

They Were Single Too

Eight Biblical Role Models

Revised Edition

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David M. Hoffeditz

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They Were Single Too: Eight Biblical Role Models

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Preface

“While neither marriage nor singleness is permanent, we accept our present marital status as a God-given gift.” I penned these words in the first edition of this book over ten years ago. Never had I imagined that the Lord would demonstrate the truthfulness of these words in my own life. As I am now married with two children, one might question why I would welcome a revised edition of *They Were Single Too*. It would seem more appropriate to write a work entitled *They Were Married Too*. However, I believe this book is still relevant. First, after speaking at countless singles events and meeting with numerous single adults, I am still convinced of this book’s importance. These biblical characters provide timeless truths that can be easily applied—no matter one’s culture, timetable, age, race, or gender. With an ever-growing single population and the uncertainties we face in this world, *They Were Single Too* provides needed encouragement, biblical edification, and exhortation.

Second, as I wrote in the introduction to the first edition, my desire was to create a study not just for single adults. Having now experienced both gifts, I can testify to this book’s applicability no matter one’s marital status. Whether married or single, we all face social inadequacies, shattered dreams, temptations, busyness, and the challenges of faithfulness amid adversity. Undoubtedly this book was written with singles in mind, but my prayer is that this tool continues to serve the *entire* body of Christ as we seek to glorify Him together!

The content of this second edition has not been significantly altered. I have maintained the single perspective of when the book was originally written. Only minor revisions have been made to update the material, clarify a couple of points, and incorporate the findings of more recent studies and research. Some data included in the first edition, specifically a survey from Purposeful Singleness and Barna Group, is still included in this revised edition due to the survey's ongoing relevance.

An endeavor such as this certainly involves numerous people.

For their work on the first edition, I want to thank Sheré Myers, Jill Zwylghuizen, and Rebecca Cragoe for countless hours of editing and for a “feminine” touch.

I am grateful to Jim Weaver and to Mark Miller for their encouragement to pen the original work.

This revision would not be possible without the wonderful support of Dennis Hillman, Joel Armstrong, and the dear folks at Kregel Publications. I appreciate their continued support of this book.

I am grateful for my parents who beautifully modeled the “gift of marriage,” while understanding and encouraging me as I lived out my “gift of singleness.”

I am also grateful to the Lord for this new gift: the gift of marriage. The Lord has blessed me with my precious wife, Lori, who displays vividly the joy of serving our Lord—no matter one's marital status.

Introduction

When I was asked for the first time to speak at a singles conference, the thought of “being exposed” plagued my mind. The group wanted someone to address the subject of walking with the Lord while living single. I feared that my facade of self-sufficiency would collapse under the stress of speaking at this retreat, as I knew my inner struggles surrounding the whole idea of solo living. I had dedicated my life to the study of the Scriptures but had personally avoided what God had to say on the issue. I was afraid—afraid that maybe people were right that being single was not God’s first choice, and that I should settle down with someone so I could be “complete.” Or worse, maybe the single life was some kind of “gift.” If so, it resembled the type of Christmas gift you would receive from your Aunt Lilly. You know the kind—an orange and brown crocheted sweater with one sleeve longer than the other.

Preparing for the retreat *forced* me to turn to God’s Word. Through examining Scripture, I discovered liberation from several shackles of the single life—shackles placed on me by others and even by myself. My desire in the chapters that follow is to explore with you what God’s Word says about singleness. I have read many books on singleness and have been greatly disappointed. Only a couple of authors wrestle through 1 Corinthians 7, while most deal with how to cope with the “plight,” provide an inspirational Kumbaya land, or establish twelve steps for a thriving singles ministry. These are not the goals of this book. I have no

desire to throw a pity party, create a dating service, or cast stones at the church. Rather, my purpose is to take a fresh look at exactly what the Scriptures say about singleness. Since only one chapter in the Old or New Testament specifically addresses this topic (1 Cor. 7), we will also explore eight individuals in the Bible who were single adults. In so doing, we will witness not only the blessings of living solo but also the discouragements, disappointments, and struggles. These eight portraits will capture how God intends men and women—single or married—to live in this fallen world. Our aim is to demonstrate, through the lives of these men and women, how one can truly serve God and be single.

This study is not just for single people. My prayer is that anyone who sincerely desires to know what the Scriptures say on this subject will read this book. Preconceived notions, biases, and cultural “ideals” must give way to God’s Word. After all, the single man from Nazareth said, “The person who has my commandments and obeys them is the one who loves me” (John 14:21).

