

“Single-Minded” (1 Corinthians 7:25-40)

When I was growing up I wanted to be tall. I worshiped basketball. All I could think about was being a successful basketball player. My dream was to earn a college scholarship. Therefore, at least once a week I would ask my mom or dad how tall I was going to be. Whenever I would have an appointment with our family doctor, I would ask him the same question. At the conclusion of my sophomore year, my doctor finally humored me and x-rayed my hand to determine if the growth plates were still open. I'll never forget having Dr. Hostetter walk back into the room and tell me that at most I may grow another half an inch. I almost bawled like a baby right in his presence. As a 16-year-old boy I saw all my hopes and dreams vanish like a puff of smoke.

Today, on a good day, I stand 5'10". Instead of being a professional basketball player, I have an even greater privilege—teaching God's Word. I wouldn't trade what I do for six NBA championship rings. Furthermore, I can buy my clothes off the rack, I can fit comfortably in a car, and I don't have to duck as I walk through doorways. Being short in stature certainly does have its advantages. It can be a blessing in disguise. Likewise, being single can also have its advantages, if you use the time God has allotted you for His glory. The apostle Paul has some counter-cultural words for us. He will suggest that *single-minded singleness has its advantages*. In 1 Cor 7:25-40, Paul shares several of these advantages. While many of these advantages can be universally true, we must be careful to understand what Paul is saying in the context of his letter to the Corinthians.¹

1. Singles are better able to cope with troubles (7:25-28). In these first four verses, Paul suggests that being single isn't nearly as bad as some think. Rather, in the midst of a difficult period of time, Paul recommends that engaged couples consider remaining single. Paul unpacks his topic sentence. **“Now concerning virgins [engaged women]² I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion³ as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy.”⁴** The phrase “Now concerning...” harkens back to 7:1 where Paul begins answering the Corinthians' questions. In this section, he is focusing on those who are engaged to be married. Paul makes it clear that he is giving an “opinion” on the matter of singleness. He even brackets off his remarks by reminding his readers again in 7:40 that he is expressing his opinion. This should caution us not to mandate what Paul has graciously and humbly suggested.

In 7:26-28, Paul now launches into the first advantage of singleness: **“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. Are you bound [betrothed] to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you.”** It seems clear that Paul was not providing advice to be used in all situations, but one that was applicable during that particular period of time. In these three verses, Paul recommends singleness in light of challenging circumstances in Corinth. In 7:26 he speaks of “the present distress” while in 7:28 he refers to “trouble in this life.” Most likely, the phrase “the present distress” is a reference to a famine.⁵ Corinth and much of the rest of the Roman world was suffering from famines. This is corroborated by secular history, and by the fact that in 1 Cor 16:1-4 Paul was taking up the famine relief collection for Jerusalem.⁶ These were challenging days, particularly for married couples.

But, you might ask, “How does this apply to me? I am not in the midst of a famine.” I can appreciate this. However, there are many other situations that might qualify as a “present distress.” Temptation, stress, financial difficulty, busyness, materialism, even peer pressure to marry or not to marry, are all modern stresses that could render Paul's opinions here every bit as practical today as when they were first offered. Paul is not against marriage. Far from it! He is pro-marriage; however, he recognizes that marriage is not for the faint of heart. Nevertheless, *single-minded singleness has its advantages*.

The second crisis is described in 7:28 by the phrase “trouble in this life.”⁷ These troubles are not specified, but may refer to Paul’s conviction that Christians are called to suffer and will likely have more trials than others.⁸ The word “trouble” or “tribulation” means “pressed together under pressure,” which is an interesting description of the marriage relationship. You have two people who are pressed together in the closest possible way: physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. They are two very distinct individuals with different personalities, different temperaments, different wills, different histories, different struggles and difficulties that they have brought as baggage into the relationship. And even believers in Jesus Christ are still subject to the limitations and weaknesses of the flesh. So you have two angry, selfish, dishonest, proud, forgetful, thoughtless people. And that’s true even in the best marriages. It’s hard enough for a sinner to live alone with himself, let alone with another sinner. You put those two separate constellations of problems together when two people are bound together in marriage, and the problems of sinful human nature are multiplied.

Again, Paul makes it clear that marriage is a legitimate option for single people, but he wants to spare us unnecessary grief. Hence, it is good to thoughtfully consider the option of singleness. *Single-minded singleness has its advantages.* So...

- Don’t think that marriage will make you happy.
- Don’t think that marriage will solve your problems.
- Don’t think that marriage will bring you closer to God.
- Don’t think that marriage will make you a better person.
- Don’t think that marriage will fulfill your dreams.
- It won’t because it can’t.

