*Singleness & Courtship* seminar

Week 2 – Sept 3, 2011

**The Gift & Freedom of Singleness**

**A Really Quick Overview of 1 Cor 7**

[Open in prayer; welcome; read 1 Cor 7.] Look down at your Bibles, and follow along as we just take a quick run through the text, so we can get some context before we talk about specific verses on singleness.

* **7:1-7—**Thequote in verse 1 – NIV “it is good for a man not to marry” (no quotation marks in the NIV) or ESV “it is good for a man to not have sexual relations with a woman” (quotation marks included). Paul is responding to unhelpful ascetic teaching in the church. In contrast to the ascetic teachings and because of sexual immorality among the Corinthians, Paul thought people should get married and fulfill their marital duty, i.e., to give themselves over to their spouse in sexual relations. But, Paul adds in vs. 7, it is good from some to be single as he was.
* **7:8-9—**To the unmarriedand widows: It is good for them to stay single as Paul was, but If they burn, they should get married.
* **7:10-11**—to the married: Don’t divorce; if you do, either be reconciled or stay unmarried.
* **7:12-16**—to the married with unbelieving spouse: Stay married if they are willing but if they leave, let them go.
* **7:12-24—**to each one in the church: Don’t feel that your earthly status needs to change when God calls you to be a Christian (see especially vs. 17, 20). Our earthly circumstances are not ultimate concern. Ultimately what matters is our status before God, not man. (Though Paul gives freedom to change if we have fair and legitimate means, vs. 21.)
* **7:25-38**—to the virgins (NIV) or betrothed (ESV): In light of the “present crisis” (NIV; possibly a famine) or “present distress” (ESV; maybe this is a more general reference to living in the last days?), they should remain as they are. The time is short (v. 29). The married should stay married; the singles should stay single, especially because it prevents them from the “troubles’ of married life (v. 28) and it gives them freedom to have an undivided devotion to the Lord (v. 35). The caveat here: If singles choose to get married (and enjoy sexual relations, cf. vs. 1-4) they are not sinning if they choose to do so.
* **7:39-40**—to the widows: They are free to remarry if their husband dies but should marry a Christian if she chooses.

**The Gift of Singleness**

One of the questions we need to tackle today is “What is the gift of singleness?” This often-used phrase comes from verse 7, where Paul said, “I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.”

Paul wishes *all* men were single (as he was). He clearly sees there is some benefit to singleness, such that he wishes everyone (“all men”) could experience it. We’ll talk about the benefits more in just a minute as we look at vs. 32-35. But he clearly recognizes that singleness is for some, and not others. This is implied by that first sentence “I wish…”. But it is more directly stated in that second sentence – each man has his own gift. Think of the word “gift” as something that is given; and in this case, it is something that is given from God. Paul is saying that not everyone has this gift of singleness. Singleness is a gift for some; and not others. Others have different gifts given to them by God (administration; hospitality; teaching; but not singleness).

What is the gift of singleness? What it is not is some super-spiritual, mystical, or magical ability to resist sexual relations and to reject marriage. It is not some higher, more super-spiritual ascetic state where you can deny the flesh and be uniquely more focused on spiritual issues. That’s what monks and nuns pursue as they cut themselves off from society in general and put themselves in secluded monasteries and nunneries. If this were what Paul was trying to describe, then God has created a two-tier system for singleness – the super-spiritually ascetic singles, and the rest of you – uncontrolled, burning, and “must-get-married” singles. / If that is not it, then what is the gift of singleness? It is a recognition that God has given some the gift of celibacy for a season (or a few, maybe a life-time). The gift is more than a *status* classification—i.e., you are single and I am married. Tied to this idea of a gift is one who is spiritually motivated to be single, who is able to live a self-controlled life, and who lives with contentment in their singleness.