Paul

The “Gift” of Singleness

Wherever the single person is, God is doing something. You can't alter it; you can't add something to it; you can't take something from it. God does His work so He can grow that person to be like Himself. Then when others see God in that person, His purpose has been fulfilled.

—LUCI SWINDOLL

(author, speaker, and never-been-married single)

An airline ticket to San Diego, a box of assorted chocolates, or even a pair of socks could constitute a gift. However, using this noun in reference to singleness leaves us wondering if one is speaking the correct language; while in English *gift* denotes a present or talent, in German the word *gift* refers to poison or toxin. Even the word *celibacy* raises images of something you might observe in a freak show. And yet, I fear the same dreadful notion carries over when people say a man or woman has “the gift of singleness.” After all, the thinking goes, a “normal” person would never choose to live alone. The argument continues by citing God’s creation of Eve for Adam, demonstrating that one is so much better off married. Consequently, the “gift” is portrayed as a curse rather than a blessing.

The reference to singleness as a gift originates in one of Paul’s letters to

the Corinthians. As a single adult serving Christ, Paul wishes that all men and women could be like him (1 Cor. 7:7). What exactly is this gift of singleness Paul is referring to in his letter to the believers at Corinth? Is the term used to provide a conciliatory token for losing in some cruel, cosmic game of Russian roulette? In this chapter, we will explore Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7, how these words are evidenced in his own ministry, and how we should understand them today.

Two Gifts and Two Questions

Understanding Paul's words begins with their context. Paul writes to believers in Corinth to correct erroneous practices, attack false teachers, and provide instruction concerning the offering for poverty-stricken believers in Jerusalem.

Despite several historical and geographical differences, the culture of Corinth bears a strong resemblance to present-day American culture. Prominent Bible scholar Anthony Thiselton states that Corinthian culture was "self-sufficient, self-congratulatory . . . coupled with an obsession about peer-group prestige, success in competition, their devaluing of tradition and universals, and near contempt for those without standing in some chosen value system." And as such, "1 Corinthians stands in a *distinctive position of relevance to our own times*."¹

While her members possessed many gifts and abilities (such as the spiritual gifts seen in 1 Cor. 12–13; see also 1:4–7), the church in Corinth remained spiritually immature (3:1–4). Resembling her culture, the church's immaturity even included gross sexual sin.² For instance, in 1 Corinthians 5 we read not only of a man sleeping with his stepmother but also of many people within the church boasting of allowing it to continue. In response to this perverse culture and to particular believers who embraced such activity, some of the Corinthian believers overreacted and forbade sexual relations even in marriage.³

The apostle addresses these extremes of promiscuity and abstinence within the local body of believers, first concentrating on the importance of maintaining sexual activity within marriage. He then concludes these

opening thoughts by stating, “I wish that everyone was as I am [single]. But each has his own gift from God, one this way, another that” (7:7). Paul boldly declares both marriage and singleness to be gifts bestowed by God. I am continually amazed at Paul’s words. In all my years of attending church, I do not remember anyone referring to the “gift of marriage.” Often people neglect to see both as gifts, and in so doing, regard singleness as a social oddity. Finally, note that Paul doesn’t pit the two marital states against each other but stresses the significance of each gift. Both are God-given.

I am comforted to know that God is the one distributing marriage or singleness. The God who called me before He created this world, who knows the number of hairs on my head, and who gave His Son for me is the benefactor of these gifts. It is the Lord who has appointed—not Aunt Lilly, not my mother, not my so-called friends, nor that well-meaning church member.

Yet Paul’s statement in verse 7 raises two significant questions. First, how do I know which gift has been divinely selected for me? The common response, even among many Bible scholars, proposes that contentment is the deciding factor. In other words, the gift of singleness equates with one’s satisfaction in living solo. Often proponents of this view believe the gift is celibacy, and they refer to the eunuchs in Matthew 19:12 for further support of their position: “For there are some eunuchs who were that way from birth, and some who were made eunuchs by others, and some who became eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who is able to accept this should accept it.”

