



Let's Talk (Part 2) – Singles

Matt Chandler – July 2, 2017

Go ahead and grab your Bibles. We're going to be in 1 Corinthians, chapter 7. It's going to take us a bit to get there, but I wanted to go ahead and orient you at that text, and then we'll look at the Word in just a second. I want to start by saying the real purpose of our time together today, the purpose of this sermon, is to reorient our hearts, as marrieds and as singles, around what the Word of God has to say about singleness.

Let me say right out of the gate that I needed a lot of help to write this sermon. Here's what I mean by "needed a lot of help." Lauren and I were married the summer after her freshman year in college and my junior year in college, so when it comes to the single life, I simply did not live it, unless you want to count my first three years in college as the single life. So I know nothing of graduating, getting a job, and then living out the single life. I know nothing experientially about that, so I have a lot of people I leaned into to write this.

Pete Scazzero, Gina Dalfonzo, Preston Sprinkle, Sam Allberry, and Joy Beth Smith are some of the authors. Wesley Hill was another. Then I had a lot of generous and insightful dialogue with many of our singles. Some are singles and hoping to be married, others are divorced, others are single mothers and single fathers. I just tried, as best I could, to let the Word of God bear its weight, and then I needed to get to the bottom of some ideas around singleness, unique struggles, unique opportunities.

It has been very fruitful and at times, if I'm honest, very painful for me to prepare to preach this. Let me explain what I mean by painful. One of the great joys of my life is to shepherd and walk alongside of you as brothers and sisters in this place. I am committed to my personal relationship with Christ, then my wife and children, and then to this congregation, and that's the order of my priorities and affections.

What struck me as I was preparing this is, if you are a single man or single woman, how often you must feel ostracized or out of the story here in our church that's so family-centric. If you're an encouraged single, a single who has kind of wrestled through where you are in life, then I was thinking how often you have to do mental gymnastics when 90 percent of my illustrations have to do with either my children or my marriage or some aspect of family life.

If you're a discouraged single, I have to believe that every time those illustrations are used you feel more isolated and more out of step, more discouraged in your relationship with the Lord. This sermon in some way is me repenting of that and wanting to say I want to get better at that, encouraging you and helping you to live out of your singleness and not always having to do those mental gymnastics.

With that said, let me overgeneralize. It seems that, in general, singles are viewed by themselves as well as others as lacking something. The longer the singleness remains, the more both singles and marrieds view the situation through the lenses of loss. This is a common story I have heard both in reading and in conversation with our singles here. What happens is in your younger single days, as your friends start to get married, your married friends then try to hook you up with their other single friends in the hope that you would find your spouse.

Then what happens is, as singleness persists, marrieds start to think something might be wrong with you, and singles begin to feel as though God has robbed them of something or forgotten them by not bestowing upon them this blessing of a life partner in the covenant of marriage for life. What I want to start with right out of the gate is that both the married couple that would view singleness as an oddity and the single man or woman who would view God having forgotten them or robbed them of a joy by not giving them a spouse are way out of line with how the Word of God talks about singleness and how Jesus himself and other biblical authors rejoiced in singleness.

Here's what I want to do. I want to start by talking about types of Christian singles. If you're not a Christian and you're a single, I don't know really how to navigate you through this talk. If you're a believer in Christ, a follower of Jesus Christ, I want to unpack how Jesus saw singleness, and specifically that he thought there were three types of singles. Then from there I want to talk about singleness as a gift, because I think that idea, the gift of singleness, is often the butt of jokes and not really understood in its biblical framework.

Then I want to talk about the advantages of being single, and then from there I want to talk about some of the unique struggles, and then I just want to encourage singles in a certain way and encourage marrieds in a certain way, and then we'll re-center ourselves around the fact that Jesus was single and full of life and joy and purpose. So there's my outline. Let's start with these types of Christian singles.

In Matthew 19:12, here's what Jesus teaches. **"For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it."** Jesus here lays out three ways of being celibate. I'm going to use these three ways as three categories of Christian singleness.

