

## ***Wayfinder Week 2***

### **The Gift: Singleness and Marriage**

#### **Jeff Jones**

Welcome, etc. Today we continue our series, *Wayfinder*, where we are looking to God's Word as our guide to help us find our way in our relationships. We all know where we want to be but getting there can be tricky. Today we are talking about the gift, really two gifts. Today we are talking about singleness and marriage and how to navigate each. The Bible describes both as gifts, which they are, but sometimes they are gifts we would rather take back.

I know a lot about gifts that people want to take back because I am a gift-giver. I love buying gifts, especially for Christy. If am traveling for an extended time without her, it's really bad, because I miss her, and I will see something and think, "Oh, she would look great in that. She would love this." I come back with all this stuff, and she's like, "Oh, wow. Thanks! I've never thought about having one of those before!" Here is one of those gifts. I think she would look great in this, but she has always been like, "Where exactly would I wear this?" We are now to the point that she has asked me to just stop buying things without checking with her first because she gets all this stuff that she really doesn't want and either has to take it back, give it away, or throw it in corner somewhere. I can't help it though. A few weeks ago, I bought her these hiking shoes because we were going to Colorado. Anybody want them? Because she doesn't. They aren't comfortable for her. Earlier this week, I took another risk of buying her a new ski jacket because it was a great deal and, again, she'd look great in it. It came in this week, and this time I think we got a winner. I do need to learn though. I read one survey about what wives do with Christmas gifts from their husbands. 42% of wives returned those gifts, 17% donated them to charity, 13% planned to re-gift them to someone else, and 10% threw them away. That leaves 18% of gifts that were actually winners. Only 18%!

Today we are talking about how to navigate the marital situation we find ourselves in which for all of us is either single or married. Whichever our status, each one has ups and downs, goods and bads, benefits and struggles. One time, Socrates was asked by one of his students which is better, getting married or staying single, to which Socrates replied,

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**“Whichever choice you make now you will regret later.”**

**Socrates**

The Bible presents each one as a unique gift though, and some of you who are single may be thinking, “I’d like to take this one back, or donate it to someone else.” Some of you who are married may be thinking, “I’d like to take this one back, maybe re-gift it to someone else.” Both have their struggles and their advantages, and the trick is to be faithful with both, right where God has us.

First, the gift of singleness. Let’s listen to Paul.

**SLIDE \_\_\_\_\_) 1 Corinthians 7:6-7**

**I say this as a concession, not as a command. I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.**

When he says I wish all of you were as I am, in the context, he is talking about being single, because Paul was a single guy. So, Paul is saying, for reasons we will see later, “I wish you all were single, but we all have our own gifts from God.” Here he isn’t talking about spiritual gifts, the unique abilities God blesses us with to serve his purposes, but the gift of either being married or being single. He is focusing on the gift of being single, and he is not saying that some people are uniquely gifted to be content as a single person and are therefore bound to a single life. He is talking about singleness itself as the gift from God, and marriage as a gift from God. Either life situation is God’s gift to us. Talking about marriage as a gift would be normal in Paul’s culture, but for him to describe singleness as a gift would have been a shocker. In Paul’s world in the first century, singleness carried this stigma. Still does. If someone is single and older than age 30, people start to wonder, “What’s wrong with her? Him? There must be something wrong.” That is different than thirty years ago when I got married because then if you weren’t married within a year of graduating from college, people would start hitting the panic button.

Paul is saying, “Stop doing that to yourself and to other people who are single. Singleness is a gift and an assignment from God.” He is actually going to argue that between the two gifts, the gift of singleness is preferable if you are a Christ follower, which is why he says, “I wish you were all single like me.” So, how is singleness a preferable gift? Again, let’s listen to our single buddy, Paul:

**SLIDE \_\_\_\_\_) 1 Corinthians 7:26-28**

**Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.**

Don't you love that phrase,

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"those who marry will face many troubles"**

Can I get an amen on that? Last week we talked about how marriage is really good, but really hard. The first reason he gives is the "present crisis," and we don't know what that was. The two leading theories are either persecution against Christians or food shortages from a massive famine that had hit the area at the time. Paul continues:

**SLIDE \_\_\_\_\_) 1 Corinthians 7:29-31  
What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.**

He's talking about the urgency of the Christian mission in light of the fact that the time is short. Jesus could return at any time, and even if he doesn't come in our lifetimes, our life here on this earth compared to eternity is so short. We get so fixated on our life circumstances here, but we need to live with an eternal perspective. Heaven is forever, this life is short, so let's live our life here with eternity in mind, and make decisions, including marriage decisions, accordingly. What is best for the mission? What is best for what matters for eternity? Our life here is not about us but about a bigger mission. So, for those who are considering getting married, that's fine, but do so with your bigger mission in mind. Is that person you are wanting to marry going to help you live the mission better? Or is it better to be single? Whichever you choose, do so with an eternal perspective. Paul then is going to say, in light of this, singleness has a huge advantage:

**SLIDE \_\_\_\_\_) 1 Corinthians 7: 32-35**

**I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.**

What is the big advantage to singleness?

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**“Undivided devotion to the Lord”**

As a married guy, I am not only devoted to Jesus and his mission, but I am now devoted to Christy, and when we had our two boys, my devotion was divided even more. I am now not only concerned about Jesus and his mission, but I have a family to consider. I have a divided focus, and I have anxieties and responsibilities that I would not have if I was single. As Paul says, I have to worry not only about pleasing Jesus, but pleasing my wife. And that can be a full-time job!

Please understand, it's not that Paul is saying that single people have more time and more money, and therefore can do a lot more for God. As I've interacted with single friends, I've learned that being single doesn't mean you have more money. Often it means you have less, because all the expenses are your responsibility. You have nobody to help. And being single doesn't mean you aren't really busy in life and work. You have nobody to share the work around the house, preparing meals, taking care of all that needs to be taken care of. You may have less time and money, and that's not what Paul is saying. But what he is saying is important. If you are single, you do have the gift of a more singular focus on Jesus and his mission. If you are single, take advantage of the opportunity you have. Adding a spouse and kids to your life really is a diffusion. If you are free from those additional obligations, don't just squander that opportunity. Live like Paul did, all out for God.

This is Paul's basic argument for this whole chapter. In all kinds of life situations, we can miss the opportunity of now because we are wanting our circumstances to change. Paul challenges that:

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**SLIDE \_\_\_\_\_) 1 Corinthian 7:17**

**Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches.**

Paul talks about a number of situations in this chapter, and he is saying, “Don’t fixate on trying to change your status as much as be faithful in the status you are in. At least for the time being, it is your assignment, your calling, so be faithful now.” You may get married one day, who knows, but in the meantime, don’t live tentatively. Live all out for God’s purposes, because you can in a way that other people can’t.

One Christ-follower I admire a lot for her focus on mission and who is also single, said,

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**“Sometimes as single people, we treat all of our plans as provisional and we can live in waiting mode. We can wait for things to happen rather than plan for things to happen, and when we do make plans, they are often not long-range plans because we don’t know when we will meet somebody. It could be just around the corner.” She added, “I’ve had to learn to transcend that, and not get stuck...to make plans. Plans for tomorrow. This month. This year. This decade. How do I want to grow? How do I want to live the adventure of mission? What is God prompting me to do? What big dreams has he placed in my heart? I don’t want my future to be a question mark because of a potential status change down the road. I have learned to plan and dream big, and if I do meet somebody, it will be somebody who shares those dreams and is also deeply engaged in mission.”**

That’s so helpful, and that’s what Paul is saying in this passage. Whatever status we find ourselves in, including singleness is not only a gift, but an assignment. Paige Benton Brown adds,

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**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.**

**Paige Benton Brown**

Singleness is a gift from God with a unique opportunity of a more singular focus, so focus! Engage. That's also true for people who are married without kids. That is a great situation and a great time of life. Choosing not to have kids is a valid choice, and if you make that choice, see it as an opportunity to serve God more fully. Or before you have kids, don't just waste that time. Use that time well. Christy and I waited four years to start having babies, and those four years were great ministry years together. I'm so glad that we jumped into ministry. We were students at Dallas Seminary, and we were serving in youth ministry here at Chase Oaks. Here is a picture from those days.

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**Picture of Jeff and Christy**

Those days were really fun ministry days and full of memories. The couples that we served with back then are still among our best friends today. And now those students who were junior highers then are adults now, and many of them are serving God and growing in him, and we had a part to play in that.