Marriage is good and noble and holy and honorable (Heb 13:4), but it’s not the be all and end all of life. If you are miserable being single, how can you be sure you’ll suddenly be happy being married? The happiest married people are generally those who were also happy while being single. Changing your marital status doesn’t guarantee a change in your happiness or your contentment or your satisfaction with life. Discontented singles aren’t usually the best candidates for a happy marriage.⁹

[Singles are better able to cope with tribulations. Paul will now go on to share a second advantage.]

2. Singles are better able to maintain spiritual priorities (7:29-31). In light of the transitory nature of the world, Paul challenges us to live with the end in mind. Looking at these three verses, notice the two key phrases that bracket 7:29-31: 1) “The time has been shortened” (7:29). 2) “This world is passing away” (7:31). The first phrase “the time has been shortened” reminds us of the brevity of life. No one lives forever on planet earth. You may live 30 or 40 or 50 years. Who knows? You may live 80 or 90 years, but sooner or later you’re going to die. And no matter how long you live, you’re going to be dead a lot longer than you’re going to be alive. If you doubt that, just check out the nearest cemetery. Every grave is proof that the time is short.

The second phrase “this world is passing away” comes from a Greek expression that means something like “this world is but a shadow of reality.” Everything we see is fleeting and insubstantial. The metaphor perhaps is drawn from the shifting scenes in a theater.¹⁰ The idea is that this life is here one moment and gone the next. It is similar to our sitcoms and movies that must change scenes every couple of seconds. This life is not all there is; therefore, *single-minded singleness has its advantages.*

So the time is short and the world is passing away. What follows from this truth? Matthew Henry says that we should live with “holy indifference” to the things of this world. Verses 29-31 flesh this out in five different ways:¹¹

- 1) With regard to our intimate relationships: **“from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none”** (7:29). Now there’s a verse you don’t hear quoted at many weddings. It simply means, enjoy your marriage but don’t make your marriage the most important thing in your life.
- 2) With regard to afflictions: **“those who weep, as though they did not weep”** (7:30a). Do not be so overcome with grief that you act as if God doesn’t have the final word.
- 3) With regard to pleasure: **“those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice”** (7:30b). Do not get so caught up in joy that you forget suffering is right around the corner. In everything you do, don’t forget about eternal realities.
- 4) With regard to purchases: **“those who buy, as though they did not possess”** (7:30c). When you do make purchases, be a wise steward. Don’t spend carelessly on the world’s toys and trinkets. And what you do purchase, hold loosely. Be careful, lest the things you possess end up possessing you. Acknowledge that you are a steward and the Master may call for what He has given you.
- 5) With regard to all earthly concerns: **“those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world”** (7:31a). Use the world, enjoy the world, live in the world, work in the world, buy and sell in the world, but do not let the world rule your life. The message is clear and unmistakable. You won’t be here forever. Enjoy life, live it to the fullest, take advantage of every moment, but don’t indulge yourself so much that you lose your focus on what really matters.

[Singles have the potential to maintain spiritual priorities. One of the reasons that this is the case is because of Paul’s third advantage.]

3. Singles have fewer distractions (7:32-35). Paul expresses the reality that marriage requires being absorbed in the “concerns” of one’s spouse and encourages singles in their devotion to Christ. **“But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord;³³ but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife,³⁴ and his interests are divided. The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.³⁵ This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.”** Paul acknowledges that married people are concerned about their spouse, and rightly so! If they are not, they will not find themselves in a happy marriage. Marriage requires immense sacrifice, time, and energy. Thus, Paul’s point is that the marriage relationship can keep us from devoting ourselves more fully to Christ. For example, we must balance our devotion to our spouse, children, and God. Yet, at the same time be so consumed with God that every area of our lives is well balanced. Remember, *single-minded singleness has its advantages.*

Dr. John Murray was once a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, who because of creeping liberalism in that institution joined with a number of other fine scholars to found Westminster Theological Seminary. John Murray served on the faculty there for many decades as Professor of Theology, writing many excellent books that have served the church well for decades. A life-long bachelor, he finally retired at age 75, moved back to his homeland of Scotland, and married a woman about half his age. Less than two years later they had a child. I think he felt that he had given God the best 75 years of his life; now it was time to have a little fun. Unfortunately, his heart couldn’t take all that excitement, and a few years later he died.¹²

Granted, this is a most unusual case, but it demonstrates that it is possible to honor God with singleness if you have the gift, and then marry at a later time. *Single-minded singleness has its advantages.*

[Paul's final words draw out an important principle...]