In his first sentence, **"For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth..."** I'll call this *celibates from birth*. What I have in mind here and what I think is in view here is those who, from birth, will not pursue a sexual relationship with another, either because of a defect or maybe even they are asexual or maybe even, if you'll indulge me here, they struggle with same-sex attraction and, therefore, will be celibate by birth.

Now what I'm not trying to concede is that there is any evidence, when all is said and done, to support that we are born that way, although, as Christians, even if science were to somehow prove one day that you *are* born that way, you can be born with all sorts of bents toward what is sinful and not be allowed to indulge in those bents. So when we look at this first one, what we're looking at is those who are celibate by birth.

When you start talking about being celibate by birth and living a life of chosen celibacy, a lot of people will dog-pile on that idea and paint this dreary, weary picture of going home to an apartment all by yourself. It's dim, and you're cooking yourself a microwavable dinner. It's this kind of drab and weary life. Yet quite a few Christian celibates who struggle with same-sex attraction paint this completely different picture of what they've experienced in trusting that the Word of God is true, laying down that same-sex attraction, and devoting themselves to a life of celibacy.

Let me give you a couple of quotes. This first one is from a man named Dan Mattson. "My life isn't a 'life of misery,' and I'm not 'doomed to celibacy,' or a life of heartbreaking loneliness. I reject the representation of a life striving for celibacy as miserable, and part of my mission in life is to debunk

all of the dreary, droopy tropes out there of what celibacy is all about." (I want to incorporate *tropes* into my vernacular. I just need to read more about how it's used.)

Here's my favorite. Ron sounds like a guy I would want to hang out with. This is a quote from Ron Belgau. "Is celibacy difficult? Yes (so is marriage; so is grad school; life *is* pain, princess). Is it frustrating at times? Yes (but watch someone raising toddlers sometime and it may change your perspective on the challenges of celibacy). Have there been times when I wanted to give up? Yes. But is it worth it? Yes. And do I regret it? No." So the first category of single would be celibates from birth.

The second is by and large the largest group of singles, and this would be *dedicated celibates*. The reason I'm using the word *celibates* for Christian singles is that the Christian is dedicated to sex within the confines of marriage, so regardless of what type of single you are, you have given yourself over to the lordship of Jesus Christ and said that sex belongs inside the confines of marriage. I am dedicated in my celibacy, whether that's celibate from birth or just a dedicated celibate.

This category is what we most often think of when we think about singles. These are divorcées, widowed, and those who I would just call *waiting*. They're hopeful they'll have a spouse one day. They look forward to being married. They're just in this space right now that they are waiting.

Then the last type of celibate, or single... Jesus adds this really radical category that the Jews would have had a very difficult time processing in the first century of *vowed celibates*, those who simply renounce marriage because of the kingdom of God. They get a sense from the Spirit of God that they want to give their life over to the kingdom of God and don't want to be distracted with marriage, so they literally give themselves over to Jesus.

In the Protestant imagination this is difficult for us, but think more about priests and nuns and those who say, "I'm going to devote my whole life to the service of Jesus, and I'm going to lay aside marriage and any desire I have in that way to give myself fully to the kingdom of God." Now here's what I want to do now that we have those categories.

Regardless of which type of single you are, the Bible is clear that singleness is a gift from God. That's how the Bible talks about singleness. Not like it's some sort of second-class status but rather that it is a gift. Let me show you that in 1 Corinthians 7:6-7. "**Now as a concession, not a command, I say**

this. I wish that all were as I myself am." He's talking about being single. **"But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another."**

When Paul speaks of singleness, and specifically the gift of singleness, he's not saying there are these select few people who have been given the spiritual gift of contentedness in singleness. That's not what's being taught here. Rather, he is teaching that where you are in the circumstances of your life is God's gift to you. If you're married, then you've been given the gift of marriage, and if you are single, you have been given the gift of singleness.

God is being gracious to you and giving you gifts in your life circumstances. Now I want to add this caveat, specifically for those who are widowers. It is not the loss of your spouse that is the gift. That is heartbreaking. It is the singleness that is your gift. Divorcées, it is not the heartbreak of the divorce that is the gift the Bible is speaking of and that I am talking about but rather the gift of singleness itself.

