

Single-Minded: How Singleness Displays the Gospel 1 Corinthians 7:25-35 (ESV)

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Marriages tell a story about God. The question is what kind of story they tell. The stakes are high when it comes to this issue. Marriage is an institution that is under attack on the outside as well as on the inside. And we have to understand it biblically so we can honor God in our own walks and then help others to do so. We're going to take five weeks to cover how marriage puts the Gospel, the good news about Jesus, on display for people to see. We're going to touch on why God established marriage, the roles of husbands and wives, and then relate it to parents and children. As we think about marriage and we begin this morning, we ask, "Where are we going to start?" Well, we'll start the same way any good series on marriage might begin, with a message on singleness from 1 Corinthians chapter 7. It might be a bit of a strange start, but I think it will help set us in the right direction and make us ready and excited for the topic. We'll call today's message *Single-Minded*.

25 Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. 26 I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. 27 Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. 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. 29 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, 30 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, 31 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.

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. 33 But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, 34 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. 35 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.

Now, the Star-Belly Sneetches- Had bellies with stars.
The Plain-Belly Sneetches-Had none upon thars.
Those stars weren't so big. They were really so small.
You might think such a thing wouldn't matter at all.

But, because they had stars, all the Star-Belly Sneetches
Would brag, "We're the best kind of Sneetch on the beaches.

With their snoots in the air, they would sniff and they'd snort
"We'll have nothing to do with the Plain-Belly sort!"

And whenever they met some, when they were out walking,
They'd hike right on past them without even talking.
When the Star-Belly children went out to play ball,
Could a Plain-Belly get in the game...? Not at all.

You only could play if your bellies had stars
And the Plain-Belly children had none upon thars.
When the Star-Belly Sneetches had frankfurter roasts
Or picnics or parties or marshmallow toasts,

They never invited the Plain-Belly Sneetches.
They left them out cold, in the dark of the beaches.
They kept them away. Never let them come near.
And that's how they treated them year after year.

That's a fanciful story from Dr. Seuss about some make believe creatures called sneetches who live in a community divided by status. Some classes hold high prestige and others are stained with a stigma. It's a power struggle over value that hinges all on status. It's a community at war with itself. It's a sort of mess we never expect to encounter in a church and in God's people. But in Corinth, it's exactly the sort of mess we discover. It is a community at war with itself. This is a church with issues. Paul visited them several times. He wrote several letters, of which two remain, inspired by God, to help us learn a bit about the problems that churches face and how to handle them. And in this letter, from the very opening we learn about the hostile culture that Paul is confronting. If you look at chapter 1, one of the reasons Paul is writing is because a woman named Chloe has come with her company to tell him about the problems. It's a community divided. And in chapter 1 verse 10, Paul's opening appeal cuts to the chase. He says

1 Corinthians 1:10-12 I appeal to you brothers, by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."

They're divided and they're sorting out their significance based on the leader who baptized them. And the church is forming factions on this culture of Christian celebrity. And Paul makes clear that following Jesus has nothing to do with this fleeting power struggle for significance. God's power doesn't come through man's performance but through the divine message. And that's why he says in verse 17,

1 Corinthians 1:17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

It's not about us being something special; not me, and not someone else. It's about Jesus and the message, the good news. That's the only way real power is experienced and true significance is enjoyed. And this Gospel is not just a box that we check. It's a lifestyle we embrace. It has implications for how we live. And those implications are another area where the Corinthians are deeply divided. We see that there is this hostile culture Paul has to confront. But all throughout the letter, there are these ethical controversies that he has to try to resolve. There are disagreements and problems over various issues. He talks about their moral struggles in sexuality. He talks about their cultural struggles of diversity and their church struggles in community and doctrinal struggles about eternity. He's dealing with fame. He's dealing with sex. He's dealing with food and church and death. He's having to enter into these things and the implications of the controversies of how the gospel is to be applied.

But all of these issues sort of converge in chapter 7 into sort of a single hot-button topic that is sort of a battleground for all kinds of culture wars then and now. It's the topic of marriage. There's a long list of questions and challenges about how to deal with the sticky situations that arise. What does the gospel look like in this situation, in male and female relationships? It's become a sort of confusion and competition and not a little discrimination in the Corinthians. You say, "What does the Gospel have to say about all this? What does the Gospel have to say in particular about singleness? Is it good? Is it bad? Does God care?" And the people have seemed to have sorted themselves into categories and classes of status and it's a community divided.