As I frequently tell my students, studying key biblical terms can greatly enhance our understanding of the text. When we investigate the Greek word for “gift,” *charisma*, in 1 Corinthians 7:7, we find that Paul never uses this lexical form with an obligation attached. In the twenty occurrences of the word in the New Testament, *charisma* always conveys a divine gift or something freely and graciously given by God.⁴ The gift stands independent of human response. In fact, Scripture never indicates that God’s blessings are earned by our contentment. *Charisma* is theocentric, not

anthropocentric. Despite periods of loneliness, depression, and need, Paul declares, “Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am” (Phil. 4:11 *NASB*; see also 2 Cor. 12:10; 1 Tim. 6:8). While the immediate context of this verse concerns material possessions and various comforts of life, certainly we can include his present state of singleness.

Later in 1 Corinthians, we also observe Paul’s willingness to become a slave to all people for the sake of the gospel (9:19), and we find his reminder that all we do should be for the glory of God (10:31). Because Paul recognized God’s many blessings, his focus was not on his marital status but on serving the Lord. In “Singled Out by God for Good,” Paige Benton provides a healthy outlook on the single life. Echoing Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 7, she writes: “I am not single because I am too spiritually unstable to possibly deserve a husband, nor because I am too spiritually mature to possibly need one. I am single because God is so abundantly good to me, because this is his best for me. It is a cosmic impossibility that anything could be better for me right now than being single. The psalmists confirm that I should not want, I shall not want, because no good thing will God withhold from me.”⁵

The popular belief that “as soon as you’re satisfied with God alone, He’ll bring someone special into your life” fails to account for God’s sovereignty in His distribution of gifts. The reference to eunuchs in Matthew 19 also fails to support contentment as the key in identifying one’s gift, because the context of the two passages is different,⁶ and because the word *charisma* is absent in the Matthew passage. And lastly, if contentment is the determining factor for singleness, wouldn’t contentment also be the determining factor for keeping the gift of marriage? Certainly nowhere in Scripture does discontentment provide grounds for divorce.

If contentment does not signal the gift of celibacy, how then can I as a single person know which gift I possess? Apart from Paul’s statement concerning lack of self-control (1 Cor. 7:9),⁷ the text seems to indicate that the gift equals one’s current marital status. The immediate context supports this claim as Paul talks about various marital states and their temporality.

In verses 17–24 Paul argues that one’s social, racial, physical, and religious status are irrelevant. As David Garland writes, “Since all human categories have become null and void in Christ, any attempt to change one’s status in order to enhance one’s standing with God is to ascribe to it more importance than it merits.”⁸ In other words, one’s marital status directly falls under God’s sovereignty and how the Lord has gifted a person. The true issue is not to determine one’s gift but rather to faithfully serve God in whatever position He grants. While neither marriage nor singleness is permanent, we accept our present marital status as a God-given gift.

We often make God’s simple truths too complex. For instance, I frequently discuss with college students the will of God concerning further studies, employment, and even marriage. Many students are afraid of making the wrong decision and missing God’s will for their lives. While I appreciate their sensitivity to the Lord’s leading, I don’t think God’s will resembles Sir Winston Churchill’s description of the former Soviet Union—“a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.”⁹ God does not play hide-and-seek with His will, but rather He promises to reveal it (Ps. 32:8; 73:24; Prov. 3:5–6). A child of God who obeys the Word, establishes convictions born of prayer, listens to the counsel of mature believers, acts on what is known, and accepts what seems incomprehensible will have little problem discerning the will of God.¹⁰ The Lord has a purpose for each believer (Ps. 37:23; Eph. 2:10; Acts 13:2), and in fact, He *desires* that we carry out His will more than *we* do. Paul cautions the Corinthian believers not to become confused as they try to determine the Lord’s will surrounding the “gift.” The apostle indicates that one’s current status is the divine plan.

This leads us to the second question raised by Paul’s bold statement in verse 7. If I receive the gift of singleness, what is the return policy? Is it possible to do a gift exchange? While there are days when my independent spirit relishes flying solo, I would be lying if I didn’t admit that deep down I long to have a wife and raise a family. At times, recognizing that my good and all-knowing heavenly Father has granted me this present state of singleness provides little comfort. Like the psalmist, I question how

long the Lord will forget me (Ps. 13). Yet my response should be like the psalmist's in the latter part of that psalm: trust in God's goodness. In the next section of this chapter we will discuss the uniqueness of this gift, but we must note that the key to singleness (or marriage, for that matter) is obedience. In 1 Corinthians 7:19, the apostle writes, "What matters is the keeping of the commandments of God" (NASB).