Paige Benton Brown says something like, "I am not single because I am too spiritually unstable to deserve a husband or too spiritually mature to need one. I am single because God is good and this is his best for me." Isn't that amazing? Singleness is your gift, single. Marriage is your gift, married. This is what God has given you in this life stage for your good because *he* is good.

Now I want us to look at what the Bible calls the *advantages of singleness*. Let's look at 1 Corinthians 7:28. **"But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that."** Isn't that crazy? Paul is like, "Hey, marriage is going to have a lot of troubles, and, singles, I would just spare you that."

"This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away."

This is Paul's way of trying to orient the heart and mind around eternity and not just the cares of the present. He's saying, "There is a future that we are closer to now than we have ever been, and

you need to orient your soul around that future." The return of Christ, the ushering in of the kingdom without bounds, the experience of the wedding supper of the Lamb.

Paul is drawing their hearts out of their present circumstances and their eyes off of themselves and saying, "Hey, look up here. Live in such a way as to show that you understand that there's a greater reality and a greater purpose for your life than your business, than your marriage, than any other part of your experience in life. There's a greater reality. Let's live for that greater reality." Now look at what he says starting in verse 32.

"I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided.

And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord."

When the Bible talks about the advantages of singleness, it's going to lay two right on top of our lives. Here's the first thing he says in this text: he wants to spare singles the troubles of marriage. One of the advantages of being single is you don't have the troubles of marriage. Then he goes on to define what those troubles are as married people. He says clearly that we have a divided mind and heart and that we're anxious about a great deal of things.

He's saying that we have a shrinking focus about our lives. I have, as a married man, a wife I need to tend to and a marriage to cultivate and to at times be anxious about. How are we doing? How am I doing as a husband? I have children I'm anxious about. How are they doing? How am I cultivating them as their father? I carry these anxieties as a married man, as a husband, as a father. If you're a married woman, you carry these anxieties. This is according to the text.

Paul says, "I want to save you singles from the anxieties of being married. I want your focus to be broad and not narrow. The married man or woman's focus has to be narrow because they're married." This demonstrates to the world, according to Ephesians, chapter 5, written through the apostle Paul who wrote these same words... We talked about this last week. I get this from Peter Scazzero.

The picture of marriage is one of the depth of God's love. "I'm covenanted to you. My attention is on you. You're my person, and you come first, and then everything else comes second." What you have in married life is shrinking focus to a particular set of people, first and foremost, that divides the heart and divides the mind. He's listing this divided mind and heart chiefly because they bear weight on the next point.

He says that in your singleness, the advantage you have is the opposite. You have an undivided mind and an undivided heart. You have a breadth of focus that's greater than the narrow focus of the married man or woman. I want to talk about it this way. I've learned (and this was one of those things I learned and I was like, "I'm an idiot") single men and women don't necessarily have more time and more money. In fact, in a very real way, they probably have less.

If you think about what it takes for a single man or single woman to cultivate deep, rich relationships, most often that doesn't occur when they come home from work at 7:30 at night and sit in their house and begin to have these conversations, but rather it takes more effort to cultivate. There is a breadth of relationships they have, a breadth of places that they are sowing in their gifts, a breadth of places their monies are going.

So most often, singles actually have less time and less money, not more time and more money. This is the great advantage of singleness: they are undivided in mind and heart. They are freed up to serve the Lord and to devote their lives more fully to the Lord, because they are not divided in their affection because of a spouse or children and, according to the Bible, the anxieties that brings.

What, then, are the struggles of singleness? I had to have a lot of conversations about the struggles of singleness, because I don't think the struggles of singleness are unique to singles, but I think the ways they have to navigate those struggles are unique to being single. They're not unique *to* them, but the ways they have to navigate through them are unique. I think I'm saying that in a way that is fair.

Let me start with sexual temptation. There is a pervasive lie that is so prevalent and so powerful in 2017 you can't blame anyone for buying the lie. The lie is that sexual expression and sexual experience are necessary for human flourishing. The pervasive, persistent lie that we're drinking in with every commercial and every ad is that in order to be fully alive there must be sexual expression and sexual experience.

