



The Ten Commandments

(36) The Seventh Commandment

(3) Singleness (2)

Exodus 20:14

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

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This is the third sermon on the Seventh Commandment which is “You shall not commit adultery.” The Seventh Commandment is about all of life from the perspective of the fact that God created us as sexual beings and so we are looking at the whole matter of singleness. Last time we looked at the one of the difficulties for at least some single people which is the biblical requirement for celibacy for all unmarried people and we saw that the sexuality of singles as well as of married people points to the fact that our deepest longings for intimacy and satisfaction are found in our relationship with Jesus Christ. The sexuality of married people makes the point that marriage and sex are not enough to fully satisfy the human person and the celibate sexuality of single Christians is meant to show that intimacy with Christ is enough for fullness of life and the ultimate satisfaction of our desires. The fact that humans in the final state will not be married to one another, but married to Christ makes it clear that the fullness of human existence requires our relationship with Jesus and not marriage.

I felt that I was not able to give a sufficiently balanced treatment of singleness in that one sermon. There are two main things to be said, I think, to get at the significance of singleness in biblical perspective. One is that for many people singleness is hard, and many singles wish to be married. The Bible does not really emphasize that all that much, but in the first part of 1 Corinthians 7, Paul does acknowledge that celibacy is a struggle for many and that that struggle is one of the biblical reasons for marriage if we have the opportunity. Even though the Bible does not

give much emphasis to the struggles that people have with singleness, the biblical call for us to weep with those who weep is reason enough to include that in our thinking about singleness. We know that for some people it is hard to be single and that is something that must be recognized in the church among people who are called to love and care for one another.

The thrust of the last sermon, however, was on the fact that our relationship with God is more than sufficient to enable us to live a full and satisfying life even while recognizing that that does not take away the desire to be married. What I want to do in this sermon is reflect a little more on the fact that from a biblical perspective being single is not in any way an inferior way to live. The New Testament teaches that marriage is good, and that singleness is good, and one is not better than the other. This is seen in the fact that Jesus was never married, and he is the ultimate example of a perfect human life. And then we have the teaching of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 which is very positive about the single life and which considers both singleness and marriage as gifts from God. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:7, "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another."

We will pay a little more attention to this verse as we go along, but for now, I just want to highlight the fact that whatever exactly Paul means by gift here, it is a positive thing – it is a blessing – it is an expression of the goodness and generosity and kindness of God. This point is very important for our thinking about singleness whether we are single or whether we are married.

It is easy for us to think of singleness in terms of what it is not. It is easy for us to think of singleness is somehow less of a blessing that marriage is and so we can think of singleness as something negative. Singles are people who are somehow less blessed than married people are. Singles are people who wish they are married but are not married. So they are lonely, and they can't have sex and they are missing out on so much of the goodness of life.

Now on one hand, this is understandable because the desire to be married and have all that goes along with that is a legitimate desire and

the reality is that many singles wish that they were married. But if we only think of singleness in this way, we are thinking of it in a profoundly unbiblical way. The biblical way of thinking on this matter is that there are two ways that God blesses his people in this area, one of them is singleness and the other is marriage. It is absolutely not the case that singles are less blessed than married people. That is a profoundly unbiblical idea. And it is very important for all of us to recognize that.

There are a number of ways that this idea can be expressed. Sam Allberry writes on this verse, “[I]n Paul’s mind both the single and married states are equally valid and blessed by God.” (7 Myths about Singleness) Matt Smethurst writes to single people, “You are not a human-in-waiting. Being single isn’t an obstacle to being fully human; it’s an expression of it. A woman’s life, for example, doesn’t really begin when she becomes a wife or a mom, but when she becomes a royal image-bearer of God.” (9 Ways to Pastor Single Christians Longing for Marriage.” Paige Benton writes in an article called, “Singled Out by God for Good.” “I am single because God is so abundantly good to me, because this is his best for me.... My identity is not found in my marital status, but in my redemptive status. I’m one of the ‘haves’ not one of the ‘have nots....’ Let’s face it: singleness is not an inherently inferior state of affairs. If it were, heaven would be inferior to this world for the majority of Christians.”

That does not mean that singles should not long for and pray for marriage. Paige Benton concludes her article by saying, “But I want to be married. I pray to that end every day. I may meet someone and walk down the aisle in the next couple of years because God is so good to me. I may never have another date and die an old maid at 93 because God is so good to me. Not my will but his be done.”

The key in all of this is the equal love of God for all of his people. Think of what Paul writes in Romans 8:32, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things.” If you are a Christian God gave his Son for you. And if he gave his Son for you can be sure that he will graciously give you all things. For some that love is expressed in giving marriage. For others that love is expressed in giving singleness.

