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FCF College Group

Practical Advice For Singles
1 Corinthians 7:1-9, 25-40

A story is told of a woman approaching 35 without a husband. Late one afternoon she went into the woods to pray for a husband. She didn't notice the hour growing late as she continued to pray. An owl in a nearby tree awoke and in a low voice said, "Whooo!" Startled by the sound, the woman looked up and said, "Just anybody, Lord!"

Maybe some of you identify with her! But, if God wants you to be married, He doesn't want you married to just anybody. We all know that the bottom line is that Christians must only marry Christians. But beyond that, how do you know whom God wants you to marry? How do you know if God wants you to marry at all? Maybe His will is for you to remain single. How can you know God's will on this important decision?

I'd like to offer some practical advice to you who are single, based on Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 7. He was writing to a church in a pagan, sex-saturated society. Many in that culture thought that satisfaction in life comes through gratifying sensual lusts. There were problems with immorality even among the members of the Corinthian church. Apparently, in reaction to the sensuality of the culture, some in the church were saying that all sex is wrong. The celibate life is the truly spiritual life. Perhaps they even pointed to the Apostle Paul as their hero. Even some who were married concluded that it was more spiritual to abstain from sexual relations in marriage. So Paul addresses these and some other problems in this chapter. We can't deal with the entire chapter in detail. But, his word to singles is:

Singles should pursue a course that leads to the
greatest devotion to Christ and His cause.

This advice applies to every Christian, single or married, of course. But it is Paul's word especially to singles. I want to develop three thoughts:

1. If you can remain single and be devoted to the Lord in purity, do it.

While marriage is God's normal design for most people, He has gifted some to remain single so that they can serve Him without the encumbrances that necessarily go along with marriage. When Paul says, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" (7:1), he is using the word "touch" as a figure of speech that refers to the physical relationship in marriage as representing marriage as a whole. Thus, he means, "It is good to remain single." He restates the same idea in 7:7-9, and discusses it at length in 7:25-40. He is not commanding being single, since he recognizes the single state as a gift which God only gives to some (7:7-9). But he is strongly commending it, since it was a gift he had, and since it provides a number of advantages for serving the Lord that being married precludes.

This is perhaps a word that needs to be spoken more often in our day. Many Christians put pressure on singles, especially those getting along in years, to get married. Sometimes we communicate an unbiblical attitude: "I wonder what's wrong with him (or her) that he's never married? He seems like a nice person." But Paul teaches that being single is good if a person is gifted for it, since it opens some opportunities for serving Christ that are closed to married people. To say this is not to deprecate marriage, which both Paul and other biblical writers esteem as God's good gift (1 Tim. 4:3; Heb. 13:4). It's just a matter of how God has gifted a person.

A. Advantages of remaining single:

Paul mentions at least two advantages for the person who is gifted to remain single.

(1) *Singles have more freedom in difficult times (7:26)*. Paul is quick to add that a person who marries at such a time has not sinned (7:28). But the married person will have more trouble (the Greek word means "pressure"), and Paul is trying to spare him. Scholars differ, and so I can't be dogmatic, but I think that Paul sensed an impending time of persecution. In such a time, it's easier to be single than married. It's one thing to be martyred for your faith as a single person. But it's much more difficult to be imprisoned or face martyrdom if you're married, both for you and for your family.

If you sense God's call to be a missionary to a part of the world where you may likely suffer persecution or severe hardship,

you should consider remaining single. Or, if you have a ministry that requires long periods of travel, it might create such a strain on your family that it would be better not to get married. Some countries are not conducive to raising a family because of the political, economic, or educational situations. Many missionaries send their young children away to boarding schools. But I believe that if God is calling you to be a missionary and a parent, then your children should stay with you on the mission field. If that isn't possible, your first responsibility is to raise your children. So being single means that you will have more freedom in difficult situations than a man or woman with a family will have.

(2) *Singles have more freedom to devote themselves fully to God and His service.* In 7:32-35, Paul points out that the married person, of necessity, cannot be as devoted to the Lord as the single person can. Marriage carries with it certain responsibilities and obligations that take time and effort which otherwise could have been given to the Lord. Of course, many single people are not as devoted to the Lord as many married people are. But Paul's point is that if a single person gives himself fully to the Lord and His service, and a married person does the same, the single person will be more devoted since he does not have the family obligations that the married person has.

Perhaps you're thinking, "If staying single has all these advantages, then why shouldn't we all stay single? Why get married?"

