

Singleness & relationships

Sunday evening 13th May 2021

Reading: 1 Corinthians chapter 7:32-35

Good evening. **Let's pray.**

Introduction

Tonight, we are continuing with our series titled "The big areas of our lives". And so as you likely know, we're taking a look at one topic each week that affects us, our families, our friends, and our church family. And of the 11 topics we're looking at, here's what we've already looked at, and what's ahead:

- ~~Education~~
- ~~Career~~
- ~~Finances~~
- ~~Time~~
- ~~Friendships~~
- **Singleness & relationships**
- Marriage
- Children
- Health & illness
- Death
- Church

And as has been mentioned in previous weeks, the reason we're looking at this breadth of topics is that God has given us everything we need for every area of our lives - so we'll be looking at what the Bible has to say about each of them. And our foundation for this series is the first 4 verses of 2 Peter chapter one...

2 Peter 1:1-4

Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

In other words, given how precious our faith is, and using this knowledge of God and His Word, we should apply it to our whole lives so that we become like Him, and not like the world.

So, using God's Word, we're going to look at the topic of **Singleness & relationships**. And I want to start by noting the very first thing we read in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, which is...

1 Corinthians 7:1a

Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me...

From this we can easily deduce that the church in Corinth had questions about marriage, singleness, remarrying after being widowed, what to do if your spouse isn't a Christian, even the correct boundaries for physical intimacy.

What does this tell us? That it's good to ask questions, because it's important to know what God would have us do in all situations and seasons of our lives. And so, I urge you to ask these questions too - for we should neither be ignorant of what God wants from us in our personal situation, or what God would have from our church family, for we need to be able to guide, encourage, equip, and hold each other accountable in this.

Indeed, as I shared this morning, we all need irrelevant sermons (so to speak); for if you are not married, you'll still be greatly affected by the marriage of others. If you *are* married there's at least a 50% chance you'll be single again at some point whether by trial or tragedy. But also, if we are to act as a church family should act, then we should be there for each other.

And therefore, I'll leave you with some application questions at the end of this study, regardless of which state or season you are in today.

Overview

As we move through this study this evening there are 5 things we're going to consider:

Summary

- Singleness isn't sinfulness
- Singleness isn't for selfishness
- Marriage is good, not god
- The purpose of dating
- The process of dating

Singleness isn't sinfulness

So first let us note; singleness isn't sinfulness. In fact, marriage isn't for everyone. That may sound alarming - but rest assured, I'm not suggesting for a moment that you don't need to get married if you're in or want to be in a relationship. But rather, as a church family we must understand that marriage is not compulsory - that it's actually OK, in fact even commendable, to remain single your whole life.

But don't take my word for it - let's read again from 1 Corinthians chapter 7 where Paul starts by writing:

1 Corinthians 7:1

Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman.

And as we heard in our reading earlier, Paul then talks about the need and blessing of intimacy in marriage, but then says in verse 7:

1 Corinthians 7:7

For I wish that all men were even as I myself. But each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that.

So, what is Paul saying? Well, some background that's helpful is that while Paul would have been required to be married to be part of the Sanhedrin, he is now speaking as a single man. Either because his wife died, or left him - the later being a real possibility considering how he would have been rejected by many for becoming a Christian. But the key thing to note is that he is single at this moment, and he says he wishes everyone were! Why? We'll that's what he'll write further about. And in the very next verse he writes:

1 Corinthians 7:8-9

But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am; but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

So, he fully understands the strong desire many of us have to get married. And from v10-16 he writes specifically to those who *are* married, so I'll leave those verses for Pete next week when we look at marriage.

But in v17-24 we see the heart behind what he'll say to those who are single.

1 Corinthians 7:17-24

But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches. Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be

circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters. Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. Brethren, let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called.

He is saying that God can use you exactly in the state and situation you are in. And he continues in verse 25...

1 Corinthians 7:25-28

Now concerning virgins: I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy has made trustworthy. I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress—that it is good for a man to remain as he is: Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But even if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Nevertheless such will have trouble in the flesh, but I would spare you.

So, Paul says that because of the persecution that was prevalent at this time, keep your attention on the Lord and not on your marital status – whether married or not. But also, clearly, he says it is not sinful to marry.

A few verses later, in v36-38 he gives more instruction to the single person, and for the parents of the single person.

1 Corinthians 7:36-38

But if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin, if she is past the flower of youth, and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes. He does not sin; let them marry. Nevertheless he who stands steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but has power over his own will, and has so determined in his heart that he will keep his virgin, does well. So then he who gives her in marriage does well, but he who does not give her in marriage does better.