While contentment doesn't determine one's marital status, satisfaction does bear on living the single life. Recently I read an article by a single adult who was upset about people telling her to be content. She thought this tells hurting singles not to hope or dream, "but to abandon the cry of their hearts."¹¹ And yet, the word used by Paul for "satisfied," *autarkhs*, was "used to describe the person who through discipline had become independent of external circumstances and who had discovered personal resources that were more than adequate for any situation that might arise."¹² The context of Philippians 4:11 centers on Paul's residing in Christ and the resulting joy. Paul's strength, hope, and joy were rooted in Christ—not in possessions or a romantic relationship. No wonder Paul could declare that he counted all things as loss for Christ (Phil. 3:7–8; Acts 20:24). True contentment—which is based in Christ—does tell singles to hope, dream, and enjoy life. True contentment soothes the soul, encourages perseverance, and affirms the certainty of the believer's future hope.

These words may call my sanity into question. To be thankful for and rest in a frequently painful state seems masochistic. And to resolve that my loneliness is God's gift rings of fatalism. Yet once again observe the life of Paul. Paul understood what it meant to follow Christ. His declaration "For to me, living is Christ" (Phil. 1:21) stems from a commitment to denying himself and taking up his cross. Philip Yancey, in his profound work *Reaching for the Invisible God*, writes:

In my own spiritual life, I am trying to remain open to new realities, not blaming God when my expectations go unmet but trusting him to lead me through failures toward renewal and growth.

I am also seeking a trust that “the Father knows best” in how this world is run. Reflecting on Old Testament times, I see that the more overt way in which I may want God to act does not achieve the results I might expect. And when God sent his own Son—sinless, non-coercive, full of grace and healing—we killed him. God himself allows what he does not prefer, in order to achieve some greater goal.¹³

Christianity presents itself as an ironic religion. We must give our lives away if we expect to gain them.

A response to the survey question “If you are content being single, why?” reads, “Being honest I go through waves of contentedness. I often feel very happy with my life as a single woman, but get stressed about it when I think about my waning fertility and growing older alone. But God sustains me. I am not ecstatic about being single, however, I can honestly say, ‘God, thy will be done.’”¹⁴ If we live our lives fully to gratify ourselves, we will miss the blessings that come from God’s gifts—yes, even from the gift of singleness.

The Uniqueness of the Gift

What blessings could possibly come from living solo? Why would Paul encourage believers to remain unmarried? After all, we just saw that both marriage and singleness are gifts from God. This question weighs heavily on single adults, given the ever-popular evangelical belief that one can best serve the Lord if one is married. In a similar vein, I often hear that one cannot serve as _____ (pastor, teacher . . . fill in the blank) unless one is married. I call these predominant beliefs the “Roman Catholic aversion.” Ironically, in the Catholic Church I would be praised for my singleness, while in many Protestant circles I am restricted or disqualified. Surely Paul faced similar attitudes living in a culture that expected Jewish men to marry by age eighteen.¹⁵ While we could debate whether Paul was married at some point, the apostle has no problem recommending that people remain single.¹⁶ He writes in 1 Corinthians 7:32–35 (NASB):

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; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, 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. 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.

Freedom from Anxiety

From this passage, we can observe two benefits of the gift of singleness. First, single adults are free from particular concerns that married people face.¹⁷ Before I go any further, I do want to be sensitive to the diversity of circumstances within singleness. Many of the freedoms we will address in this section may not hold true for every single (such as single parents). However, *all* singles are free from marriage—a relationship that entails submitting to one another and sacrificing time, energy, and resources. Paul delineates various roles for husbands and wives elsewhere in his writings (Eph. 5:22–33). Such requirements are irrelevant for single adults. I don't have to visit the in-laws, attend my spouse's company picnic, worry about forgetting my anniversary, justify my recent purchase, or seek permission to spend an evening with the guys. In a more serious vein, I have the freedom to go on a short-term mission trip, work a couple of evenings at the office, or enjoy a road trip without the concern of leaving a spouse at home.

We need to keep in mind, especially those of us who are single, that both singleness *and* marriage are gifts. Paul is not saying that if we marry we cannot please the Lord, but rather we will desire to please both the Lord and our spouse. Time, energy, attention, and responsibilities will compete.

To further stress the value of this freedom, Paul highlights the “present

distress” of the Corinthian believers: “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” (1 Cor 7:26 NASB). While the believers may have been facing a specific event (such as a famine), the context of verses 29–31 indicates a more serious situation—the end times.

