

Every once in a while, a TV show or movie that describes events in high school has a scene with a high school dance. All the popular kids are coupled up, cutting a rug on the floor, usually in some sort of impossible, perfectly mass-choreographed fashion, clearly having the time of their lives. The kids who aren't so cool are milling about by the punch bowl or standing in a straight line next to a wall, or, worst of all, talking with the adult chaperones. The message is clear: the greatest living is done when you have someone to be in a romantic relationship with and being alone is to be avoided at all costs. From our teenage years onward, our culture places an enormous stigma on being single. The plotline of almost every Hollywood story involves someone whose life is stagnant and incomplete, but then the stars align and they find that special someone. They have to climb mountains and cross oceans, but eventually they end up together and the movie fades out, under the assumption that now that they are together, everyone will live happily ever after.

The message we hear again and again, sometimes subtly, other times more overtly, is that if we are in a fulfilling romantic relationship then our lives can be whole and complete. But if we aren't in a fulfilling romantic relationship, we are inadequate and lacking. Some of you may have felt that before. Some of you may feel that way now. Though that is a common sentiment in our society, it is far from the truth taught in Scripture. As we continue through the book of 1 Corinthians, talking about relationships and sexuality, we come to a passage that addresses the topic of singleness, not in a sad, mopey, "I'm so sorry you are alone" kind of way, but rather in a joyful, opportunistic, "there are a lot of benefits to be taken advantage of" kind of way.

What we see as we open the Bible is that God has much higher, nobler view of singleness than most in our society. This is good news because everyone is single at some point in their life. Even for those who do marry, sadly 50% will be single again through the death of their spouse, and statistically speaking, roughly 40% will be single again through divorce. In America in 1970, 28% of adults were single. The census report from 2021 showed that today the number is over 48%, or 122 million people in our country. Singleness is a status in life that everyone experiences for at least a season, some experience for multiple seasons, and still others experience their entire lives. Each experience of singleness is unique. Being single in your twenties is different than being single in your forties. There is a different quality to being single and never married than single and divorced. Being single and divorced is different than being single and widowed. Each of these experiences is unique, and God's word speaks into them all.

If you are here today and you are single, my hope is this sermon will transform and elevate the way you view this season of life. If you are here today and you are not single, I hope this sermon will build in you personally, and our church as a whole, both an esteem for the value of singleness as well as a commitment to a higher level of intentionality about relationally engaging with single people in a more encompassing way. I've drawn a lot of the content for this message from Ben Stuart and Tim Keller, two pastors and authors who have many helpful things to say on this subject and whose books are available in our lobby bookstore.

Let's go ahead and dive into the passage, 1 Corinthians 7:7-8 and 25-40.

I wish that all of you were as I am (not married). But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do.

Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.

What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away. I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man also does the right thing. So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better.

A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

I love how open-handed Paul is in this passage. There are certainly times in his letters where he says, "I have a command from God about this and you have to obey it." But when it comes to singleness and marriage, he says, "Look, you have the freedom to do whatever you'd like. Here's my wisdom and advice, but you get to choose." Unlike most people in our culture today, Paul says that singleness is a wonderful thing. Speaking of being single, in 1 Corinthians 7:7 Paul says, "But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that." Singleness is not a punishment or a curse—it's a gift. There are four different aspects to this gift that I want to look at.

First, the Bible teaches that *singleness is a good gift*. When most people hear that singleness is a gift, they roll their eyes. Maybe a white elephant gift, but not a real gift. We all know what a white elephant gift is, right? Everyone who shows up at a party brings a present wrapped in such a way that no one knows what it is. When it's your turn, you pick a gift and open it. Sometimes you love it because it's a 25 dollar gift card to Amazon. Other times, it's a used diaper. Are you kidding me! I want the gift card, not the diaper! That's how a lot of single people feel. "This is NOT the gift I want. I want that gift that Susie and John have. Not this gift!"