B. Reasons to marry:

The main reason Paul gives is that being celibate is a gift from God, and while he wishes that everyone had that gift, he recognizes that this is not so (7:7-9). You ask, "*How can I know if I have the gift of being celibate?*" There are three tests you can apply:

(1) *Can you control sexual desires?* Paul is quite practical at this point: "But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn" (7:9). If you are single and find that fighting sexual temptation is a daily, constant battle, then you need to pursue marriage. Paul is not saying that it is impossible for a single person to resist temptation, because he later says that in every temptation, God provides the way of escape (1 Cor. 10:13). Every Christian can be pure in thought and deed. But if all your

energy is directed toward fighting the battle of purity every day, the best solution is not more self-discipline, but a spouse. Of course you still need self-control even as a married person. But God has given marriage as a legitimate safeguard against immorality (7:2).

(2) Are you constantly lonely in spite of close relationships with the Lord and with other believers? I am going back to Genesis for this point, where we find Adam in a perfect environment, in unbroken fellowship with his Creator, and yet God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make a helper suitable for him" (Gen. 2:18). To be lonely when you're single is not necessarily a sign of a spiritual problem. If as a single you can reasonably control your loneliness through Christian fellowship, then you may be able to remain single. But when I was single, in spite of some good friends, I often felt very lonely. Also, I like kids and long before I got married I looked forward to having my own children. So I often used Genesis 2 when I argued in my prayers for a wife!

(3) To what ministry has God called you? As mentioned already, if God is calling you to a place where it's unsafe or unwise to take a family, then you should remain single. I've read the biographies of C. T. Studd and other missionary greats, who left their families to take the gospel to difficult places. As I recall, Studd and his wife, who was too ill to go to Africa, were together only a couple of weeks during her last 11 years. David Livingstone left his wife and children for years in order to pioneer in the interior of Africa. While God accomplished much good through these dedicated men, their families suffered great harm. I believe their witness was marred by neglecting their families.

Please note: If you do marry, it should not be for the purpose of self-centered fulfillment and personal happiness. While marriage and children are God's good gifts that bring great joy, you should marry because you can better serve Christ in line with your spiritual gifts as a married person. The idea of getting married and settling down in suburbia with your nice home, two cars, good job, weekend recreational hobbies, and, of course, a church for the weekends when you're in town, is completely worldly. All Christians are to seek first God's kingdom and righteousness. If you seek first your own happiness, you will come up empty (Matt. 6:33; 16:25).

2. If you're not gifted for celibacy, pray and look for a godly mate.

When I was single, Paul's words in verse 9 often frustrated me. He makes it sound so simple and matter of fact: "Let them marry." Okay, so how do I go about doing that? There's a lot of living packed into those three words! I offer five suggestions:

- A. Focus on personal growth in godliness.

You can use your time as a single person to sit around feeling depressed and lonely. You can waste a lot of time in a frantic search for a companion, where you fill all your spare time with being around people. Or, you can use it to seek the Lord in His Word and in prayer. If you use your time to read and study God's Word, to read good Christian books, to pray, and to serve the Lord in some capacity, when God introduces you to your life partner, you will be mature enough for the responsibilities of Christian marriage. If you want a godly mate, you've got to become the kind of person the kind of person you want to marry would want to marry, namely, a godly person!

When I was single and on active duty in the Coast Guard in the Bay Area of Northern California, I was very lonely. There are many temptations to gratify the flesh in that area. But I spent many evenings sitting in a coffee shop or going to the University of California library, reading the Bible and Christian books. On my way back to the base, I would pull off alongside the harbor and spend time praying. It was a lonely time in my life, but I was much better off than if I had wasted that time in other ways.

- B. Never consider marriage to an unbeliever.

Burn it into your thinking: It is *never* God's will for a Christian to become unequally yoked with a non-Christian in marriage (7:39; 2 Cor. 6:14-18). For some reason, it is usually Christian women who get tangled up with nice unbelieving men (they're always nice!), rather than the other way around. I don't care how nice he is to you, if he is not committed to Jesus Christ and if he is not denying self daily to follow Christ, then he's living for self. You're going to be miserable married to such a person. Your children will suffer. Your devotion to Christ will be hindered. Don't do it!

- C. Guard your moral purity.