So, what does this mean? Three things:

- First, if you are single, and you are attracted to someone, it is perfectly OK to marry them (of course, within the other boundaries that the Bible sets)
- Second, if you are single, and even if you would like to be married, but decide to remain single, you do well. There is nothing wrong in that per se! (though, we'll dig into that some more in a moment).
- And third, if you are a parent, and your child does not marry, neither you or they are a failure because of that fact. Indeed, Paul says you do even better. Now there's some obvious caveats to that – if you prevent them from marrying, or they never want to marry because of the example of marriage you set, something is wrong!

But I've seen a good few parents in their time who have been desperate for their child to marry. And I get that. I get the overwhelming desire to see your child happy. But if it's not what they want, and importantly, if it's not what God wants, then don't try and persuade them to do anything other than what God has called them to. For singleness is not a sin, neither is marriage a sin. But rather, both are to be used for God's glory.

And we should all note, that our marital status does not define us. That is not where we get our identity from. Rather, it is from Christ himself. We read in Colossians chapter 2...

Colossians 2:8-10

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

It might sound all romantic, and it might be a great movie line to say, "you complete me". But unless you're talking to Jesus, that's not true!

I like the simpleness of this comment from Brant Hansen, a Christian radio host:

Marriage is a gloriously difficult, wonderful thing.

Single-hood, on the other hand, is a gloriously difficult, wonderful thing.

Brant Hansen

You know, singleness and marriage are both good things. Just like my kitchen knives. But if I use those knives to harm myself or others, clumsily or intentionally, they're not a good thing - so with that in mind, let's dig into another area of singleness.

Singleness isn't for selfishness

The second point I want to make this evening, simply put, is that singleness isn't for selfishness. Rather, it is tremendous opportunity to serve. Again in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 7:32-35

But I want you to be without care. He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord—how he may please the Lord. But he who is married cares about the things of the world—how he may please his wife. There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world—how she may please her husband. And this I say for your own profit, not that I may put a leash on you, but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord without distraction.

So, the Bible says; use your singleness to serve the Lord without distraction. But why would marriage be a distraction?

Well, if you are to be a good husband or wife, you *must* invest time in your spouse. Yes, you are to serve the Lord, and you are to love others, but you should always remember that you are the only person on the planet who is called to be their spouse. You have a duty to them that no-one else can fulfil. If you're married you can't let that be an excuse not to serve, but as a single it does mean that you have more time to serve.

Now if you're unmarried you might be thinking "well does that mean I have to do the majority of the work around here?". That's the wrong way of looking at it, for Paul writes that he doesn't write this to put a leash on you. In other words, this isn't to pressure you - but to profit you!

How? Well, I can see at least 3 ways serving in your singleness will profit you:

- Serving God draws you closer to Him
- Serving God with others draws you closer to them
- Serving God causes you to grow up

That is, when you are spending your days asking God what He wants you to do... or when you are praying for more labourers, but saying "send me", or when you are asking the Lord "how can I do this better for you?", or "what would you have me do in this situation?" or you're asking yourself "how can I best use my time, my finances, my friendships for the Lord - you will grow closer to Him. Regardless of your relationship status, that's critically important. But if God calls you to serve Him in a specific way, wouldn't it be good to know that before dragging someone else along with you?

Likewise, when you serve the Lord alongside others, you will grow closer to them. Take my friendship with Pete for example. I've known Pete a long time - he was DJ Pete when I was in youth group, later I served in the band with him. But it was serving closely, and with a lot of hard

work together in youth ministry that we really became friends - and what a blessing that has been. When you serve together, you'll get exhausted together, you'll go through difficulties together, and you'll share your lives with each other unlike anything else. Thinking about this, I wonder if the biggest cause of people feeling disconnected in churches is because they simply don't show up to serve. We all want to have strong friendships in our church family - but I firmly believe we'll develop those as servants, not as consumers.

But furthermore, you'll find by serving that you'll meet all sorts of people along the way that are a tremendously helpful counsel to you. Some of the deepest conversations I've been able to have with friends in the past about relationships, or lack thereof, are with those I have only met as a result of serving the Lord. God always sees to it that you get more than you give. You can't outgive Him! Indeed, many Christian couples I know have met through serving.

And the third reason we are to serve God in our singleness, for our benefit, is that it will cause us to grow up. Serving requires humility, patience, integrity, honesty, and a servant's heart. All things that in the end will be a blessing to your spouse and your marriage, should you marry. But whether you remain single, or marry, these qualities are desirable in every Christian, and in every church family.