That's the message of our culture. Cosmopolitan and GQ magazine will tell you that singleness is, by definition, a state of deprivation, something to be avoided at all costs. Sometimes even very mature Christians perpetuate a low view of singleness. When I was single, I can't tell you how many times I heard someone say to me: "As soon as you are satisfied with God alone, then he'll bring someone special

into your life.” Or they’d say, “Before God can bring you someone wonderful, he first needs to make you into someone wonderful.” The underlying assumption seemed to be that singleness was some sort of prison sentence that I could reduce by good behavior. I know the intent behind each of those statements was good, but those sorts of statements are anecdotal, not biblical and they often do far more harm than good. They portray a different perspective than we get from this passage. Not only is Paul very content with his singleness, but he also says he wishes other people were single like him.

According to God’s Word, singleness is a gift, and God doesn’t give bad gifts. Singleness was a worthy enough gift that Jesus Christ, who lived the most complete, perfect, fulfilled life of anyone in history was single. The Apostle Paul, who, outside of Jesus, made the biggest impact on the world in history was single. Though the world may not see singleness as a good gift, the Scriptures give a radically different message. That leads to the second observation.

One of the reasons singleness is a good gift is because *singleness is an impactful gift*. This is really brought out in 7:32-35 so let's look at those verses again: “I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided.” Some single guys might be thinking right now, “I would love to have ‘the concern’ of making my wife happy.” But you don’t realize right now how many trips to Target and Bed, Bath, and Beyond that is going to take. You don’t realize the conversations about duvet covers and throw pillows and candle scents and holiday decorations that are about to ensue. You don’t realize that when you get home from work, you don’t get to watch ESPN or play a video game; you get to talk about how your day was and share about these things called feelings. There is more to it than you think.

And it’s not just men: “...An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord’s affairs: her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband.” A lot of single women might be thinking right now, “Paul, that’s not a bad thing, that’s a good thing. I would love that!” But you don’t realize right now that no matter how good your lasagna is, it won’t be as good as his moms. Some of you might end up marrying a man whose level of cleanliness isn’t just poor, it’s unsafe. You think that cleaning your house is going to be a joint effort—50/50 or at worst 60/40. In reality it ends up becoming 99/1, and even that is generous. There are going to be times you want to connect emotionally, for him to listen to you and care and understand, and the only thing on his mind is a football game, and there is nothing you can do about it. You’ll ask him when the game will be over and he’ll say, “There’s just two minutes left.” He’s telling you the truth. That’s what it says on the screen. So naturally you think that means two minutes. The game will be on for another hour! Being married to a man at times can be “pull your hair out” challenging.

When Paul says it’s good thing for an unmarried person to remain unmarried, he’s mindful of all the distractions and challenges and difficulties of married life and he says, “I am saying this for your own good—not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.” The key phrase here is “undivided devotion to the Lord.” This is why singleness is impactful, because instead of the requirements of a spouse and family, you can, without any distraction, focus on God and his kingdom. This is key. The majority (not all) of single folks I know are not content in their singleness. The reason, I believe, is that they’ve used their singleness for their own interests rather than for God’s interests. The average kid in America will have spent 10,000 hours playing video games by the time they turn 21. Ten thousand hours. Video games can be fun, but so many people, males in particular, are spending all their time trying to save fantasy worlds when the real world is on fire and needs your time and attention, your creativity and passion. The average American spends 20 hours a week watching TV. There is nothing ultimately satisfying about staring at a screen watching actors live our imaginary lives. It may be entertaining for a bit, but it ultimately leads to loneliness and isolation.

The Bible doesn't say, "Singleness has lots of advantages: you get to spend all your time on pursuing your hobbies and entertainment. You can vacation on the cheap, eat out every night, stay up as late as you want and not be accountable to anyone." That's not the gift. The Bible says singleness is a gift and here's why: "You get to live in undivided devotion to the Lord." The people I know who are single and full of joy in their season of life are those who have leveraged the season they are in to put their relationship with God first and then to serve other people in his name.