4. Singles have the option of marriage (7:36-40). This is a particularly difficult paragraph because the Greek is ambiguous and it's impossible to know for sure whether he's talking about a marriage arranged by a parent or a voluntary one between a man and his fiancée. I believe the man in view is the fiancé of the virgin, who is considering the possibility of marriage with her. These verses then summarize what Paul has already taught. In my estimation, the best English translations of these verses are found in the ESV, NRSV, and NLT. I will provide the NRSV rendering of 7:36-38: **"If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his fiancée,¹³ if his passions are strong, and so it has to be, let him marry as he wishes; it is no sin. Let them marry. But if someone stands firm in his resolve, being under no necessity but having his own desire under control, and has determined in his own mind to keep her as his fiancée, he will do well. So then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better."** Paul's point is that an engaged couple is free to decide whether to marry or remain single. Everyone likes to have the freedom to choose, so here Paul leaves the choice up to believers. Both options are viable and permissible.

In 7:39-40, Paul concludes this chapter and his section on marriage and singleness with these words: **"A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God."** Paul wants to leave the topic of marriage, divorce, and remarriage with an emphasis on his two most important thoughts: marriage is for life and Christians should only marry Christians. Married people and singles both need to come to grips with these points. Of course, he isn't here dealing with the two biblical exceptions: sexual immorality (Matt 5:32; 19:9) and desertion (1 Cor 7:12-16). He is envisioning the ideal circumstances—death is the only condition that frees a person for remarriage. *Even then* the freedom is not total, for a believer is to marry only another believer, whether it's a first marriage or a second. That doesn't mean simply that one must marry a person who believes in God; rather, it means the potential marriage partner must have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I would also urge every widow (or widower) to only remarry a spouse that is at least a spiritual equal.

The truth is there are many excellent reasons to not marry. It is better not to marry...

- than to marry a nonbeliever.¹⁴
- than to marry someone who will hinder your relationship with Christ or your service for Him.
- than to marry someone without the commitment to give completely of yourself to that person.
- than to marry for the wrong motive.
- than to marry at all, if you have the gift of celibacy.

Paul's last comment is a unique one: "and I think that I too have the Spirit of God." This doesn't mean Paul wonders whether he is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, for he knew that; rather, he believes he has the illumination of the Spirit on this topic. I like that because it shows Paul's humility and honesty. He was never arrogant about God's truth. When he had a word directly from the Lord (as in 7:10 of this chapter), he made no qualms about sharing it and enforcing it. When he had opinions that were apostolic (as in 7:12 and 25), he gave them with conviction. But when he wasn't sure whether his ideas conformed to that which the Spirit of God taught, he was willing to say so. Unfortunately, there are many in the ministry today who would never admit what Paul says here, and *they* aren't even close to being apostles. Yet they always claim to be right, always have a word from the Lord, and are usually dogmatic about it. They may be wrong, but they're never in doubt. Beware of teachers who claim to have a direct pipeline to God.

This past week, I came across a book by a number of doctors who have discovered numerous advantages to being short: First, shorter people of the same proportions as taller people have many physical advantages based on the laws of physics, and these advantages are supported by many researchers. Shorter people have faster reaction times, greater ability to accelerate body movements, stronger muscles in proportion to body weight, greater endurance, and the ability to rotate the body faster. They are also less likely to break bones in falling.

Second, shorter people tend to live longer. A few years ago, a comprehensive study of about 300 height and cancer papers, concluded that taller people had a 20 to 60% higher incidence of cancer compared to shorter people. More recently, breast, testicular, and prostate cancer studies found taller women and men suffered from substantially higher cancer rates.

Third, shorter people have a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease.

Finally, shorter people have a reduced negative impact on the environment, water needs, and resource consumption. A population of 6 billion people averaging 6' and 190 pounds can impact human survival by creating more pollution and depletion of resources, such as water, energy, minerals, farm land, and oil. The reason for this is that a 6' person weighing 190 pounds is 73% heavier and has 44% more surface area than a 5' person weighing 110 pounds. (The weight difference is based on tall and short people having the same proportions.)¹⁵

Obviously, being short in stature certainly does have its advantages. It can be a blessing in disguise. In the same manner, being single also has numerous advantages: the potential ability to cope with troubles, maintain spiritual priorities, and remain undistracted and utterly devoted to Christ. *Single-minded singleness has its advantages.*