Much of the blessing of serving is also experienced by married folks who serve, but if the opportunity to serve is greater in your singleness, so perhaps is your opportunity for benefit too.

But with much available time, there is, however, a risk. For we all have a natural tendency to fill our time with self rather than serving. And both the young single and the old widow can have an abundance of time. Of course, if you are a young widow or widower, and have children, your available time is obviously quite constrained.

But, I would caution every unmarried person - be very careful how you use your time. For marriage isn't the only thing that can distract you.

So many are the possible distractions, that I need to leave you to fill in the blanks of what could or does distract you - whether it is your career, gaming, binge-watching TV shows, trips to the cinema, or shows, concerts, travelling the world or social media, you're going to have to find a healthy balance, again remembering singleness is not for selfishness. Basically, don't let "me-time" become an excuse not to serve the Lord.

Marriage is good, not god

So, the third thing to consider this evening is that marriage is good, not god. For marriage is great... depending on who you're married to! We read in Proverbs ch. 12:

Proverbs 12:4

*An excellent wife is the crown of her husband,
But she who causes shame is like rotteness in his bones.*

If you're single, that should cause you to think carefully about who you marry. But also, it should also cause others to think about whether they would marry you! We'll talk more about finding the one in a moment, but don't neglect aiming to be the one - that is, being the kind of godly guy or girl that you should be.

Right now, should you desire to marry, be thinking about what you can learn about marriage. Be thinking about what questions you can ask of your married friends. And consider, if God answered your prayers for a boyfriend or girlfriend, husband or wife, would you know what to do, how to act? Now is the time to figure some of that out.

But furthermore, be careful of the importance you place on marriage. Yes, it is a great thing. It really is. But many will acknowledge that it's easier being single wanting to be married, than to be married wanting to be single.

Ultimately, you must not let marriage itself become an idol. You must not pursue it at any cost. You must not think it will solve all your problems. In fact, you should anticipate it might add some! And, you'd be quite wrong if you think it will complete you.

Ultimately, we all need to reject the lie that anything other than Jesus will satisfy us. Because it won't. And therefore, you must not idolise the idea of having a husband or wife, because that will lead you to idolise them.

The purpose of dating

Fourth, let's consider the purpose of dating. Contrary to what the world says, its purpose is not mating. It is not for finding someone who is sexually compatible with you - that's utter nonsense. In fact, whatever it is, it certainly isn't that! The Bible says in 1 Thessalonians:

1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.

It could not be clearer. Whether here, or in 1 Corinthians 6 where Paul writes of how we were bought at a price, or in 2 Timothy 2 where we are told to flee youthful lusts, the Bible teaches that dating is not for sex.

Rather, dating is for one purpose - marriage. That is, the reason to date someone is to get to know their character, to understand their heart - do they love God, do they want to serve Him, does He direct their lives? Do they obey Him in honouring their parents, in working with diligence, in being good stewards of their time and money, in obeying the laws of the land, in loving others, in desiring God, His Word, and spending time with His people?

If so, you have likely found someone suitable to marry. Yes, it's important that you like their personality. Yes, it's important that you're attracted to them. But be careful, for preferences, interests and superficial things change, and beauty fades. What you need to determine is whether this person will draw you to Christ, or away from Him.

The process of dating

So then, fifth, and last of all, if marriage is the purpose of dating, what does the process of dating look like? Well, I think we could spend weeks talking about the details here, and even within the boundaries of scripture, there is room for personal choice and all the unique things God will do in bringing about each marriage made in heaven.

But I'd like to suggest five markers, or milestones that I believe everyone seeking marriage should work through - in order:

- Know what to look for
- Consider where to search
- Ask the difficult questions
- Understand their character
- Commit fully

So, the first marker, or milestone is **knowing what to look for**. And you're going to need your Bible for that.

You need to know what Godly character is. For example, we read in Philippians 4:8...

Philippians 4:8

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

Does someone have their heart set on those things? For that's a good starting place! Or what about the requirements of leadership that Paul sets out to Timothy and Titus - the reason those are requirements, is because they were to be an example of how all Christians should be!

Again, you can't hope to know if someone has godly character if you don't know what godly Character is, and there's only one place you'll find that - the Bible.

Second, **consider where to search**. Sure, sometimes surprises happen - a chance meeting in the office, on the bus, or in the coffee shop. But more than likely there will be some intentionality required. And let's be honest, you're more likely to find a godly girl behind the doors of a church than in a nightclub.

And I think it's perfectly OK to visit another church in the area to meet other Christians, especially if you want to meet others your age; but that shouldn't make you less committed to your local church, to abandon your responsibilities there.