I have a friend in this church who is single. He runs a successful company in town. A year or so ago he opened a second company whose purpose is to give all the proceeds to the church, other ministries, and people in need. He recently opened a third company in a developing nation. He travels there three or four times a year to support missionaries and the company he started there exists to fund their work. That is how you leverage singleness.

I have another friend at church who is single. She leads a small group of high school girls in our youth ministry. Every Sunday night she is with them. She meets with them again during the week. She takes girls out for coffee to connect one on one. She has helped them learn how to pray, how to read the Bible, and how to lead their friends to Christ. She's walked with some through difficult break-ups and walked with others through their parents' divorce. There are a dozen teenage girls whose lives are different and who know Jesus better because of the way this woman uses her time. That's how you leverage your singleness.

Jim Elliott said, "Wherever you are, be all there." If singleness is your season right now, don't spend your time longing for a different season. Embrace the season you are in. Don't squander the season on investments that yield no meaningful return. Seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and you will find not just contentment in this season, but a richness and a satisfaction that defies explanation.

Singleness is a good gift, an impactful gift, and it is also a *unique gift*. What do I mean by that? I mean that Christians are some of the only people in the world who value singleness and view it as beautiful and worthy. In society before Christianity, there are literally zero examples of any culture or religion that upheld singleness as a value. Listen to Tim Keller's observations:

Nearly all ancient societies made an absolute value of the family and of the bearing of children. There was no honor without family honor, and there was no real lasting significance or legacy without leaving heirs. Without children, you had no one to take care of you in your old age. You had no security and essentially vanished without any future. In ancient cultures, long-term single adults were considered to be living an under-realized life.

In other words, the ancient world said if you didn't marry and have kids, you had no honor, no significance, no lasting legacy. But in Christianity a single person has a spiritual family, with mothers and fathers in the faith, brothers and sisters in the faith, sons and daughters in the faith. The Bible teaches that our future is secured not by biological descendants but by God himself. In the family of God, we have honor, significance, and a legacy that will last not just for a few generations but will last literally for eternity.

Christianity recognized and celebrated singleness in an entirely unique way. Did you know that in the first century when Jesus lived, the Emperor of Rome literally fined people who lost a spouse and didn't remarry? If your husband or wife died, you had two years to remarry or pay steep taxes to the government. That's how much their society disdained singleness. In this passage, Paul says the emperor might want you to remarry so you don't have to go on government welfare, but the church is more than

willing to provide for your needs, give you food and shelter, and promote rich relationships. If you want to remarry, of course you can. But if you want to remain single, you have a valuable, meaningful place in our community, and it would be our honor for us to help take care of you as you help take care of us. Because of our unique community, values, priorities, and hope, Christianity uniquely elevates and esteems singleness in a way the world had never seen before.

Singleness is a good gift, an impactful gift, a unique gift, and finally, *singleness is a challenging gift*. Even those who have a very grounded and mature view of singleness face the challenging aspects of singleness at times. Almost every song on the radio is about falling in love. Almost every movie in the theaters features a romantic relationship. I remember when I was single in my twenties, I had the chance to visit London. I spent one entire day touring the city—Buckingham Palace, Westminster Abbey, Big Ben, and St. Paul’s Cathedral. I was captivated, impressed, and inspired. But when I stopped at the end of the day to reflect on it, as much as I loved the day, I felt a little empty because I was all alone. I so wished that I had someone by my side to enjoy all those things with. There is a loneliness to singleness that is undeniable.

Listen to the words of Wesley Hill, a single man in his forties who has never married:

When I was still in high school, I often daydreamed about what it would be like to be married, to have a house and children, to have a home of the sort I had growing up, to know that I belonged somewhere. Now (in light of my celibacy), I stopped dreaming about those things. In their place, I began to have a recurrent picture of myself around age sixty, coming home to an empty apartment, having lived all of my adulthood as a single man. I started to think about the particulars of that scenario: not knowing each year where I’d be for Christmas, waking up each morning to a quiet bedroom and having no one across the table from me as I ate my cereal before heading to work, coming home at the end of the day, and reading a book with no one to talk to about the parts of it that stood out to me. I began to resonate with what Lauren Winner has called “the loneliness of the everyday.” The loneliness of no one knowing if your plane lands on time, of no one to call if you lock yourself out of your house or your alternator dies. That kind of loneliness is particularly challenging to face.”