Preston Sprinkle says the whole idea that sexual expression is essential to human flourishing comes from Freud, not from the Christian worldview. This is, again, a very modern idea, that what I need to be most fully alive is great sexual expression and great sexual experience. This is handcuffing and paralyzing and wreaking havoc, not just among marrieds but among singles, as they try to navigate spaces where the prevailing norms are sexual expression and sexual experience, fast, without a lot of connectivity, and a lot of anonymous going about and doings. This is the air they're breathing.

The place that I was like, "Wow! Things have really gone crazy" is the Hardee's commercials. You couldn't hardly watch football this past year without some half-naked woman eating a hamburger. I'm trying to watch a game with my son, and I'm thinking, "What does this naked woman have to do with this giant hamburger?" But it sells. It captivates attention. It draws us to it.

It's so pervasive that just watching a game with your son or daughter, you have these graphic images that would have been considered nearly hardcore pornography 20 years ago, and now they're on at 2:00 in the afternoon on a station you could get with just the bunny ears/no cable setup in your living room.

Singles have to navigate this space in an over-sexualized culture where they are dedicated celibates, giving themselves over to showing that Christ is sufficient, that they are dedicated mostly, if not fully, in an undivided way to the Lord.

The temptations and the pull they're going to experience with everything they're drinking in from the world around them is that if you're ever going to feel fully alive you need expression and experience sexually, and if you *don't* have those two you'll never be fully alive. This is a pervasive and persistent lie. They're drinking it in, so they're going to struggle with this.

The married people are going to struggle with sexual temptation, but they also know the limits sexual experimentation can bring. You have sex, and you know it does very little to quench sexual appetite. It doesn't solve anything. In fact, I heard someone say the ache for sexual fulfillment is itself the gift. The longing to be satisfied points to something beyond the satisfaction you feel in the act of sexual intercourse. The angst, the longing itself points to something that is to come in the return of Christ and the consummation of all things.

Then I think singles will struggle with loneliness in a very different way than married people struggle with loneliness. I'd like to lay down that everybody in a certain season or a certain time in their life is going to struggle with loneliness. The single will think that loneliness might just get filled by a spouse, but the married person is not under that illusion.

They know the spouse has *not* solved that loneliness, so then the temptation *they'll* have to fight is to not go into this world of fantasy that maybe they married the wrong one and maybe somebody else out there *will* satisfy that loneliness. This is unique for the single in that they're always going, "What if? What if there is this person out there who is the one and can satisfy all of these longings of my heart?"

I would say the same thing here as I said on sexual temptation. When all is said and done, the longing to not feel alone is actually pointing to something beyond itself and greater than itself: this relationship with our Savior, a soul that finds its home in the rest of Christ's grace and mercy, a hole that gets filled through progressive sanctification but only ultimately filled at the return of Christ once and for all. I'm sure there are more, but those are the two I wanted to highlight.

Here's how I want to end our time together. I want to speak directly to you singles, and then I want to speak directly to you marrieds. If you're a single man or woman at The Village Church, here's my encouragement to you. I want to try to call you out of any holding pattern you might be in. If you're a single here and you're like, "Man, I can't wait. I have this real desire to do this ministry, to start this ministry, to do this kind of discipleship, to begin to lead out of my passions, but I have to wait until I find my spouse before I can give myself over to that..."

I want to call you out. You start to lead us. God has put a passion in your soul, a passion in your heart. You're eager to make disciples. You're eager to start up ministries. You're eager to lead out here. I want to call you to lead out here. You need not a spouse to be a leader. If that's the case, we have to take out a whole slew of ferocious men and women of God in our Bible.

God is not waiting for you to get a spouse to lead in a profound way and at a high level. That is a lie from the Enemy. I'm calling you out of it and asking you to reject that lie. You are not waiting for a spouse to lead. You lead. If you have a passion, step into that. If you have a desire to start something up, begin to go through that process, and let's go. You lead. We'll follow.