I've always appreciated that 1 Corinthians is in the Bible because it sort of gives a sense that God understands we're in a mess. It sort of gives me a little bit of hope. God gets it! And if you've been alive any length of time, you know what it is to live in a mess. You know what churches are like. And for all our modern technology and our academic pride, we still haven't moved very far past hostile cultures and ethical controversies, have we? We have lots of issues. People still categorize each other into cliques and groups and try to compare and prove our own status as better and others inferior. We try to find significance over whether it's economic or social or ethnic or marital status. We see this happen. And Paul is saying it shouldn't be like that.

In the Gospel, we learn that God cares for every one of these groups. Whatever ethnicity or economic status or marital status, God has a unique place from which every one, all of these areas, is to serve Him. He has a unique value and significance that transcends these superficial unifiers, that actually rises above these things that we start to define ourselves by and identify ourselves with. He says these things that devolve into clubs that make us blind and insensitive to what other people are going through, this is not where our true identity lies. And it's easy to find good things and make them God things and they shouldn't be. We idolize something and think that this is the area in which I find my identity and my hope and my security and my meaning and my significance. And sometimes marriage can become one of those things. And so as important as marriage is and as wonderful as it is, and we're going to enjoy it and celebrate it over the next couple of weeks. But it's important to start and remember that it is about God. And not only

marriage, but singleness as well.

Marriage is not the ultimate measure of Christian maturity or happiness. Jesus is! We're going to consider what it means to place Him at the top. The sort of sentiment that marriage is the ultimate measure of happiness is neither biblical nor helpful. We remember marriage and singleness are both gifts of grace from God to individuals and to the church. And we remember that while the norm and God's design for marriage is very clear and we experience that, there are many among us who are single, in a state of singleness. It's a state into which we were all born and it's one that many of us will eventually experience, regardless of where we're at now. And there are all kinds of ways that we experience that. There are some who have never been married. There are some who are divorced. There are some single parents. There are some widowed. There are some at all ages; 20, 30, 40, 50, 60. There are some who have chosen it deliberately and there are some who are in it and really didn't expect or want to be in that state. So this is a topic that deserves some nuance and time, more than we can give this morning, but at least we can start the discussion.

What is the Christian value of singleness? If we're all following Jesus together, how do singles in particular display the Gospel? What are the implications of Jesus upon this issue? What does God think about it? We'll say it in three words. How about this? God loves singleness! How's that for the first of five lessons in a series on marriage? We'll say it like this. For some: the status. For all: the focus. Both of these have value. We're going to touch on both. But in particular, we're going to start with the focus because there's a sense in which a single focus or being single-minded or having that mindset of single-mindedness is valuable and we need to appreciate it. And then there's a sense in which the status is something in which we need to appreciate as well. So single-focus as a way of thinking and then single-status as a state of being. Both are valuable. We're going to begin with the focus.

#1 Single-Focus: The Value of Singleness as a Way of Thinking (7:25-31)

When we think about marital status, it's almost like a pair of glasses frames. We have the frames and you sort of put on the frames of singleness or the frames of marriage. But either way, there are lenses that we should have. And these single-focus lenses are important whether we're married or unmarried. Those single-focus lenses are sort of the way we see the world or how we think about it. And that's what we'll take a moment to look at, here. These two lenses help us appreciate single-focus as a way of thinking. And the two lenses are this. I don't think it's in your notes, but the first lens is this principle: Life is hard. And then the second lens we'll get to is that time is short. Whether we're married or unmarried, it's important to remember that life is hard and time is short. And first we'll look at that idea that life is hard and it's going to control the way that we think. And because life is hard, Paul endorses this mindset of single-focus.

Single Focus Endorsed (7:25-28)

He can endorse, he can say this is a good thing to think this way because of the difficulty or in light of the difficulty of life. Look at what he says in verses 25-28.

25 Now concerning the betrothed,

You'll see a footnote there. The idea is that there are unmarried virgins, is the Greek. And probably in particular here, he's talking about unmarried females. That's what has sort of given rise to this discussion.