Let’s camp out for just a moment on this idea of contentment. If you have this gift, you’ll be content in your singleness. Look at how Paul talks about contentment in the Christian life in Phil 4:11-13, and remember how this great apostle was single. You might hear me say this, and you automatically think, “Oh, no, obviously I don’t have the gift, so I need to get rid of my singleness as soon as possible.” No, no, no. That is just not a helpful way to think of your singleness. Some of you are very discontent in your singleness, so recognizing that God has providentially given singleness to you, the question becomes: what does it take to grow in your trust of God and be content in your singleness? (I don’t want to rush by this question, so just think about the answer for yourself for a moment. If your only answer to this is, “If God gave me what I want then I’d be content….well, then you are not really wrestling with this question.)

Fit vs. 7 with what Paul says in v. 37 (if someone feels no necessity to get married; and feels he or she is spiritually motivated for singleness; and is able to live a self-controlled life), then it is clear that ***some* *singles can choose to remain single*** (for a season, or for a lifetime). In a church culture that teaches on the beauty of marriage and encourage singles to get married, it can be falsely assumed that singles are second-class Christians to married folks. That should never be the case. Generally speaking, more singles are going to get married than remain single. Remaining single is less common. But, biblically speaking, just because it is less common should never mean it should be thought of as abnormal. You know what I mean by that? Some people think that a single person would never knowingly choose to remain single, either for a season or a lifetime. If people ask you, “Why are you still single?” or “You want to be married, right?”, sometimes they are implying that marriage is a better state. Yet, what you learn from Paul in this chapter is that singleness and marriage are both valuable, one is not superior to the other. You see that in the way Paul wishes for some to have the gift of singleness like he has (vs. 7), but also in how he encourages some singles to not rush into marriage, but to stay single and be a good steward of that singleness (v. 27, 32-35, 37-38). Question for you: Do you think like Paul? Do you see your singleness as *valuable*? Or do you have such a strong yearning for marriage and to change your singleness that you don’t place any value on your singleness? In fact, you devalue it and you always see the grass greener on the other side (i.e., marriage)?

Fit vs. 7 with what Paul says in v. 2 (because there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband) and v. 9 (if you burn, get married) and it makes sense that ***some singles should get married***. Paul is a good pastor, and he recognizes that many singles are going struggle with sexual desires, and rather than falling into sexual temptation, it is good for you (as a single) to enjoy sexual relations in the context of marriage. That’s where sex is meant to be—in marriage (cf. v. 4, conjugal rights or marital duty, i.e., the rights of a spouse to give their bodies over to the other and to enjoy physical relations with their spouse). Granted, this is not the only reason why someone should get married (i.e., to have sex), but it is one good reason why it is important to pursue marriage. Two caveats to this: (1) Plain, hard, cold reality – you may struggle with sexual desire, and desire to get married, and even pursue marriage by dating others; but circumstances just may not work out for you to get married. It is easy to think, “This is not fair! God is torturing me. Don’t you see I burn and therefore I *must* have marriage?” That’s a poor way to read this verse, i.e., because I burn, I must be *guaranteed* from God the gift of marriage. No, what you should see Paul saying in v. 9 is, if you can’t control yourself, do everything you can to pursue marriage. For it is better to be married and enjoy sexual relations within marriage than to burn. (2) I’ve talked with a lot of single men who struggle with internet pornography who assume that because they struggle, they should not date or get married. They think the problem needs to be completely “fixed” before ask a girl out for a date. What do I think? YES – single men, do everything you can with God’s strength to fight the problem *now*. The longer you have reprieve from the problem, the more it will serve you in your dating relationship and marriage. NO – the pornography problem is a sign that you burn, and what does Paul say about that? It is better to get married than to burn with passion. But don’t think that when you get married, and you enjoy sex within marriage, that your porn problem will magically go away. It won’t. You can find great satisfaction in your sexual relationship with your wife, but it is not a magical prescription to make your sexual struggles go away. (3) It is okay to enjoy singleness for season, to have great contentment in your singleness, to run hard after Jesus while you are single, and at the same time be open to one day being married. The two don’t have to be mutually exclusive.

[PAUSE FOR QUESTIONS.]