So, serve! Not only will that cause you to grow. It will cause you to meet other Christians as you serve at conferences and retreats and the like. But of course, don't get the balance wrong - a team I served on in my early 20's had some good rules, one of which was "you're here to work, and not to woo". That is, make sure your focus is actually serving Jesus, not looking like you're serving Jesus.

And then there's the question of online dating. I felt uncomfortable about doing it myself for a long time, yet ultimately that's how I met my wife. To put it as concisely as I can, it can be helpful, or horrendous. And I think there's two things to consider... some dating sites are not conducive to finding a godly spouse. So, avoid them. While others are indeed helpful, but not fool proof - that is, they still let the fools through! Just like you can expect to meet some foolish, even ungodly people behind the doors of a church, you'll find a variety of people on dating sites - so really, all these sites offer is the introduction, and wisdom is still required.

So next, **ask the difficult questions**. Just because someone says they are a Christian, doesn't mean they are. And even if they are, it doesn't mean you can let your guard down. You need to be prepared to ask about what the other person believes.

I know from experience that it's hard to do, as ultimately if you get an answer that rings alarm bells, you need to be prepared to walk away. But the earlier you do it, the better. When Sian and I first started messaging each other, I asked her if she believed God created the world, if Jesus literally rose from the dead, and if she was expecting Jesus to return - *before* asking her out for dinner. She answered yes to all, but if she had said no - I wouldn't have asked her out.

But the difficult questions shouldn't end there. There were many questions and topics we talked about before we got engaged; I even wrote a list of well over 30 things we needed to talk about before I proposed. And I'm glad I did, because unity is so important in marriage. If you haven't yet thought about what the deal breakers are, then do so before you go any further.

Fourth, you need to **understand their character**. For while someone's theology is important, whether they apply and live what they believe is even more so. Are they an angry person? Do they recklessly push physical boundaries? Are they proud? Do they lack self-control? If so, you need to talk. And likely, you need to walk away.

Yet if you find someone who reads their Bible, who serves in their church, who truly loves the Lord, who has a good report from others - then you've got some serious thinking and praying to do about the future, for good reasons!

Two things I would suggest are enormously helpful here are that you should read and discuss the Bible together, and pray together. For if you can't do that now, what guarantee is there that you'll be able to do it once married? And in doing both, you'll definitely get to know their heart more than you'll ever do by discussing whether pineapple should go on pizza.

Finally, if you have found someone of godly character, whom you can read and discuss the Bible with, whom you can pray with, who believes the same as you in major doctrinal issues such as creation, salvation, and Jesus' return, who loves God, and is willing to serve Him - then, you can call off the search, and get engaged. Not in 5 or years from now, but as soon as you have determined these things, and both individually prayed about whether you should marry.

There are too many relationships that take too long to go anywhere - but if the purpose of dating as a Christian is with a view to marriage, then long multi-year relationships without any commitment should raise alarm bells. And as such, the last milestone I suggest you note, is that you need to **commit fully**. For as the purpose of dating is to marry, the purpose of engagement is to plan, not to procrastinate. That is, long engagements are rarely a good thing, and while there is no need to rush, a wedding isn't about the celebration, it's about the commitment. You don't need 5 years to plan the perfect day, you need to commit fully and enter into marriage.

Summary

So, taking a look back at what we've covered this evening:

- Singleness isn't sinfulness
- Singleness isn't for selfishness
- Marriage is good, not god
- The purpose of dating
- The process of dating

But of course, it's only possible to talk about these things in part in such a short space of time, so like the Corinthian church did, we should ask questions and desire to know what God would have us do in singleness, relationships and in supporting those that are not married.

On that note, and in closing, I want to leave you all - whether single, dating, or married, with some application questions to think through.

Application questions

If you are single

- How can you best honour God in your singleness?
- What opportunities do you have to use your time to serve Him?
- Where can you serve where married folks can't? (That might be serving other singles as well as married folks!)

If you are in a relationship

- Is your relationship honouring God? (Are you dating the right person? Are you setting the right boundaries? Are you keeping to them? Do you have accountability?)
- Where are you headed? - if it's not with a view to marriage, what are you doing?
- Are you asking the right questions?

If you are married

- Are you caring for those who are single? Do you consider them in your plans? (Jon and Jo are the only couple I can recall inviting me round as a single, on my own)
- Are you thoughtful in your comments?
- How can you better serve them? (Are you available to talk? Do you ask how they are?)
- How can you practically set an example of marriage? (Do you show enough of your marriage without showing too much?)

Let's pray.