25 Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord,

So there's no direct quote from Jesus about this particular situation,

but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.

So Paul is speaking with some guidelines, some advice on the issue.

26 I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. 27 Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. 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.

He's looking through this lens of single-focus and he endorses this way of thinking. And he does so because he understands that life is hard. And you see him expressing that. He starts in verse 25 with sort of this credible endorsement where says "This isn't coming directly from Jesus. I'm not quoting a command, but I'm speaking as His apostle, trusted to tell you and give you some advice and guidance from God." So he offers some credible advice. And it's contextual here because he says

26 I think that in view of the present distress

Or this difficulty. It's this idea that life is hard. "In view of that, I'm going to give you this advice." He is understanding that there is a difficulty or a challenge that they face. Now the question is, what is this present distress? Is it a specific, immediate trial of persecutions that they were facing? Or is it more of a general trial or crisis or pressure that we all face when following Jesus? Jesus clearly predicted that there would be trials and distress in Matthew 24. It's going to be hard. Is it only a local persecution that applies to them or a general pressure of the system? There is discussion about that. But I think probably there is a sense in which, especially when you read the whole thing, that we understand there is a general pressure of the system. There is a distress or crisis that may wax or wane at minor points, but over time is going to be difficult. And the pressure of the system, the fact that life is hard should impact the way that we think about things. Following Jesus will be hard. It's a stressful climate that he says is a danger we need to weigh. And so he gives some concrete advice here, some practical counsel. He says

26 I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is.

It's a good thing for someone to think twice about jumping ships, as it were, in the middle of stormy seas. I think it's good to think about that. And his advice corresponds to whatever scenario the person is in. He's not just saying that singleness is better. He says

27 Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife.

He is speaking specifically to where people are at. He's saying, "I think there is an appropriateness in light of the difficulty that life is hard, that you should think about not making a big switch in your status." But he respects the discretion of individual choice and says

28 But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned.

This is not an issue where there's a direct command. You're free to do so. There are people who teach that celibacy is required or that it's far more ideal and that marriage is wrong or is a sin. And Paul is saying that is not true. This is not a sin. We respect the discretion of individual choice. We can rest easy in what we would decide, but he is very candid. He's honest in what he thinks in verse 28.

Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.

There's a practical complexity that he recognizes and that he wants to spare them of. There are inevitable worldly troubles that he wants them to escape, a difficulty of concern that isn't necessary. And we're supposed to take note of just how things work when it comes to marriage. Paul is very candid that there is trouble.

You might say, "What kind of trouble are we talking about?" Well marriage first brings trouble because you're talking about two sinners. And you take two sinners and put them together close enough and long enough to hurt each other more deeply and frequently than anyone else. And then the result is very often that these two sinners produce other sinners. It sort of goes downhill from there. There is lots of trouble and people getting in trouble. There are worldly troubles for sure. There are all the blessings of life, and it's wonderful and sweet, but there is some worldly trouble.

But I think that there's more that Paul is getting at here. I think he is addressing the fact that there is going to be opposition for following Jesus. And Paul knows what that is. He has been thrown into prison. He has experienced being beaten. And he, I think, is expressing a sense of when persecution strikes, when you're trying to follow Jesus and the world comes after you, there are some extra burdens and troubles that you have to face when you have a wife and children to care for. One commentator says it like this. "A man who is a hero in himself becomes a coward when he thinks of his widowed wife and his orphaned children." Life is hard and following Jesus has great cost. And living in this

day, for sure, there was distress. And it was something to seriously be considered, to think sensibly about the fact that life is hard before you just add on responsibility of caring for a wife and children. Now, it's not a sin to do so. It's a great blessing and it would be desirous for many to do so, but Paul says be sensible. Think sensibly and recognize the hardness of life. That's the first lens. The second lens is the understanding that time is short. So yes, life is hard, but time is short. He endorses single-focus in light of the difficulty of life, but then he explores this idea of single-focus in light of eternity.

Single-Focus Explored (7:29-31)

29 This is what I mean,

It's great when writers do that, isn't it?

29 This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short.

So life is progressing along. And not only our own lives, but the end times is approaching.