**The Freedom of Singleness**

Looking again at vs. 25-35: As I mentioned earlier, Paul says in v. 26 that because of the “present crisis” (NIV) or “present distress” (ESV), the Corinthians should remain as they are – married stay married; single stay single. (v. 28, but if a single marries, he or she is not sinning.) v. 29, the time is short (before Christ comes back) and v. 31, the things of this world are passing away. Paul often wrote about living in the time between the resurrection and Christ’s return—how we do not know how long this time will be (1 Thess 5:1-2), how we should not be attached to this life because it is fleeting (James 4:14), and how we should get ourselves ready for Christ’s return (1 John 3:2-3). So it initially sounds strange when Paul says, “if you are married, live as if you don’t have a wife; if you are happy, live as if you were not; if you use things, don’t get engrossed in them.” He is pointing to how the things of this life are fleeting and passing, so ultimately, they won’t matter anymore when Christ returns. That’s the immediate context for Paul’s statement in vs. 32a: “I would like you to be free from concern.” He doesn’t want us to be caught up with the things of this life, but take full advantage of the season the Lord has put us in because “the time is short” (vs. 29) and we don’t know how much time we have before Christ returns. To give an example of what being “free from concern” might look like, Paul contrasts unmarried folks and married folks in vs. 32b-35. The unmarried person is “concerned about the Lord’s affairs, how he can please the Lord” (32b), how she can make it “her aim to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit” (34; body & spirit – i.e., giving herself totally over the Lord), and how she “may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord” (v. 35). The married person is “concerned about the affairs of this world” (32, 34) and Paul further defines that as being preoccupied with how you can please your spouse. This is a very deliberate contrast where Paul wants you to see the concern-free living of a single person compared to the life a married person which is very full of concern for a spouse and other things (children, home, etc.). If you are single, then you know your life is by no means concern-free (especially in a fallen world!), but the point of this is the comparison—a single person’s life when compared to a married person has less to be concerned about and much more freedom to be preoccupied with the Lord.

Let’s define these freedoms a little further according to this passage…

***Freedom from the Troubles of Marriage (v. 28)***

When Paul says “those who marry will face many troubles in this life” (v. 28), he is not necessarily talking about really bad things—abuse, abandonment, the mean things that spouses can do to one another, etc.—though that might be included in this description. What he is probably thinking about is the fact that marriage is a lot of work. There are a lot of daily burdens you face when you are married and have a family. When you get married, you marry a sinner, and you get to deal with their sin up close for the rest of your life. That’s certainly not easy. When you get married, you take on responsibility. To daily keep up with those responsibilities is a lot of work. Take this morning for example: Just to get to church, I had to get my three older kids up and ready, make breakfast for them and get them feed, help them get their shoes on, and get them checked into nursery, and that is what I do when things go well. When things don’t work out as I plan, it can be a lot of more work (and in some cases a major burden). Examples: in our morning routine, if one of my kids gets out of hand, he or she needs to be disciplined, and that adds time to our already pressured morning schedule. Or in the “burden” category: as a husband, if you get fired from work so you’ve got find another way to provide for your wife and children; or if you get into an car accident that totals your car, you’ve got to find another way to get your kids to school in the morning. There is daily work, daily burdens, and daily responsibilities that must be faced if you are going to be married. As a single adult, you are free from those troubles.

***Freedom from Pleasing Your Spouse (v. 33-34)***

When you are married, apart from pleasing the Lord, one of your greatest priorities is pleasing and serving your spouse. A good marriage takes a lot of work; just like any good relationship. It requires vulnerability, transparency, self-sacrificial love, servant-heartedness, communication, kindness, time and lots of energy. There is a level of intensity that comes along with “pleasing” a spouse that is very different than pleasing any of your friends. As a single adult, you are free from the hard, daily work of building a good marriage.

