



# SINGLE, SERVING, AND SATISFIED

## INTRODUCTION

You don't have to be around church culture long to see that the experience of a single person in the church is very different from that of a married person. Nobody (for the most part) states directly that being single is undesirable, but there are more subtle, less obvious ways that virtually everyone, single or married, communicates it. Our roundabout language, for example, reveals this bias. We say, "when you (or I) have kids," or "when you (or I) get married," "he/she is out there," "I'm waiting for 'the one.'" In truth, we usually don't think of people as truly single, only married or "yet to be married."

Why is this a problem? There are at least three reasons this should concern us. First, it is *not* the way that God sees the situation. As discussed below, singleness is affirmed in Scripture as a good and desirable way of life. Second, it implicitly reduces singleness to a subpar status, sowing the seeds of inferiority complexes in those who aren't married or don't expect to be married. Third, it destroys our ability to have healthy friendships with both sexes. When singles are busy trying to get married, they tend to neglect same sex friendships and relations with the opposite sex are often reduced to romantic "potential." Of course, those who are married don't have the same problem, but because we idolize marriage as the ultimate goal, emphasis on friendship is diminished, even for couples.

## MARRIAGE IN THE BIBLE

Before exploring the most blatant passage in scripture on marriage and singleness (1 Cor. 7:1-40), we should see how singleness and marriage are presented in the overarching Biblical narrative. From the record alone, we see that people like Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Paul were single and are held in high esteem. On the other hand, Adam/Eve, Noah, Abraham/Sarah (and the patriarchs), Moses, Ruth, David, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Jesus' mother Mary, Peter, and others were married and also honored.

In addition to heroizing people who were married, the Original (or Old) Testament affirms marriage in the opening narrative in Genesis 2:24. Eph. 5:22-33; Col. 3:18-20; 1 Pt. 3:1-7 all give specific instructions to those who are married. In doing so, Peter and Paul implicitly affirm marriage (and child rearing) as good and natural. In Ephesians 5, however, Paul gives marriage a little more theological development. His primary metaphor for the relations of husbands and wives to one another is that of Christ and the church. After explaining that the husband should love his wife the way Christ loves and died for the church, and that the wife should give herself to her husband the way the church should give herself to Christ, he quotes the above passage from Genesis, and says that, "this mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (v32). In fact, in addition to this passage and Revelation 19, marriage is the metaphor used for Christ and the new Jerusalem (Rv. 21-22), and God and Israel in the Original Testament (Is. 54:5; Jer. 3:20; 31:32; Ez. 16; Hos. 2). Our relation to God is primarily envisioned in terms of a covenant marriage.

## SINGLENESS IN THE BIBLE

Yet this is not the whole story. Jesus says that the marriage we have here on earth is temporary. The Sadducees tried to prove to Jesus that there is no afterlife by arguing that those who remarry would have multiple spouses. Jesus replies that, "in the resurrection they [human beings] neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Mt. 22:30). Marriage is a living, yet temporal metaphor for what is to come.

Perhaps it is with this awareness that Paul responds to the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 7:1-40. The sum of his argument is that marriage is good, but he prefers that more people were single. His main argument is that "the unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and 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" (vs.32-34). It is important to note that part of Paul's conviction comes from a "present crisis" that may be altering his opinion. However, the principle that one's interests are more easily united when single stands in virtually all situations. This is not to put marriage down, but as Paul says, "those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that." (v.28)

## PRINCIPLES FOR EMPOWERING, INCLUDING, AND CELEBRATING SINGLES

If it's true that singleness is presented as a good, desirable, fulfilling, and strategic position in life, how can our church be the kind of community that reflects God's heart for singleness in how we function as a community? Below are six principles that might serve as starting points for us:

1. **Consider both marriage and singleness as legitimate occupations in life.** We must honor marriage by respecting its limitations as good, but not ultimate, since it will pass away with this age. We can honor singles by acknowledging their unique kingdom capacity as singles, rather than “to be marrieds.” Are we empowering and (healthily) taking advantage of singles’ capacity for focus, time, and energy in ministry?
2. **Affirm the importance of friendship.** The human being is not only relational, but constituted by relationship. That is, you become who you are precisely because of your relationships (or lack of them). Although marriage is a significant part of this, it is still only one part. We exist in a network of relations, spousal and otherwise. When these relationships include commitments, they bind us to one another, shifting our focus from self to the other, and free us to become who God has intended us to be.
3. **Fight to end our suspicion toward singles.** In opposite sex interactions, don’t assume that everyone who isn’t married is seeking romance or that “there must be a reason” for their singleness (i.e. there must be something wrong with them). Do we intentionally or unintentionally refuse to consider singles for particular ministry leadership roles? Are we proactively working to reflect the diversity present in our church in each ministry?
4. **Bloom where you are planted.** Rather than trying to escape your present status, ask how you can embrace it and live most fully for Jesus in it. How can you find joy in it? Ask yourself what you can do presently that you could not do, or would have a hard time doing, if your marital status changed.
5. **Take stock of your own friendships.** Ask yourself if you’ve sought out friends from different walks of life. Are they all single? Are they all married? Try and build a network of relations that allows you to know, love, and learn from both.
6. **Be prepared to get uncomfortable.** Do couples have an extra room to rent out to a single so they can pay for school? Can singles spend time with couples’ kids so they can get away? Understanding and affirming one another requires sharing life at deeper, informal, and uncomfortable levels.

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**A Theology of Singleness** video lecture by Tim Keller - Keller gives a short biblical theology, exploring how the theme of singleness develops across the story of the Bible. [<https://vimeo.com/88162694>]

**Theology and the Rest of the World** video lecture by Kathy Keller - Keller discusses her personal story with biblical wisdom, vulnerability, and humor. [<https://vimeo.com/88660506>]

**Called to Celibacy Unchosen** article by Aaron Taylor - This short article calls the reader to consider celibacy, not so much as an individual choice of renunciation for God, but of God’s choice of fullness for the individual. Appeared in *First Things* in June 2013. [<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2013/06/called-to-celibacy-unchosen>]

**Spiritual Friendship** book by Wesley Hill - Hill is a celibate gay Christian who’s book describes both his experience as a single in the church and a vision for how the church can recapture a richer vision of committed, spiritual friendship. About 160 pages.

**Redeeming Singleness** book by Barry Danylak - Danylak’s book is a pretty thorough biblical theology of singleness. For anyone who is interested in diving deeply into how the theme of singleness develops across the canon. About 250 pages.

**The Four Loves** book by C.S. Lewis - See especially the chapter on phileo (friendship), which defines friendship and differentiates it from romantic love. He also gives reasons why true friendship can be difficult.