From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, 30 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, 31 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.

Now the rational basis for this single-focus kind of thinking is simple. In the beginning and end, he said, "This is what I mean. The time is short. The present form of this world is passing away. Time is short." Think in terms of eternity! So think sensibly because life is hard, but think eternally because time is short. And he explores what that means. He says everything we do matters. And he gives a practical description of what that would look like. He touches on five areas. The first is the area of relationships. He touches on relationships. He touches on hardships. He touches on what we might call championships or victories, happiness. He touches on ownership. And then he touches on maybe citizenship or involvement in life, these different issues. But when he touches on these issues, what he's trying to do is say that none of these should be the top priority for you. Jesus should be on the throne in your heart. And He should reign so high as priority that it's as if these other things don't make sense to the world around, because you're living for eternity so clearly that the world would say it's almost as if you don't have a wife.

29...From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none,

Now that's a shocking statement! This is kind of scary stuff. We could really go off the deep end here, if we take this the wrong way. But I don't think Paul is talking about neglecting our spouse. He is making a point, to be sure, but he's not talking about neglecting your spouse. And certainly there are people who would enthrone their own spouse or their relationship to a position that shouldn't be held, where they're in the place

of Jesus and where someone would fear the wrath of their spouse or desire the pleasure of their spouse more than Jesus. And that would cause them to not live for eternity. And Paul is saying you need to dethrone the relationship or dethrone even your spouse from taking the place of Jesus. I think that's what he's getting at, here.

You might say, "Well this is still hard to understand." Here is maybe an example that might help, that came to me. Think of the life of Abraham. Here's what it doesn't look like. Do you remember when Abraham went down to Egypt? He is there and his wife is very pretty. And all of a sudden he realizes they might try to kill him to take his wife. So he acts as if she wasn't his wife. He kind of slips in a little bit of sort of a half-truth. "She's my sister." That is a way of living as if you didn't have a wife that is not good. That's not the way to do it. For Abraham, there is hard pressure. He is afraid. And he's sort of neglecting and abandoning his responsibility. That's wrong. We're not talking about that.

What are we talking about? Well, from the same man, the life of Abraham, God speaks to him. He has waited years for the fulfillment of His promise and he receives this child, Isaac. And what does God tell him to do with Isaac? Go to the mountain. And what are you supposed to do? Sacrifice your son. Kill him. And now Abraham is living in light of eternity. He's letting God be God and he's willing even to go and to live as if he didn't have a son. Does that mean he loves Isaac any less? Absolutely not! He loved and cherished his son. But he recognizes that God is on the throne and I'm going to live for eternity. It doesn't mean anything less for the love of the relationship. Just like in a relationship with marriage, there is a way of neglect. We're not talking about that. We're talking about letting Jesus be God.

Paul touches on relationships. He moves on and he touches on the issue of hardship. You have the issue of love, but now we're talking about grief.

30 and those who mourn as though they were not mourning,

So dethrone your sadness or your hardship. Don't let that thing be what defines you, what you live in light of, that this is your identity now. Whatever that grief or hardship is, don't let that define who you are and control what you do and consume you. He says that should not take you away from meaningful devotion to God. You can mourn and grieve. It's right and good. But it should not consume you the way that Jesus does. You should live in a way that Jesus reigns. Don't let hardships take you from eternity with Christ.

And then he touches in verse 30 on the issue of fun, we could say. Or you might call it championships or just victories over which you would rejoice.

and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing,

There are some people who have kingdoms that turn out just the way that they hoped. They have the job that they wanted, the career, the marriage, the children, the hobbies, the car that they wanted. There are all these victories that sort of reign over the throne of

their heart and define who they are. They're defined by whatever bank account or championship or trophy or accomplishment or legacy. And that consumes their thinking and their investment and their drive. And Paul says time is short. Think eternally. Don't live for those things. Live for Jesus.

And not only that, he talks about ownership in verse 30. We could say stuff. He talks about love, grief and fun; now stuff in verse 30.

and those who buy as though they had no goods,

I think there's one preacher who said it's not bad for us to have things, but it's bad for those things to have us. Be very cautious about letting ownership or possessions take the place that Jesus should have in our hearts. Dethrone those possessions. We can live for our toys or our house or our outfits and accessories or the vacation or the cell phone or the video game, these things that consume us. Paul says they should not reign. Dethrone them. Time is short. Think eternally. And that might mean you live as if you didn't have goods. It may be whatever that extra house project that you wanted or the vacation you wanted to take, it doesn't happen because you're living for eternity.