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Scripture Reference

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

Matthew 6:33; 16:25

Matthew 6:19-21

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Romans 13:11-12

Hebrews 11:24-26

2 Peter 3:10-13

Study Questions

1. Do Christians put too much emphasis on marriage as a key to fulfillment and happiness? When I was single, what were my primary motivations for getting married? If I am currently single, what do I hope I will experience in marriage? In light of this passage, do the strengths of marriage outweigh the potential drawbacks? Please explain.
2. How have my spouse and I worked through distresses and troubles in this life? Have these trials bonded us in our love for Jesus Christ and one another? If so, how? What have my spouse and I learned over the years that we could share with others?
3. How can I avoid allowing a good thing (marriage) to take the place of the best thing (devotion to Christ)? As a married individual, how would I advise couples who are married or engaged to put Christ first? How have I failed to fulfill this goal in my own marriage? How have I succeeded in meeting this aspiration in my own marriage?
4. As a single person, have I maximized my singleness by putting Christ first? In what specific ways have I demonstrated devotion to Christ during my single years? How have I found significance and fulfillment in my love relationship with Christ?
5. If I am single, divorced, or widowed, am I willing to seek counsel and input from godly and mature believers on a prospective mate if that is what God has for me? Would I be willing to honor Christ with celibacy if that is what He calls me to? How can I learn to submit my will to Christ?

Notes

¹ First Corinthians was written as an “occasional” letter. Paul wrote this letter to a specific church regarding particular problems that church was having due to its peculiar circumstances. It was also written largely in response to a letter that the Corinthians had written to Paul (1 Cor 7:1).

² Paul used the feminine gender in five out of the six uses of this noun in 1 Cor 7:25-38. Consequently, it seems clear that he was speaking of female virgins in particular. Thomas L. Constable: *Notes on 1 Corinthians*: 2005 edition: <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/1corinthians.pdf>, 78.

³ “Yet why does he say it is an ‘opinion’, and not an instruction? It may be that Paul is being tactful in order to deflect the arrogance of those intent on raking up circumstantial evidence to show that he always wants his own way. If so, he employs irony to appeal to the Corinthians to agree with him: after all, the Lord has not found him unreliable. Secondly, in that marriage and the single state are voluntary, Paul, following the precedent set by Jesus, will not command.” Peter Naylor, *1 Corinthians* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2004): http://www.rheader.com/ebook_excerpt/c5/AStCommemoCorint.html.

⁴ The word “trustworthy” (*pistos*) is used by Paul a number of times. In the Pastoral Epistles, it is used of sayings which are “faithful” or “reliable” (see 1 Tim 1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim 2:11; Titus 3:8).

⁵ See Bruce W. Winter, “Civil Litigation in Secular Corinth and the Church: The Forensic Background to 1 Corinthians 6:1-8.” *New Testament Studies* 37 (1991): 559-72; B.B. Blue, “The House Church at Corinth and the Lord’s Supper: Famine, Food Supply, and the Present Distress,” *Criswell Theological Review* 5.2 (1991): 221-239; Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistles to the Corinthians*: New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 239; and David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 323-325.

⁶ Even though the Corinthians were suffering, those in Jerusalem were evidently suffering worse from the famines. ⁷ Thistelton suggests the meaning may here be pressures, e.g., responsibilities (cf. 7:32-35) and *te sarki* may mean “in everyday life.”

⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*: The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 333 n. 44.

⁹ Ray Pritchard, “Overcoming Discontentment” (1 Cor 7:17-35): <http://www.calvarymemorial.com/pastors/sermons/pdf/120802rp.pdf>, 12/8/2002.

¹⁰ Garland, *1 Corinthians*. 331.

¹¹ Pritchard, “Overcoming Discontentment.”

¹² Michael P. Andrus, “One Is a Lovely Number” (1 Cor 7:25-40): unpublished sermon, 3/18/2001.

¹³ Thistelton writes, “The distinction between *he gune egamos* and *he pathenos* has been much discussed. But the difference seems to be fairly clear. The former term denotes (usually) a woman who has been married but is now either widowed, divorced, or in a state of permanent separation. Since the latter subcategory is included, we need not be surprised that Paul does not choose to use *chera*, even if *widows* represent the majority of those included under the broader term.” Thistelton

¹⁴ Like it or not, the Bible is clear that believers are only free to marry fellow believers (see Deut 7:3-4; 1 Kgs 11:1-2, 4; Mal 2:11-12; 2 Cor 6:14).

¹⁵ See “Advantages of Shorter Height”: <http://www.shortsupport.org/Research/samaras.html>. This summary is based on Thomas Samaras, ed., *Human Body Size and the Laws of Scaling: Physiological, Performance, Growth, Longevity and Ecological Ramifications* (Nova Science Publishers Inc., 2006).