Singleness has huge advantages, and it is a gift. That said, it is a gift that you may sometimes want to take back, because there are also unique challenges to being single. I was married at twenty-two, so in conversations with singles I've learned a lot about the challenges from them. Here are a few:

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**Being Misunderstood**

It's crazy some of the things we married people say to single people, and we just need to stop it, especially once we understand what the Bible says about singleness. Here are a few of the things married people have said to single Chase Oakers that are well-intended, but way less than helpful:

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**You are so pretty/handsome. How are you still single?**  
**You are just too picky.**  
**You will meet someone when you least expect it.**  
**Don't worry. You are still not too old to have kids one day.**  
**Are you putting yourself out there?**  
**When you are ready, God will send you the perfect person.**  
**You can eat cereal for dinner!**  
**Since you are single, you don't need to get paid as much.**  
**You must have so much free time on your hands.**  
**Want me to set you up with someone?**

You can see how those are well-intended, but really misguided and counterproductive, especially in light of what Paul just said about singleness. We need to all learn to value the status of singleness like the Bible does and not treat it as a weird waiting period.

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**Loneliness**

Listen to another single friend:

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**Sometimes you just want someone to think of you first, or think of how to celebrate you, or someone to come home to. It's hard without someone there to support, encourage, challenge, and love you all the time.**

That's hard. As a church, it is also why we need to do a better job of not building our groups and relationships around marriage and parenting. Most single friends I've talked to have said, "Just include us. If you are going somewhere, send out an invite. I may not be able to do it, but it's nice to be asked." And in our groups, we need to be sure we take responsibility to celebrate and remember people in our spiritual family, not just our nuclear family.

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**Sexual Purity**

Sexual purity is a challenge whether you are single or married, but Paul does talk about this part of the single person challenge as a unique kind of challenge, because a single person who follows Jesus is committing to a celibate life. That's not easy, and we need to acknowledge that. However, a life of celibacy is not as hard or strange as our culture makes it out to be. As Ron Belgau, who as is single and committed to celibacy says,

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**“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.”**

**Ron Belgau**

The idea that life without sex is not a full life is a lie. As theologian Preston Sprinkle says, “That idea comes from Freud, not from Jesus.” Jesus lived a full life as a celibate single, and we in our culture have made too much of an idol out of sex.

So, that's the gift of singleness, which brings us to the gift of marriage. We talked about marriage last week, so we can be brief here and just focus on the implications of what Paul is saying in this passage to those of us who are married. Marriage is a gift from God, as Proverbs 18:22 says,

**SLIDE \_\_\_\_\_) Proverbs 18:22**

**“He who finds a wife finds a good thing.”**

Interesting he didn't say, “She who finds a husband, finds a good thing.” Socrates adds something else here too:

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**“By all means, marry. If you get a good wife, you will be happy. If you get a bad one, you will become a philosopher.”**

**Socrates**

Marriage is a gift, but a gift sometimes we want to take back because it has some unique challenges and troubles and anxieties, as Paul mentioned. The core implication of this passage however I believe to those of us who are married is this:

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**Accept Your Limitations.**

Listen again to what Paul says about singleness and marriage:

**SLIDE \_\_\_\_\_) 1 Corinthians 7:35**  
**I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.**

Paul is saying, I'm not trying to restrict you from getting married. That's a good thing. But if you get married, then you are giving something up and that something is pretty big, what he terms:

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**Undivided Devotion to the Lord**

If we choose to get married, we are choosing to give that up, which means we are saying yes to

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**Divided Devotion to the Lord**  
**If you are married and have children, you cannot fulfill your full potential in ministry and vocation to God.**

I know that raising children is also ministry, but what Paul is implying is that once you get married and start a family, then you cannot accomplish for God all that you could have accomplished for God if you had chosen to stay single. Your devotion is divided, and you have to accept those limits. That's not just true of ministry, but also true of career. When you choose to get married and start a family, to be faithful to that obligation means that you cannot achieve everything you might have in your career had you decided to stay single.