In his reflection on 1 Corinthians 7, Will Deming draws a connection between Paul’s words in verses 29–31 and both Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature. He believes the apostle is focusing on the hardships the world will face in “the period *before* the End.”¹⁸ The themes of buying, rejoicing, and mourning found in the immediate context (vv. 30–31) occur in Ezekiel’s vision of the end times: “The time has come; the day has struck! The customer should not rejoice, nor the seller mourn” (Ezek. 7:12). And in Luke 17:26–37, Jesus tells his disciples that the Son of Man will come, destroying those who are distracted by marriages, buying, selling, eating, drinking, planting, and building.

The issue for Paul is not chronological but theological: “The redemptive events which took place in the death and resurrection of Christ remain ‘decisive’: These have ‘shortened the time,’ leaving believers ignorant of how long they have before the parousia [the coming of Christ] will finally cut short all activity in the world.”¹⁹ Anthony Thiselton writes, “Such concrete circumstances bring home the crumbling insecurity of a world order which stands under the apocalyptic judgment of the cross.”²⁰ In light of the imminent hour, Paul calls for the loosening of our vicelike grip on temporal possessions and relationships. John Calvin, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, points out that the apostle calls for “a moderate and disciplined way, such as will not hinder or delay us on our journey.”²¹ Marriage can distract from the truth that we are pilgrims in this world and that our citizenship is of heaven. Singleness creates looser ties with this world and directs our attention to the promises of an immediate future. Lucien Legrand summarizes the issue well:

Marriage is not condemned. . . . Yet it is discouraged. This is not because it multiplies earthly obligations and petty worries

restricting the mental freedom to meditate and contemplate. Neither is it because it proposes objects of affection other than Christ. It is not wife and children which disturb men but their worldly requirements, real or supposed. The danger of matrimony is that, by the whole force of circumstances which surround it, it tends to remain a “thing of this age” and to enfold men in the spirit of this world.²²

Allowance for Unhindered Devotion

Paul highlights that the gift of singleness also carries some unique responsibilities. Several months ago my parents gave me a piano. My gratitude for this wonderful gift is demonstrated in my care for it. Proper placement of the piano within the home and regular tuning are necessary responsibilities that accompany such a gift. In the same way, the single life carries certain responsibilities. The unmarried life is not about self-indulgence but about selflessness. It is about experiencing the wonderful luxury of glorifying the Lord in a unique manner. As mentioned above, this greater freedom provides opportunities for many singles to minister in ways that married folks, especially those with children, are likely unable to do. Single adults serve in many churches and parachurch ministries. At the Christian university where I teach, nearly one-sixth of the faculty and staff are single. My marital state lets me work odd hours, speak at late-night dorm meetings, attend a Saturday morning soccer match, or drop my Friday evening plans to join a group of students for dinner. I thank God for these opportunities to build into my students' lives. I also thank God for an institution that acknowledges the value of singleness.

Unfortunately, freedom from particular activities does not always result in increased devotion to the Lord. For some, the single life means unleashed independence, irresponsibility, and poor stewardship of their God-given resources. In a recent study by the Pew Research Center, less than half of never-married single adults view religion as important, compared to 58 percent of married adults who viewed religion as important. In addition, this study revealed that approximately 30 percent of

never-married or divorced adults attend a religious service weekly, while 43 percent of married adults attend a weekly service.²³ Other unmarried people spend the free time afforded by the single life bemoaning the fact that they are single or desperately pursuing Mr. or Ms. Right. Interestingly, in the Old Testament, anxiety is associated with striving for what lies beyond one's grasp. In contrast, Psalm 55:22 reads: "Throw your burden upon the LORD, and he will sustain you. He will never allow the godly to be upended." The gift of singleness is intended not for living a carefree, irresponsible, self-centered life but for living a life that glorifies God. One of my seminary professors, John Hannah, often said, "We are losing the opportunity of giving our lives away."