As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:18, "Flee immorality." Your body belongs to God, whose Spirit dwells in you. Therefore, you are to glorify God in your body (6:19-20). Physical intimacy, even in a so-called "one night stand," creates the illusion of personal intimacy (6:16). But it clouds and confuses the real issues that need to be the foundation of a Christian marriage. It creates guilt. It carries the risk of venereal disease. It defiles you and your brother or sister in Christ. As Paul states (7:1-5), the sexual relationship is proper for marriage, but only in marriage.

If you're going to guard your moral purity in our sex-saturated society, you've got to plan for it. If you visit the Grand Canyon and don't want to fall over the edge, don't go near the cliff. If you want to guard your moral purity, plan *not* to get yourself into tempting situations. Moral purity begins in your thinking (Matt. 5:27-30; Mark 7:21-23). You've got to guard your thought life, which also means guarding what you watch on TV, videos, movies, and on the internet. You've got to cleanse yourself from all such defilement of flesh and spirit if you want to grow in holiness (2 Cor. 7:1).

I encourage you to challenge the American dating system, which is designed to foster romance and to see how far you can go physically. As Christians, your aim should be to get to know the person in the context of moral purity. I encourage you to put yourself under the godly wisdom and counsel of your parents in the process of seeking a mate. If they have red flags about a prospective mate, back off. While I don't endorse everything in the book, I encourage you to read Douglas Wilson's *Her Hand in Marriage*. I think he restores a needed biblical emphasis on the role of parents in helping their children find suitable godly mates.

If I may speak man to man, any scheming, men, on how you can get a date into a romantic setting to see if you can "make out," even if you don't intend to go all the way, is sin. Your purpose should be to build up your sister in Christ and to get to know her, not to indulge your lust. Plan for purity!

D. Study and develop godly character qualities.

If you were going to shop for a new car, you'd probably do some research. And yet many Christian singles never give any

thought to what qualities they should be looking for in a godly mate! I've seen girls end up married to abusive men because their role models were macho men, not men of God. If a man doesn't show you respect, gentleness, self-sacrificing love, and other godly traits, don't marry him. You're not going to transform him! You need to be able to submit to him as your spiritual leader. Men, burn Proverbs 31:30 into your thinking: "Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised." Know what you're looking for (based upon Scripture) and pray fervently to that end!

E. Be wise, but not super-spiritual.

By this I mean, God expects you to pray and wait on Him, but He also expects you to use appropriate means for finding a mate. Sometimes we get super-spiritual, thinking that God is going to rain down manna from heaven, when He expects us to plow our field and sow some seeds! There's nothing wrong with putting yourself in situations where you may meet a godly mate. That can include involvement with campus ministry groups, attending conferences for Christian singles, getting a job at a seminary or other Christian organization, etc.

Also, even though godly character should take precedence, there's nothing unspiritual about being physically attracted to someone. Read the Song of Solomon and you will discover that the couple isn't extolling the finer points of each other's personalities! In its proper place, there's nothing wrong with physical attraction.

Also, don't be so super-spiritual that you overlook *liking* the person. You're looking for a companion, and a lot of companionship involves enjoying the person's personality. You should have some common interests and be able to enjoy just being together without having to do things. You should be able to accept the person as he or she is, without major change. Again, seek the counsel of those who know you well, especially your parents. Any strong opposition from parents should be weighed very carefully.

3. Marriage is not the final solution to your problems; God is!

Marriage is a gracious, good gift from God. As Proverbs 31:10-12 exclaims, "An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life." Amen!

But at the same time, if God is not at the center of your life and your mate's life, marriage creates more problems than it solves. Without the Lord at the center, marriage just brings together two self-centered people seeking self-fulfillment from one another. It doesn't work. Put God at the center of your life. Pray that He will bring you a mate with the same commitment. Then joyfully serve Him together.

Conclusion

Psychologist William Marston once asked 300 people, "What do you have to live for?" Nine out of ten were simply waiting for something to happen—a better job, a new house, a trip, etc. They were putting in time while they waited for an uncertain tomorrow.

But as Christians, our mentality should be that of 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, that the time is short and eternity is just ahead. Our focus should be on the Lord and His kingdom. If He graciously gives you the blessing of a Christian home, enjoy it thankfully. But don't put your hopes for happiness in a family. Hope in the Lord! Whether you're single or married, your purpose should never be to seek self-fulfillment and personal happiness. Rather, your purpose should be to pursue a course that leads to the greatest devotion to Christ and His cause in these days that remain before His coming.