And not only that, but life. In verse 31 he says

31 and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.

We could just call this citizenship or just living out life. We'll say this. Single focus means you dethrone your plans or your schedules. Time is short. Think eternally. Don't let general citizenship, your schedules, your plans, your dealing with the world; do not let that take the place of devotion to Jesus. It's so easy for schedules to get so packed. There are so many work trips or practices or tournaments or community events or projects or parties or vacations or whatever. And it starts to crowd out the best things, devotion to Jesus. All of these things are good and necessary and important, but they cannot reign. They cannot be at the top. Jesus must be. There's only one who enjoys Lordship. There's only one worthy of worship. There's only one after whom we follow in discipleship, and that is Jesus. And we dethrone all else. This is a single kind of focus. Life is hard. Time is short. Jesus should be what we're thinking about, thinking sensibly and eternally. It's what is driving us. And we can learn something about singleness as a way of thinking.

You say, "This is harsh. This does not sound like a marriage series. I don't know about this. And in fact, I don't even know about Paul. What's he talking about? Jesus was a lot more loving and kind. This kind of stuff is crazy." Well, maybe Paul got some of this from Jesus. Do you think? If you look back to Luke chapter 14, it's worth thinking about this. Luke chapter 14. Jesus is talking about following Him and there are some people who are saying, "Hey, this is great! We're going to be a part of God's kingdom." And Jesus says, "Let me tell you a story."

Luke 14:16-26 But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited,

‘Come, for everything is now ready.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.’ So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, ‘Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.’ And the servant said, ‘Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.’ And the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.’”

You might say, “I don’t know. That was a story. Maybe we’re misunderstanding.” And Jesus says, “No, let me make it clear.”

Luke 14:25-27 Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

Luke 14:33 So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

This is harsh language, even from Jesus! And in Matthew 10:37, I think He says it simply.

Matthew 10:37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

These things are all good things, but they are not the God, the God-Man. Jesus reigns in that position. Even when you think about the mourning and grieving aspect, there is someone who comes to Him and says, “Lord, let me first go and bury my Father.” And Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.” (Luke 9:59-60)

That is intense language! Jesus is endorsing and then Paul is now endorsing and exploring this idea of single-focus. Time is short. Life is hard. We live for God. God loves this sort of single-focus. But we look not just at the focus, but the status as well. We’ll take a few moments to think about

#2 Single-Status: The Value of Singleness as a State of Being (7:32-35)

This is the actual state of being unmarried. Paul calls singleness a gift. He doesn’t view it with a stigma or as inferior. He recognizes that this is a gift just like marriage is a gift. Both are of grace for the glory of God, to be used for the benefit of God’s kingdom. And

he recognizes that this is a good gift for a particular purpose. It has unique benefits. And he contrasts these benefits with the gift of marriage, and he commends them.

32 I want you to be free from anxieties.

Recognize that when this pressure comes, that life is hard, time is short and the persecution comes. There is some anxiety that is going to be coming. I want you to be free from that if possible.

The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. 33 But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, 34 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.

So what is it that makes singleness as a state, valuable? He contrasts it as a role and he expresses that singleness is different. When it comes to marriage, we'll say this. There is a light in which we can look at singleness and recognize that marriage is full of frets, we'll call them. Marriage has complexities along with it. And marriage comes with those frets inherently. And he describes that when you're dealing with marriage, there is a fret, there is an anxiety, there is a pressure. There is a stress that comes with trying to care for the responsibility of a spouse. And he contrasts that against the simplicity of singleness. And he commends singleness for its simplicity. In singleness, there's a unique kind of freedom. While in marriage, there are some unique frets because of the complexity, in singleness there is a unique freedom because of the simplicity, where you can devote yourself to the Lord, unhindered. He is explaining this and he wants us to understand and appreciate the value of singleness as a status.