That means the biblical category for singleness is blessing and gift. It also means that the biblical category for singleness is not affliction. Single people have afflictions associated with their singleness. But the biblical category for singleness is blessing not affliction. And it is on the same level as the blessing of marriage in biblical teaching.

But it is legitimate to ask, “What about the fact that married people get so many of their desires satisfied that single people do not get satisfied? There are many good things in life that married people get that single people do not get. To answer that question I want to apply one of the thoughts from this morning’s sermon to this whole idea of the satisfaction of our desires.

We tend to think about the satisfaction of our desires in a way that is influenced by the world more than from the Bible. The whole idea of the satisfaction of our desires is not much of a priority in the Bible – at least in the way that it is a priority for us. We tend to think a lot about our desires, but the biblical emphasis is that our focus must be more on living how God calls us to live and leaving the satisfaction of our desires to God.

There is a place for wanting things that we do not have. 1 Timothy 4:4-5 Paul writes, “For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.” Creational life is good. There are many desirable things that we may desire. But as sinners we put too much emphasis on the satisfaction of these desires so that we look at them as needs that must be satisfied in order for us to be happy and satisfied. And that is idolatry and coveting and ingratitude and discontentment. It is also putting the cart before the horse. In other words, our focus must not be on ourselves and our desires, but on God and pleasing God. When it comes to the language of desires and longing in the Bible, the focus is on longing for God and longing for holiness.

Listen to how David speaks in Psalm 27, “One thing I have asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.” Or Jesus in Matthew 5:6, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” And also

Matthew 6:33, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

What all this means is that our focus and our most passionate desires are to be for God and pleasing him and serving him, and it is by focusing on these things that we receive joy and satisfaction in life. The biblical order of things is to focus on loving and pleasing God and the deepest joys of life follow from that. We do not get joy and satisfaction by focusing on ourselves and our desires. We get joy and satisfaction by seeking God and his kingdom and they come to us as gifts and blessings from God which he gives as we live for the purpose for which we were created and redeemed. That is why there is little in the Bible about us seeking to satisfy our this-worldly desires expect to warn us about over-emphasizing them. The order is to seek first the kingdom of God and then all the other things will be added unto us.

When it comes to the satisfaction of our this-worldly desires, the key word is contentment. Paul's words in Philippians 4:11-13 speak to this matter. "Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought now, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." Or 1 Timothy 6:6-8, "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content."

Now this applies to married people as much as it does to single people. If the focus of married people is on themselves and their own happiness and satisfaction, it is in the wrong place and they are not living in a way that is pleasing God and they are missing the deeper happiness and satisfaction that come from not focusing on our own desires but focusing on God and serving him. If we live for ourselves and grasp for our own satisfaction and happiness, we are missing the boat and committing spiritual adultery and missing the joy that comes from focusing on God and on what God calls us to do in this life. This is a subtle thing, but it is very, very important.

The deep joy and satisfaction that is possible for us as human beings does not come from seeking joy and happiness directly but by seeking God and his kingdom. It is when our focus is not on ourselves, but outside of ourselves on enjoying our relationship with God and giving ourselves in his service that the result of that is the profound joy and happiness that we are designed to enjoy. This is why the Bible focuses on obedience rather than the idea of satisfying our desires with the things of this life.

It is in the light of this that we must understand Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7 about singleness and about marriage. Singleness is a gift and marriage is a gift not because they are about the satisfaction of our desires, but because they are both avenues of serving God. Verse 17 of 1 Corinthians 7:17 says, "Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him." The gift of marriage is an assignment. And the gift of singleness is an assignment. The first purpose of these gifts is not about pleasing ourselves, but a life-situation that is to be used to serve and please God.

And this is the context in which we must understand Paul teaching about the advantages of being single and the disadvantages of being married. Both marriage and singleness are gifts that are given to be used in the service of God, but in the nature of the case, there are certain anxieties and distractions that married people have that single people do not have. Verses 32-35, "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." (1 Corinthians 7:32-35)

Now marriage and family are important ways of service to God in and of themselves. Godly marriages are about serving one another and if God grants children they are about raising the children for God. But service to God always includes an outward looking aspect. Families are to serve

others outside of the family. Their family life is not the extent of their service. The family is to serve the church and kingdom not simply through their family life, significant as that is, but also through seeking the kingdom in ways that are connected to the service of the kingdom and other people outside of the family.