***Freedom from Having Divided Interests (v. 35)***

When people make requests or announcements in Sunday PM service, asking for vounteers, I often think, “Oooh, I’d love to do that.” But often times, I just can’t. Why? Well, my family life requires a lot of time from me if I’m going to be a good father and husband. I’m not complaining. I love the responsibilities of being a husband and father, but it requires a lot of time and energy. So on Saturdays when many others are volunteering of a wedding, or ESOL, or community outreach, or an evangelistic outreach, I’m on the sidelines of a soccer practice, or dropping my daughter off at ballet, or giving my wife a break while I watch our baby girl. I can’t volunteer for a lot of these things because I have divided interests—I try to serve both the church and my family. In serving my family, I do also serve the Lord. But practically speaking, it prevents me from serving the church and participating in certain ways. My interests are divided because I have a wife and family. As a single adult, your interests are not as divided because you don’t have the preoccupations of marriage and family.

***Freedom to Be Single (vs. 32-35; Matt 19:10-12)***

Don’t overlook how radical Paul’s statements about singleness are in this passage. In Paul’s day, to be single as a female was the equivalent of being a poor and destitute. Your livelihood was often connected to being married and having a husband. For him to encourage widows and unmarrieds to stay that way was big deal. It showed that Paul valued singleness, even if it was counter-cultural for his day.

Look for a moment at Matt 19:10-12. Jesus says something very similar to Paul—that is good from some to choose to be single for the sake of kingdom of God. In describing the complications that divorce brings on a marriage, the disciples over-react in v. 10 and say, “Maybe it is better to stay unmarried.” Jesus responds this is true, but only for whom this word is given, namely eunuchs. A lack of sexual relations comes to some who are born that way; it comes to some who are castrated, but also to some who deliberately choose a life of celibacy. Don’t get thrown off that these verses are talking about eunuchs; Jesus point here is very similar to Paul’s—this gift of celibacy can be chosen by some for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (“not everyone can accept this word, but only those whom it has been given”).

You don’t have to think about singleness for a lifetime as your only choice. Let me give you a few examples/reasons why I’ve heard some singles choose to be single just for a season: (1) *Time.* Singleness might be preferable so that you can meet your current obligations and to not short-change a boyfriend/girlfriend (or much worse, a spouse). Take an example, a young man I knew who was leading a bible study, actively serving in the church, working full-time, going to graduate school, and had lots of really good friendships. When he started dating, the only time he had to talk during the week was late evenings, between 11pm and 1am. This couple sometimes (not always) saw each other on the weekends. As he said to me, “I just realize I didn’t have the time it took right now to dedicate myself to a dating relationship. So I choose to wait until something significant changed in my life.” In his case, after graduate school was done, he had a lot more time that opened up in his schedule and a lot more freedom to pursue dating relationships. (2) *Personal Issues.* If you’ve got some very difficult issues in your life, like prior physical or sexual abuse, or maybe you grew up with an alcoholic father or drug addict for a mother, you may want to take some time while you are single to work through some of these issues so you won’t bring as much baggage into your marriage. (3) *Maturing in life and faith.* Increasing I’ve had conversations with 20-somethings who want time to learn to live on their own apart from family and after college life, to learn how to pay bills, to organize their life, to be a faithful employee, and (most importantly) to take greater ownership of their faith outside of the shadow of their parents.

***Freedom to Dedicate Your Life with Singular Purpose to God (v. 32, 34, 35)***

As a single, you have freedom to be “concerned about the Lord’s affairs—how you can please God” (v. 32). Your “aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit” (v. 34) and to “live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord” (v. 35). Paul uses these three phrases to describe the freedom you have as a single adult to dedicate your life with singular purpose to God.

Two ideas I want to emphasis here: (1) You’ve got a freedom to invest in your spiritual growth in a way that will be harder when you are married. When I was single, I had a freedom to take missions trips, or to spend my evening and weekends studying the Bible, to read good Christian books, or to pour into relationships in a way that I don’t have now as a married adult. Don’t take this season for granted. Take advantage of it, especially for the sake of your growing closer to Christ. (2) You’ve got a freedom to love and serve God by investing in our church community in way that is much harder for married adults. When Paul talks about gifts in 1 Cor 12, he says the point of our gifts is not personal gain, but for building up of the body (1 Cor 12:7). Is that the way you think about your gift of singleness? Do you enjoy being single just simply for your personal gain, or do you see your singleness as a means to building up the body of Christ?

[PAUSE FOR FINAL QUESTIONS.]