When we understand that marriage is full of frets, it helps us to be realistic. Sometimes in singleness, we're tempted to not be realistic and are tempted to think that marriage equals happiness. So we're tempted to be discontent or not recognize the benefits of the status of singleness. Paul can be super romantic. He wrote some of the passages that we use at weddings all the time. He's super romantic, but also very realistic. He's explaining that marriage is full of frets and you need to understand that as a single. And it will help you to be realistic.

But also understand that singleness is full of freedoms, and you need to be ready. The freedoms that you enjoy, the benefits of singleness are not intended for you to serve yourself, but to benefit others, to bless the church. And there is a great danger that we would use singleness the same way that someone might use marriage; to serve ourselves. And so when we think about the gift of singleness, it's not given for us to enjoy ourselves, but to be a blessing to the church. And so many blessings in the church come from the singles who are serving and caring and sacrificing. I'm so thankful for the battle that is fought by the singles in prayer for the saints and in service.

There are other singles who are struggling with deep temptation and this passage is an

encouragement and a reminder for us to be realistic about marriage and the challenges of it, but also to be ready for the freedoms that singleness affords. And it reminds us to not use singleness as an excuse to be lazy or an excuse to seek to avoid the responsibilities and complexity of marriage, but also try to sneak some of the benefits through certain forms of entertainment or pornography or other means that would be wrong. And we settle into this particular area of a gift to say, “Oh, this is for me.” And Paul says no. This is for serving others. This is for being devoted to the Lord. It’s a freedom given so that you can worship and serve Jesus. And what a blessing it is! There is great forgiveness and joy and then transformation. This is what the Gospel says about singleness. You can be of great value and significance in pleasing God and living for Him. There is tremendous value! And we’re realistic and recognize that our value is not found in our role or even in our relationships with other people in a temporary sense. Our value is found in the Lord.

There are all kinds of challenges with engaging in community together when it comes to both being married and being single. And I think one of the most beautiful ways that I’ve seen the Gospel on display is when true community is enjoyed that transcends those statuses. It’s when the married couples in the church and the families in the church and the singles in the church recognize the gifts of grace that each other have and they celebrate Jesus together. The solution to singleness is not marriage. It’s not saying, “You can come and what we have to offer you is our home and our family.” There are blessings there, but what we have to offer is Jesus. And sometimes in marriage, when there’s difficulty in marriage and it’s hard, you might think, “Well, it would be nice to just have some relief and freedom and have a day of rest.” And the solution to that is not singleness or pretending to be. The solution is we recognize Jesus and we celebrate Him.

Some of the sweetest times in my past, I remember when my parents were hosting people who didn’t have anywhere else to go, maybe for a holiday or just inviting singles over. And then being a single myself and getting invited over to holidays or to peoples’ houses and experiencing that what we have in common is Jesus. It’s such a sweet thing, because it’s a hard thing, mixing this. I remember in college, I was thinking, “I want to be a part of the church and I want to belong and I want to connect with other couples.” And so I’m thinking, “After church, I’ll try to invite a family. But I can’t invite them to my dorm room. We don’t all fit. My table is only this big, so we’ll have to go out. I can take them out. I have only a couple dollars, but I can make it happen.” Then you go to the family and you invite them out. But what happens if you invite out a family to lunch? Well, you’re inviting yourself to their lunch. Do you know what I mean? (Laughter!) “Do you want to go out to lunch with me? I’m joining you. That’s what I mean and what I’m saying.”

There are challenges in trying to engage in that sort of community. But recognize that it’s so worth it! Because what we have in common in Christ is so powerful. And what we offer each other is not our status, but we offer each other Jesus. And that’s what we’re coming together to celebrate and recognize. And we see that the single status has a freedom that can bless the church in very precious ways. Both singleness as a way of thinking and singleness as a state of being are a blessing and a grace for God’s people.

And I think that's important for us to remember as we enter into the rest of this series. What Paul is after is an undivided devotion to the Lord.