And in this the logistics and requirements of family life are a distraction from serving outside of the family. Paul speaks about a married man being anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife and that the unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. Again this is not to say that we cannot please the Lord through our family life, but what Paul seems to be saying is that a lot of family life is inwardly focused and that does limit a more outward focus on serving God and others outside of the family circle.

It is hard to get the balance right here. We must do justice to the importance of family and family life in the kingdom of God and the various ways that married people serve the Lord through their family life. But we must also do justice to what Paul is saying here in this passage and he is clearly saying that to some extent family life is distracting from serving the Lord. He is clearly saying that there is a sense in which singles have an advantage as far as serving the Lord is concerned. And I think it has to do with the fact that family life is to some extent about us and a huge part of serving the Lord is about serving others, serving the church, and not serving ourselves.

What does this mean for singles? It is clear that the Bible is saying here that singles have a certain advantage as far as serving the Lord is concerned. There are certain cares and entanglements that go along with married life that divide the minds of married people so that they are not able to serve the Lord with the same focus as single people are. It sounds almost sacrilegious to say such a thing, but that is what Paul is saying in this passage. Married life ties you to the cares and concerns of this life in ways that single life does not. Paul is saying that singleness is an advantage here because it enables you to give your undivided devotion to the Lord in a way that married life does not.

The assumption here is that a life of undivided devotion to the Lord is better than a life that is more divided between the cares and concerns

of this life and devotion to the Lord. The best way to live is the life of undivided devotion to the Lord and single people have fewer distractions for living that kind of life. And the thrust of what Paul is saying here is that single people should use their singleness in order to serve the Lord. I remind you for verse 17, 1 Corinthians 7:17, "¹⁷Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches."

Now most of us prefer living with the distractions of marriage rather than the advantages of singleness for undivided devotion to the Lord. And Paul is clear in the rest of the passage that it is not sinful to get married. That means that it is not sinful to wish to be married if you are single. But as long as you are single, your singleness is your assignment from God and Paul here is insisting that it is a perfectly good assignment and there are certain advantages to it.

And while it is an assignment that few people actually choose, from God's perspective it is a perfectly good way to live and it is perfectly possible to live a full and satisfying life as a single, because all that is needed for a full and satisfying life in biblical thought is devotion to God. None of this makes any sense, unless we understand that the way to fullness of life is loving God and doing what he commands, and that kind of life is as possible for single people as it is for married people and there are even certain advantages for singles. So if you want a full and satisfying life as a single look at your singleness in biblical perspective and if you desire marriage and God opens the way for that, go for it. It is not sin.

One more thought. There is a very significant implication of the biblical truth that all of us find the deepest joy and fullness of life by focusing on God and his service rather than on our desires and longings. It means that singles should be more focused on pleasing God than on their own desires and longings. But one of the implications for this principle for married people is that **we** should think about the desires and longings of single people. Single people should focus less on their own this worldly desires and longings and find their joy in serving the Lord. Married people should do exactly the same thing, but part of what that means for married people is that we can think a lot about the desires and

longings of single people. None of us should be obsessed with our own desires and longings, but serving the Lord means that we should be very concerned about the desires and longings of other people.

Think of how Paul puts this in Philippians 2:4-5, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus....” He makes a similar point in Romans 15:2-3 “Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself....” So, in connection with our subject, married people should think of how they can serve single people and single people should think of how they can serve married people.

This is the gospel way. If Christ had only thought of himself, he would never have humbled himself to become a man and give himself to die for our sins. Because he did, we are not crushed by our sin and guilt. We are set free from the dread of condemnation. We can live in hope and peace and joy. Our needs are met in the gospel and we enjoy so much than what we need because of the gracious generosity of God. But one of the things that the gospel does is to begin our transformation from being selfish and self-centered people living impoverished lives because selfishness is sub-human to becoming more like Jesus who lived the fullest and most satisfying life that was ever lived because it was a life of love – a life of not focusing on his own desires and longing, but on giving of himself for the well-being of others.

This is one of the ways that God blesses us and enriches our lives. We are blessed when by the transforming power of the gospel we grow in thinking not so much of our own things, but the things of others. But we are also blessed when other Christians are not thinking of their own things, but our things.

So as married people, one of the fruits of the gospel in our lives should be thinking of the single people in our midst and how we might serve them. One of the great provisions that God has made for single people is their church family. That requires all of us to live like a family as the church. Some in our congregation are wonderful examples of this. But this is an area in which many of us need to grow. And the way to grow is

to consider the love of Jesus for us in the gospel. The power to love is the love of God for us.

1 John 4:10-11, "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love has been perfected in us."

So, we all have our assignments whether single or married. They are grace-based assignments. May the love of God in Christ continue to do its work in us all.