We shouldn't miss, however, that Paul never claims the single life to be easy. Study after study shows the number one concern for singles is loneliness. And yet, singleness is not an exile to the isle of seclusion. While we'll discuss loneliness later in chapter 4, we can note from Paul's life important steps when serving the Lord single. The apostle demonstrates in his ministry the importance of people. He identifies about thirty-six individuals—married couples and single men and women—who accompany him, pray for him, encourage him, and even serve him.²⁴ Names such as Timothy, Titus, Luke, Aquila and Priscilla, John Mark, Barnabas, and Phoebe are highlighted in his epistles. In a discussion of what he calls "the Pauline circle," F. F. Bruce writes, "The evidence for its membership lies plentifully before us in the New Testament, both in Paul's own writings and in the Acts. Paul attracted friends around him as a magnet attracts iron filings. His genius for friendship has been spoken of so often that it has become proverbial—almost a cliché, in fact."²⁵ Paul was not a lone ranger but welcomed and celebrated the role of others in his missionary endeavors (Rom. 16).

A wonderful example of Paul's provisions while serving the Lord single is his companionship with Timothy of Lystra. In six of Paul's letters Timothy's name appears with Paul's in the superscription, and Timothy is the only person to whom two canonical epistles were addressed. Timothy joined the apostle on both his second and third missionary journeys,

residing with Paul in Corinth for eighteen months and serving with him in Ephesus. Later Timothy accompanied Paul on his last voyage to Judea (Acts 20:4) and eventually came to comfort the imprisoned apostle in Rome (2 Tim. 4:6–13). Paul frequently wrote of Timothy’s service and their common goal in serving Christ (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10–11; Phil. 2:19–23). This deep and common bond between Paul and his convert serves as a source of encouragement. One writer aptly comments, “In the loneliness of his dark dungeon, Paul craved to have his devoted and sympathetic young friend with him again. He therefore urged Timothy to come to him speedily, giving diligence ‘to come before winter’ (2 Tim. 4:9, 21).”²⁶ This single apostle recognized that companionship prevented the seeds of depression and loneliness from growing (2 Cor. 2:13; Phil. 2:19–20; 1 Thess. 2:17–3:2; 2 Tim. 4:11).

Marriage is not necessarily a solution for loneliness, however. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul’s fullest discussion of matrimony, “nothing is said about marrying to intensify the joy of companionship outside the bedroom or to provide a loving environment for child nurture.”²⁷

Given the benefits mentioned above, it is not surprising that the majority of single adults claim to be content with their present status. The Purposeful Singleness website surveyed single adults concerning what they were thankful for, especially regarding their marital situation.²⁸ These were just some of the comments:

- “I am thankful for the time I have to spend with God. For depending on God as my help and my refuge.”
- “I am thankful that I have learned much about depending on the Lord and the importance of finding my purpose in Him.”
- “In this season of singleness, I have grown in my walk with the Father and matured as a person.”
- “I am so thankful for being single. It has been almost two years since my divorce and God has drawn me close to Him. I have never known love like God’s love.”
- “The gift of being single has been such a blessing. The opportunities

of this present to minister to many overflow. Ministry opportunities often happen at a moment's notice, and being single allows time to immediately focus on His work instead of our relationships.”

Many who live solo could echo such sentiments. Instead of questioning why someone isn't married, we should applaud single adults for carrying out Paul's exhortation and for enjoying the blessings of this divinely appointed gift.

Yet the question of the value of dating still remains. Is the pursuit of a spouse tolerated given Paul's rhetoric in 1 Corinthians 7? The apostle appears to leave little room for maneuvering between the two gifts. Either you “burn” with passion so you marry, or you don't and thus live a life of celibacy. There are a couple of issues to remember. First, Paul's comments are his assessment of the situation, not theological dogma. Repeatedly he stresses that this is his opinion (vv. 7, 25, 40). The apostle seeks only to assist believers in their obedience to the Lord. For instance, in verse 35 Paul declares that what he says is for the readers' own benefit, not to restrict them. The reflexive construction in the Greek highlights the fact that the benefit is entirely their own. As pointed out by Thiselton, “Paul's motivation and concern are neither purely authoritarian nor largely ascetic, but to maximize the freedom and lack of anxiety experienced by the addressees in the Lord's work.”²⁹ As stated earlier, the key to our spiritual success is obedience, regardless of our circumstances.

Second, marriage is a gift, not a sin. God established and blessed marriage. Twice Paul clearly states, “If you marry, you have not sinned” (v. 28; see also v. 36). Those who lack power over their passion should marry, but for others who do not “burn,” marriage is still a viable and God-honoring state—free from any sense of sin, failure, or second-class status. While Paul views marriage as a means of preventing sin (*porneia*, vv. 2, 5–6), he's not suggesting in verse 9 that marriage is little more than a remedy for a strong sex drive. Rather, the apostle seems to suggest that a couple's love may produce such a powerful force that it distracts from everything, and this too is for the sake of the gospel. Attempting to suppress a God-given

aspect of human existence will only frustrate and hinder the believer from any service for the Lord. However, a strong sexual drive is not an excuse for discontentment or the desperate pursuit of a spouse. Purity, self-control, and contentment are to mark the believer's life.