35 I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you,

The idea is of a yoke upon animals that would sort of restrain them. He said, "I'm not trying to tie you up. I'm trying to set you free, that you'll be free to serve God."

but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

When we think about singleness or marriage, all this is about what God has done through Jesus. There is maybe no easier proof than to look at Jesus Himself. We need to be careful not to think that our definition of marriage is sort of the epitome of humanity or manhood or womanhood. Recognize that Jesus was fully man and perfect, and He was single. From a human standpoint, He did not experience human marriage. And yet, He enjoyed ultimate fulfillment. Singleness does not equal loneliness or unhappiness. Singleness is still a place of deep community and intimacy with God and then with His people. And Jesus expressed that our ultimate highest calling and fulfillment is not through being a husband or a wife or a father or a daughter. It's through being a child of God in Christ. And Jesus is our identity. We recognize that marriage is temporary. But there is a God-size hole in our hearts and an ultimate marriage to look forward to, that transcends all the things we experience here. And we need to recognize how we are called to embody that sort of community and belonging to each other, whatever our status or role is.

It's sweet to think about what John says in Revelation. For all of us who experience incredibly difficult seasons and maybe even a lifetime of singleness that we didn't ask for...maybe there are some of us in an incredibly difficult marriage that just is bringing us into deep pain. And John says in Revelation:

Revelation 7:17 ...God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

And one day there is going to be a great shout that says

Revelation 19:7 "Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready"

There is a wedding day in our future that will last forever, where God will be with His people. And we recognize that Jesus is a God who understands, who lived in this status of singleness, who as one pastor would remind us, "He was tempted in all points, in every way as we were, yet without sin. And therefore, he is able to sympathize, to support and strengthen us when we're tempted. And in one sense, Jesus is *the* single." He says it like this. "He lived a life of perfect singleness and died a death of perfect singleness – experiencing the greatest possible sense of abandonment, desertion, and loneliness – so that we could be brought into the deepest marriage relationship of all."

On the cross, Jesus experienced something deeper and more painful than we ever will face. And by doing so, He accomplished the deepest meaningful community and marriage we can experience in relationship with God forever. That is a God worth worshipping! That is a God worth enthroning as the chief goal of our minds! It's to have a single-minded devotion to Him.

There are many things that my wife and I miss about Los Angeles. One thing we certainly don't miss is the traffic. Six lanes packed with cars starting, stopping, starting, honking, swerving, speeding, crashing. All that is just a mess! But one of the things that always amused me was those cars who were trying to pick the right lane. You're sitting there and they're switching into a lane and then they're switching back. And you watch them just weave back and forth, trying to find the right lane. I get it!

In Los Angeles, they have this far left lane called the HOV lane or the carpool lane. You know those lanes? Those people are zooming over there. You have to have more than one person in your car, and so you go over there. And actually, officers have reported people trying to sneak into that lane. They put mannequins in their car. (Laughter!) You're laughing. You would never do that, right? They use mannequins or cardboard cutouts. Or they tape Styrofoam wig stands onto balloons. They buckle the seatbelt and then recline the seat and pretend to talk to someone, like they're sleeping. There are all kinds of things they would do. They would take an infant seat and put a blanket over it. There was one that I couldn't believe. This one guy, in his passenger seat, he had the Articles of Incorporation of his business because somewhere in the law, it said that there was corporate personhood. So he was trying to argue that there was a person in his seat next to him. And it was rejected in traffic court. The judge said, "Common sense says carrying a sheaf of papers in the front seat does not relieve traffic congestion." Everybody is trying to get into the carpool lane. And the thing is, once you get in the carpool lane, sometimes things slow down. And then there are the double lines and you can't get out, but people want to get out of the carpool lane. Everybody's trying to switch lanes and find the right lane and get where they want to go.

Here's the other thing about Los Angeles. They have this place called Disneyland. And when you're going to Disneyland, it sort of changes your mindset. There is this end experience that far surpasses the importance and even the memory of whatever lane you took to get there. The key is not where we're sitting while we travel. It's where we're going to be at the end and who we're going to be with when we arrive.

Human marriage and human singleness are sometimes like lanes. Neither one is permanent. We may end up switching from one to the other. Hopefully not too many times, but it does happen. But the joy is not in the lane on the way, it's in the celebration at the end. Marriage and singleness are both designed to display the good news about Jesus. Whatever lane you're in, you can live with joy and singleness of mind that the drive is about the destination. Whatever lane God puts you in is okay because in the end, it'll be worth it because you get to be with Him.