To be faithful to your family commitment, you cannot be married and live as if you are single. The way some of us are wired, it is very easy to make that mistake and very likely that we will. I know that because I've made those mistakes. When Christy and I got engaged, I got down on my knee and in a romantic way asked her

to be my wife. She said yes, but right after she said, yes and we are about to hug and kiss and enjoy this romantic moment, I said, “Well, not so fast. Can we go into the other room and talk first?” It was a real romance killer. I said, “I just want to be 100% sure you know what you are signing up for before you lock in a definite yes.” She’s like, “Okay. Sure.” So, I talked with her about how my focus was on serving Jesus and his kingdom purposes, and at the time I was thinking I would be traveling overseas a lot in dangerous places, and that she would have to be okay with that. If she wasn’t, then we shouldn’t get married.” I said a lot of other things, and she did say, Yes anyway. She said, “Jeff, I am committed to following Jesus too, and whatever he wants for us, I’m up for it.” Looking back, what I was doing was not just unromantic, it was totally unfair because what I was doing was essentially saying, “I want to get married, but I don’t want marriage to restrict me from doing what I want to do. So, being married to me is going to be really hard.” Paul would blow his whistle and call a foul. And I had to learn that the hard way. For the first years of our marriage, I pretty much lived as if I wasn’t married, and I was traveling all over the world and way over-busy when I was here, and I’ve shared before how Christy eventually called me out on that when our kids were little, and I was missing their childhood.

For a long time though she sucked it up and let me live as if I had no marriage obligation because she didn’t want to feel like she was keeping me from what God wanted. What I had to learn is that her job was not to support me in my ministry, but for us to be a ministry team. And as a team, I couldn’t just live like I was on my own.

It’s easy for some of us to make this mistake because the reality is that there is no way we can do it all. Andy Stanley is a pastor in Atlanta who wrote a helpful little book called *Choosing to Cheat*. where he says that none of us can do everything we want with our time. We make trade-offs. Every time we add something new to our lives, we cheat another area of life. It’s not like we add more hours to the day or days to the week. Every time we say yes to something over here, we are saying no to something over there. Andy’s point is that you have to choose which part of life you are going to cheat, marriage, parenting, career, ministry, recreation? You can’t do it all, so what are you going to cheat?

The implication of what Paul is saying is that we cannot cheat our marriage or our kids if we are going to be faithful. We have to choose what we are going to cheat. One of our former elder couples is a great example of that, John and Jennifer Creech. Years ago, as John’s kids were growing up and his career with a large financial firm was skyrocketing, they wanted to promote him and move him to

their base in New York. When he realized how much time and travel that job would demand, he turned it down, and they couldn't believe it. Who would turn that down? But he did and took a sideways job that would allow him to stay in Texas and devote more time to his family. I loved that because it kept him in Dallas, and at Chase Oaks, so I was like, "Yes, totally God's will! Good job!" His job was based in Houston, but it was close enough to be able to stay here and be with his family more. I really admired that. A few months ago, however, he met with me to tell me that he felt like it was time to move from Dallas to Houston, that working in one city and living in another is not good for their family dynamic and not best for their remaining son at home. That was harder for me. I wanted to say, "No! Not God's will! You need my consulting services to clarify God's will for your life!" I hated to see this family that has had such an impact in this church leave, but of course it was the right thing to do. He had to choose who he was going to cheat—his church or his family. And in this case, he made the right choice even though I hate being the one cheated!

All of us have to make that choice, single or married, about what we are going to cheat, but for those who are married and have families, the implication is that is not what we choose to cheat. We accept our limitations. If you are wired like me especially, ask yourself the question, "Am I cheating the right priorities right now? Am I accepting my limitations? Am I honoring my commitment to my family?" You and I can't be married with a family but living as if we are single.

So, we've talked about two really wonderful gifts, that both have some drawbacks. For those who are single, realize it is a gift, and take full advantage of that gift. Don't put life on hold but serve God fully and passionately. Find out who you are and define your mission which will serve you well if you do meet someone because you will know not only who you are but who your partner needs to be. Whether you ever get married, or married again, or not, be faithful now. And as a church family, can we act like family toward our single friends? There should not be one lonely Chase Oaker. Really. Let's be family to one another and include each other and reach out to each other. Let's start thinking and living that way today, this week.

And for those who are married, and maybe have a family, accept your limitations and be really choosy about whom or what you choose to cheat. You may have some hard conversations to have or some hard choices to make, but I encourage you to lean into it.

Pray.

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