challenge of often unfulfilled sexual desire.

Again, St Paul is not naïve about this as he speaks of the single life.

And one very simple thing we need to say to encourage single Christian people who are seeking to live a God pleasing life in this area,

Is that even though God has made us sexual beings and sexuality is a gift of God,
not having sex does not mean there's something wrong with you.

Our modern culture is so sexualised in every way that single people can be made to feel like there's something wrong with you if you're not sexually active,

But it's not true,
Not from the Bible's point of view,

Sex is good,
It's a gift,

But so is virginity and the celibate single life.

Our own Lutheran confessions even say that '*virginity is a more excellent gift than marriage*'.

If you as a single person are seeking to live a pure and chaste life by the grace of God,
Be assured,
Even in its challenges,
This is a good thing.

And this is good for married people to hear,
So that we together can consider how to support single people in their lives and in the church.

Single people do need companionship,
And encouragement and support,
And to be invited to dinner and other events,

Single people do need the empathy of those who are married,
as they sometimes struggle with desires that may be unfulfilled.

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MARRIAGE CAN BE HARD

So there's something *good* in singleness,

There's particular *challenges* to being single,

Then interestingly,
Another thing that is said here is that single people need to know that marriage has its challenges too.

The Apostle Paul says in verse 28,
'If you marry, you do not sin... yet those who marry will experience **distress** in this life, and I would spare you that'.

To paraphrase:
Singleness has many challenges,
But marriage aint always all its cracked up to be either.

Marriage is hard.

Those who marry will experience **distress** in this life because they are married.

There's something very realistic and sober minded about St Paul's teaching here.

He then goes on to say something even more dramatic on this point,

He says,

'I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none...' (v 29).

Now what is he getting at here?

Given everything else we've heard him say about marriage,
He can't be giving permission for people not to love and serve their spouses.

No, what he's saying in the context,

Is that, as Christians,
we realise this world is not the ultimate thing,
That there is a world to come with God,
That's the ultimate goal.

And so everything in this world,
In this age,
Which is passing away,

Everything,
even marriage,
Needs to be understood in its proper place.

Christians aren't to treat marriage,
As good as it is,
As a final and ultimate source of happiness,

We can't look to anything in this life,
Including marriage,

For what only God can finally give.

Another way to put all this would be to say,
That we aren't to make an idol out of marriage.

And married people can fall into this,

But so can single people.

Single people can be tempted to think if only God gave me a husband or wife,

Then I could finally be happy,
Then I could finally be content.

But pastors will tell you that if you go into marriage with that sort of attitude,
It's a recipe for disaster,

Because you're a sinner marrying another sinner,
And you're going to let each other down.

And it seems to me this is one reason why St Paul,
And Jesus too at one point,

Seem to speak about unmarried Christians having this special place in the Christian community,
Because in a unique way they can point us all to the truth,
that marriage and family are not the source of ultimate meaning and joy and life,

God himself – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is the only one in whom you will find that ultimate joy.

Which is why the New Testament says the final and truest marriage is the one between Christ and
his bride the church.

If you are single,
Not to mention if you are in a difficult marriage,
Not to mention if you're in a good marriage,

You need to know that the only one who will truly love you and never let you down is God himself,
As he's revealed that to you in Jesus Christ who laid down his life for you.

Singleness has its challenges,
But marriage ain't always all its cracked up to be either.

And just as marriage couples and families in the life of the Church can be alert and aware of the
challenges to single people,
And consider how to support and encourage them,

So single people can be alert and aware of the challenges married couple and families face,
And consider how they might support and encourage them.

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SINGLENES CAN BE A SOURCE OF BLESSING

Then finally,
There are the particular blessings that God can bring in and through the single life.

Here's how St Paul puts it:

'I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; ³³but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, ³⁴and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband. ³⁵I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.

For the Apostle Paul,

One of the great blessings he sees in the single life is that it can enable people to devote themselves to God and his service in a way that is simply not possible for married people.

And one can't help but think of what Paul himself did as an apostle and missionary.

He travelled all over the Mediterranean preaching the Gospel,
Planting churches,
Getting thrown in prison,
Becoming shipwrecked in obscure places with poisonous snakes,

And he chose not to live off the financial support of the places he ministered,
But instead continued in his craft as well.

Now he just couldn't have done this if he had a wife and family at home.

He'd have been divided.

He'd have been thinking to himself,

This is the Lord's work, I should be out here doing this,

But I'm also called to serve my wife and family,

There's a natural conflict that arises,

And it's just the way it is.

There are many well-known people in Christian history that are the same.

John Stott the well-known English preacher and teacher again travelled and spoke extensively all around the world,
And he remained single his whole life,
And in fact wrote some very helpful Christian reflections on this.

Mother Teresa,
Serving the poorest of the poor in the slums,

Could have this '*unhindered devotion*',

Because she lived a single life.

I wonder if there are even people in your own life if you think about it,

Through whom God has blessed you in particular ways,

Through their singleness.

I know there are people like that in my life.

My life is richer,

The congregations I've been in are richer,

For the presence of unmarried Christian people.

Again,

It's not for everyone,

St Paul knows that.

But for those who can receive this life as a gift,

Tremendous blessings can flow from it.

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CONCLUSION

So, there's our sermon on the single life for today.

The single life can be a good and God pleasing way to live,

It does have its challenges,

But so does marriage, remember,

And God does certainly bring particular blessings through it as well.

May the Lord continue to grow us as his family in love for each other,

In all the places in life he calls us to.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.