Third, neither gift is necessarily permanent. Even in the immediate context, Paul addresses those who once had the gift of marriage (vv. 8, 15). Likewise, the gift of singleness doesn't confine us to a convent. The pursuit of a spouse requires, however, that we acknowledge the difficulties and additional responsibilities associated with marriage. The pursuit must never set precedence over glorifying the Lord or hinder our obedience to Him.

Finally, we need to ensure that the pursuit of marriage doesn't strip the benefits of our current gift of singleness. If we allow it, the longings for intimacy can eclipse the blessings of living solo. Maintaining this balance is difficult because it requires continual, concentrated effort. We must constantly remind ourselves of the advantages of single living and evaluate our actions and attitudes.

Often in discussing the gift of singleness, single adults will quote Psalm 37:4 to me: "Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart" (NASB). This recitation resembles a CIA agent's use of an identity badge. The person assumes that citing this verse will guarantee immediate and full access to their desires. The danger with this thinking is great, as it misunderstands our relationship to the Lord and can lead to major disappointment. The context of the verse calls for believers to trust even amid confusion. David writes, "Do not fret because of evildoers. . . . Trust in the LORD and do good" (vv. 1-3 NASB). A few verses later the psalmist calls for believers to "rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him"—a theme he will echo three more times in the psalm. This psalm was not intended to serve as a classified barcode. The psalmist would never dream of manipulating God into providing what he thought was best for his life. Instead the psalmist indicates that in trusting and obeying the Lord, our desires will be in tune with His desires. These words reverberate through 1 Corinthians 7. God is the giver of the gifts.

He knows us best. We are called to obey Him. As David later declares in Psalm 37:25, “I have been young and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken” (NASB). Delight in Him.

Conclusion

The Lord allows all of us to experience a time of singleness. As Paul clearly indicates, our response to this gift is our decision. Many are ready to take their gift to the local pawnshop or throw it unopened into the closet in hopes that it’ll be forgotten. But Paul’s words and life call for two major responses. First, we should value where God has currently placed us. We need to express gratitude for the gift of singleness. Paul states that living solo is not only an option but also a wonderful opportunity to live for the Lord. Praise God for the blessing He has entrusted to us. We also observed that regardless of our current marital status, we must be obedient. We are called to live holy lives that glorify our Lord. Consequently, we need to make the necessary provisions. As a single adult, Paul surrounded himself with people who could encourage and exhort him to persevere and finish well.

Second, we need to value how God has gifted others. For singles, this means thanking the Lord for the married people He has placed in our lives. Personally, I struggle at times with jealousy as I observe a young couple enjoying each other’s company. It’s not always easy to witness couples enjoying what you long to have. However, when I turn my focus on Christ, I can rejoice over what God is doing in their lives. On the other hand, married people need to thank God for the singles in their lives. Statements such as “What you need is a wife,” “Are you dating anyone yet?” or “It’s too bad he’s not married” fail to take into account the legitimacy of singleness. These comments call into question God’s sovereignty and omniscience, and they also lack in love for a fellow believer who may be struggling to serve God in their present state. Both married and unmarried adults serve together as the body of Christ. Each member is important and valued for the way God has gifted them.

Paul, an enormously significant person to the church, lived the single

life. Despite the ups and downs of singleness, the apostle affirms this marital status in one of his epistles to the Corinthian church. Both his actions and his words reflect a life lived where God had called him, attempting to serve the Lord in full devotion, undistracted by earthly relationships and obligations.

For Reflection

1. Provide a list of benefits the single life has provided for you this past month. How might you build upon those experiences?
2. In Acts 18:18–21, Romans 16:3, and 2 Timothy 4:19, we read of a married couple who assisted the apostle Paul in ministry. Based on the lives of Aquila and Priscilla, note particular ways a married couple can assist a single adult in ministry.
3. What aspects of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7 do you find difficult? What hinders you from claiming the words of Paul?
4. If you marry, how will marriage affect your service for Christ? Are you prepared to enter into this union for life?