Secondly, if you're a single, I want to encourage you to practice healthy self-care. When I say "self-care," let me tell you what I'm *not* saying. I'm not telling you to get a gym membership and get a rockin' body. That's not what I'm talking about here. What I *am* saying, though, is that, as a human being, you are going to run into very difficult seasons, and I don't want you to buy into the temptation to pretend that you have it all together and that you don't need help.

I want you to be willing to receive help and be eager to ask for it. We talk all the time here about the veneer. The married and single can both wear the veneer. I think both project a strength that maybe is a faux strength. I want to invite you to really take good care of yourself, to take good care of your spirit, to take good care of your soul, and to practice really healthy self-care.

Then lastly, and again, I had a lot of help on this one. I needed to ask a lot of questions. I don't want to give any shout-outs, but many are in this room this weekend. As a single, you need to learn emotionally healthy skills to bond with others. I have been informed, both in book and in conversation, that deep relationships between singles, although they can be very life giving, can also grow very broken and become codependent.

They also can begin to drift toward a sexual, weird relationship. So what I want to encourage you toward is to develop emotionally healthy skills to grow in your relationships. Part of that is you need to not just have *your* person, but you need to have people in different seasons. You need to not just hang with a group of singles, but you need to be around people of all different life stages and all different seasons of life who can encourage you and speak into you and walk alongside of you.

Now to our marrieds. I think you make up about 75 to 80 percent of our congregation. Let me say this to you. In light of the Word of God, we must not think of singles as a second class of Christians. They're not second best. They're not weird. They are a gift from God to the church. We need them; they need us. So let's not view singles as a second class but begin to see and rejoice in the good gift they are to the body of Christ and the picture they represent about the breadth of God's love to the world.

Lastly, I want you to remember that your family is the whole church. This is one of the things that's going to become evident in the Scriptures. When Jesus himself says, "Who are my brothers and sisters, and who is my mother? Is it not those who belong to my Father?" he's really reorienting the soul of the family unit around the church. The church is your whole family. I want to encourage us to strive toward this.

I don't think I'm being overly romantic here, but there should be no lonely people at The Village Church. As best we can, we need to open up homes, open up lives, learn from one another, lean into the highs and lows of each other's lives, married men and women with children and singles. There have to be these rhythms that are established. That's why we've been so serious over all of these years about multigenerational Home Groups.

We know connecting with people your own age is important to a lot of you, but I can tell you what's probably more important is for you to get around people who *aren't* what you are in the hopes that you can connect and learn with one another. I know that's harder and slower and makes you feel at times disoriented, but giving yourself to that end will pay a dividend that will blow your mind if you're faithful to stick with it and keep fighting for it.

So marrieds, I want to encourage you to include into your worlds, into your lives, into your homes, those who are single, and singles, you have much to teach us about breadth, about friendships, about families. I want us to all the more value one another and rejoice in the gift, according to the Bible, that God has given each of us: to the marrieds, marriage, and to the singles, singleness.

If I could orient our hearts around one last thought before I pray, I'll paraphrase Preston Sprinkle again. "The good news about a single Savior who provides abundant life for all who die with him... Jesus didn't view his celibacy as a no...no to joy, no to sex, no to intimacy...but rather he viewed it as a life-giving yes...yes to relationships, yes to friends, yes to serving others, and yes to enjoying life to the fullest." Singles, you have not been forgotten. You have not been punished. You have been given a gift from God to live out of your *yes*. Let me pray for us.

Father, thank you for this time together. I do pray for our singles. I just pray, God, that this would somehow orient or remind or would call up their hearts to rejoice in this season the good gift you've given them. I pray for our marrieds in this room. I pray that you would give us a real heart for one another, that we would be able to celebrate the picture we're both bringing to the community of faith. I pray in a very real way some relational connective tissues among singles and marrieds.

I pray for our single moms and single dads who don't feel fully single and don't feel fully like a parent. They're kind of stuck in this world in between. I just pray that you would minister to them as they live out faithfully both of these positions, both of these gifts. I ask, Spirit of God, that you

would continue to make us more and more and more a household of faith that communicates to the world the beauty of Jesus' gospel. It's for your beautiful name I pray, amen.

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