As noble, meaningful, and impactful as a single life can be, there are also challenges and loneliness that can characterize this season. That is why it is so important for single people to prioritize deep friendships and build community with other people. If it’s only work and hobbies and food and sleep and surface-level relationships, loneliness will be unavoidable. But if you are in a life group at church, if you are serving at church, if you are discipling a younger person or two and being discipled by an older person or two, the breadth, depth, and beauty of your relationships will be undeniable. Invite people over to your house once or twice a week for a meal. Go to people’s houses once or twice a week for a meal. Even if you do not have any biological family in town, if you build intentional relationships and integrate your life into a multifaceted community, you’ll feel like you have several moms and dads, a dozen brothers and sisters, countless nephews and nieces. The beauty of the family of God is undeniable.

About once or twice a month I’ll have someone at this church who is single come to me and say, “Dan, we need a vibrant single’s ministry here at The Creek.” I respond by saying, “I hear where you are coming from, but our goal as a church isn’t to have all the single people congregating together and all the married people with families congregating together. We want to be united together as a church family with rich, intergenerational, multifaceted relationships. The church isn’t a single’s bar. We are the family of God. We want our single people in our families.”

The weight of the responsibility in forming those family-like relationships isn't just on single people being willing to engage, it's on the entire church to help make those sorts of relationships possible. If you are here and you are married, if you have a family, stop to think: when was the last time you invited a young single person, a recently divorced person, or a widow to your house for a meal, a BBQ, or a holiday gathering? Have you invited any single people to join you for a family vacation? Do the single people in your life have a key to your house and know that if they are ever lonely, they are welcome in your living room or at your table or on your deck? It's not about using single people to house sit for you or baby sit for you; it's about honoring them, valuing them, recognizing the incredible gifts they have to offer, as well as relational needs they might have, and grafting them into your life in way that blesses them, blesses you, and most of all, blesses God.

To wrap up, I want to introduce you to one of my good friends at church who is single and who responds to her singleness with wisdom and leverages it for the kingdom. I asked her to share her story; listen to what she wrote:

My season of singleness began in early 2015 after my then husband ended our eleven year marriage. For the first few years, I struggled a lot with the realities of being divorced. It was very difficult to be alone and the prospect of missing out on half of my daughter's life was sometimes more than I could bear. It was an incredibly lonely time for me. After about a year of Christian therapy, I felt like I was ready to seek community and healthy, Christ-centered friendships. In September 2018, my daughter and I began attending the Creek and that was the beginning of a transformation in the way I experienced singleness. Within a few months, I joined a Rooted group, and what God did was truly amazing. He brought a couple of women into my life that have become two of my dearest friends. They are the kind of friends that laughed and cried with me, encouraged me, and lamented with me. They cheered at my baptism and ministered to me later that year when I lost my mom to cancer. Upon experiencing true gospel community, I began to see my singleness as less of a burden and more of an opportunity. I had the privilege of serving in the Food Co-Op and finding a strong sense of purpose there. I made so many new friends in all stages and situations of life—the kinds of friends that would lovingly speak the truth to me even when it was difficult to hear. Of course, there are times when I long for being on the other side of this season. Seeing healthy marriages sometimes makes me wish that I could experience that for myself. When I bring this to God though, He always reminds me that I'm right where He wants me to be. There is such peace in knowing that. This season that I'm in grants me the gift of a life rich in friendships and opportunities to love people in a way that I don't think I could if I were married. It also allows me to focus more energy on my relationship with the Lord. I know that there is nothing on Earth that I need more than I need Him and so I am so grateful for where He has me now. I didn't always see my singleness as good. I encourage anyone who finds themselves in a similar season to seek God for a change of heart. I'm proof that He will do it.

What an encouraging testimony. Let's take a few minutes and do just that, let's ask God to change our hearts.