

# Gift of Singleness? You're not Serious?

A LOOK AT PAUL'S CALL TO SINGLENES IN 1 CORINTHIANS 7

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## *The Idol of Relationships*

1 Corinthians 7:40 says it is better to be single than married. What statement could be more outlandish in our culture? Most Christians probably react to this with confused acceptance. “Yes, I can see it’s true in theory — and the apostle says it, so I believe it, but that’s just not my gift.”

Finding a partner is the essence, or at least the required sub-plot, of just about every sitcom, movie and popular novel. The majority of us grew up expecting to become a part of a couple. It is hard to get our minds around the idea that being single is better than being married, or even (more incredibly) that it is possible to be *happier* single, as 1 Corinthians 7:40 says. How could this be?

Indoctrinated as we are by our relationship and sex-worshipping culture, it can take us some time to understand the reasons behind Paul’s thinking. We have to get over our culture shock first. Nevertheless, it is a very worthwhile exercise for us to face a portion of God’s Word that may seem quite foreign to our mindset. It convicts us that what we believe may be wrong, and forces us to confront our own unwillingness to conform to Scripture.

## *Reasons to Stay Single*

So why is it better to be single? The reasons are very straightforward. We live in a unique time of history, a time of crisis, as we see in verse 26: “I think then that this is good in view of the present distress, that it is good for a man to remain as he is.”

This time of crisis is what should shape our decisions about whether or not to marry. The Christ has come; the Kingdom of God has begun. We are just waiting on the last knife-edge of time before the world ends. Why this short delay? So that more may come to repentance, according to 2 Peter 3:9. This is why Paul urges us to remain single now.

Verse 34 tells us that as singles we can be devoted to the Lord, which is a great blessing even if our sinful hearts don’t realize it. It means we can have a mindset more like the Apostle Paul. It means time to be committed to and sharing in the work with the Lord and Creator of the universe. That is an amazing privilege.

While marriage is part of creation, and a good gift central to our humanity, we are in a time when the urgency of the situation demands that singleness be seriously considered for the purpose of devoting one’s life to Kingdom-work. Marriage is good; but the Apostle Paul tells us that given the task we have, and the short time in which to do it, singleness is better.

There are many people yet to hear the Gospel, yet to be challenged about its meaning, yet to be talked to and made to think; it is good to deny ourselves even such a blessed thing as marriage in order to take up these tasks.

## *Overcoming Loneliness*

Does this stir your heart to consider the godliness of singleness? Maybe it does in the moment you read it but selfish desires won’t take long to assert themselves. We all have at the center of our being the fear of loneliness. We crave relationship; it drives our fantasies and thoughts even in times when society at large is not as obsessed with sex as it is at the moment. God created marriage because it was not good for the man to be alone — the only thing not good in his whole marvellous creation. Marriage is partly designed to answer loneliness, and for that reason it will always be attractive.

However, we need to say more about loneliness. For we no longer live in the garden; we live in a fallen world after the resurrection, which adds further elements to the issue. In our fallen state, marriage is in itself no guarantee of *not* being lonely. Many married people are lonely. Also, for Christians, loneliness is not a necessary product of singleness. In the family of God we need never be lonely. Jesus has given us family members beyond counting. Contentment is something which can and should be learned, either married or single, and it is a matter of knowing that your heart belongs to God. No earthly relationship will ever come close to that.

## *Misconceptions of Marriage*

Practically speaking, only a short time of reflection shows that we should not be too romantic about marriage. Marriage does not solve your problems, particularly your emotional ones. It may remove some issues, but it will bring along its own complications — complications which make dedicated work for the Kingdom of God more difficult to do. Younger singles usually fail to appreciate the reality that being single means being free from a whole range of burdens and sorrows. The single person has no day-to-day worries about raising children or working out issues with a spouse. Married women face the possibility of death in childbearing. Childlessness, or the death of a child, can be so heartrending as to destroy the marriage itself. Anyone who has seen a friend go through this terrible pain starts to appreciate the blessing of being spared such a possibility. Parental worries never quite go away, either. Will your teenage children turn the wrong way? Will they get into danger? What if they reject Christianity? You cannot guarantee that your children will be saved.

It is also wrong to assume that the relationship itself will be permanent. Marriage is the closest of human relationships, and this very closeness means that anything that breaks the relationship is dreadful. The death of a husband or wife, divorce, or adultery: these are real possibilities that happen to people. Your own spouse, whom you think is a true Christian, committed to the Gospel, may gradually become liberal to the point at which you no longer share the same views. He or she may even give away Christianity entirely, and may leave the marriage. There are so many things that can break a relationship, and sinful human beings are only too likely to find them. The blessing of marriage comes with risks, and requires constant, prayerful effort — sometimes even that is not enough.

### *The Freedom of Singleness*

In the face of the fallenness of the world and our call to do God's work in these critical times, we can begin to appreciate why being single, in the words of the Apostle Paul, might be better. Both the joys and the sorrows of marriage cause Christians to be concerned about the things of the world, not the things of the Lord (1 Cor. 7:32–33). Marriage ties Christians to this world instead of leaving them free to look to the next. Married people are called upon to live for the new creation just as much as single people — but they will find a great many more distractions that take their minds away from this goal. Paul describes them this way: “their interests are divided” (v. 34a).

We congratulate people when they get married, and so we should, for it's a marvellous blessing — but it's good also to remember Paul's down-to-earth attitude. Far from congratulating couples, he allows marriage as a concession, and urges people to avoid it if possible that they might be “free from concern” (v. 32) and have “undistracted devotion to the Lord” (v. 35).

There will, of course, be difficult times during singleness. It is hard to face grief alone, and grief will come, even to the single person. Parents, brothers and sisters will die. Accidents and illness will happen. Sometimes you just want a big hug and there's no one there to give it. Coming home to an empty house, making meals by yourself, and not having anyone to talk with can be overwhelming at times, pushing the single Christian to his utter limit.

However, on balance, the practical benefits of singleness far outweigh the practical problems; we just find it hard to see them. It is very distressing to see single people bitter, angry and torn up by their single state, for if they only opened their eyes they could find great advantages in being single. We need to recognise these things — not in a hedonistic and selfish way, but just to appreciate that singleness is a blessing in a complicated world.

Pragmatically, staying single means being able to accept invitations or go places without the restrictions of someone else's timetable. It means, probably, having

more money to spend as you wish. It gives more time for going out, pursuing hobbies, and catching up with friends.

Without viewing these as freedoms to aid us in our pursuit of pleasing the Lord (v. 32), they would be rather selfish reasons to stay single. There can also be very selfish reasons for getting married. Consider your true reasons for desiring marriage. Is it because you want to serve your spouse and give your life to his or her welfare? Or have you accepted society's decree that a life without sex is not worth living? Perhaps you are conscious of your lack of social status as a single and want a handy partner for all those social occasions? Examine your heart carefully and see if your desires are truly conformed to those of our heavenly Father.

Jesus has risen, and we are called upon to live for Him in a difficult and fallen world. This does not mean that we *must* be single, or *must* get married. It does mean that we must make our decisions carefully, based on what we know to be true, not on what we are deceived into believing. Any life will have trials, but let's be realistic; is being single really that much more difficult than being married? Our work is the same: to serve God, to glorify Him and make Him known to others. The great gift of singleness is being given so many more opportunities to carry out our common goal. ■

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*Consider your  
true reasons  
for desiring  
marriage. Is it  
because you  
want to serve  
your spouse  
and give your  
life to his or  
her welfare?*

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