

The Christian and Singleness

*To the unmarried and the widows I say
that it is good for them to remain single, as I am.*

- 1 Corinthians 7:8

The Percentage of Unmarried Adults is Growing.

About one in four Americans ages 25 to 54 are either unpartnered or unmarried, and this number has been on the rise since 1960. If churches in America are reaching the people around them, we should expect to see an increasing number of single adults in the church.

Unfortunately, many churches don't know quite what to do with unmarried adults. The author of a book on singleness put it this way: "Singleness is more of a conversational cul-de-sac, requiring an awkward maneuver to exit." Perhaps the biggest problem is what people *think* they know about singles: That they just haven't found a spouse yet. Or that they aren't ready for a spouse.

The unstated assumption seems to be that singleness is "Plan B."

The Bible's Teaching on Singleness

The Bible presents a very different perspective on singleness. As Christians, whether married or unmarried, we ought to understand what that is.

1. What the Bible teaches

Our go-to Scripture text on the topic of singleness is 1 Corinthians 7, and rightly so. In this chapter, the Apostle Paul is replying to some questions coming from the Christians in Corinth. Since Jesus is our Savior-King, is it best not to get entangled in marriage? What about those who are following Jesus *and* married to an unbeliever? Should they get divorced? In addition, they were about to face some unusually severe pressures ("present distress," 7:26) that would make having a spouse and family especially difficult.

Paul's response boils down to this: Both marriage *and* singleness are equally valid paths for the Christian.

This was radically different from the prevailing culture's view of marriage and singleness. For a Christian to remain single also means to abstain from any sexual relationship. It also meant not having children who could carry on one's legacy. How could singleness ever be on par with—or, depending on the person and circumstances, *better* than—marriage?

2. Why it teaches this

The rationale for honoring singleness as an equally valid path boils down to the message of the gospel. God called us to himself, not on the basis of our social status (married or unmarried) but on the basis of his grace. Therefore, being useful and satisfied as a Christian depends not on your marital status but on the fact that you belong to Christ. So you can serve Christ whether married or not.

This does not mean that marriage and singleness are equally simple or equally desirable paths for the Christian. Paul made it clear that, in view of some "present distress" facing the Corinthians, staying single was the path that would cause less anxiety (7:32). In other cases, getting married would present fewer pressures. It simply depends on the person and circumstances.

Now this principle applies not just to marriage and singleness, but to any condition in which we are tempted to think: “I would be more effective if only such-and-such were different.” This is why Paul expands the application to other areas of life: “Were you a bondservant when called [by God to himself]? Do not be concerned about it (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity)” (7:21).

3. How do we respond?

The Bible’s teaching on singleness speaks to several key areas of Christian living:

First, it speaks to the way we all think about ourselves—whether married or single. To begin with, we all should settle in our minds that the most important thing about us is that we belong to Christ: “You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God” (1 Corinthians 7:24). We tend to think: “If only *this* circumstance would change, I would really be free to live as a Christian.” So we need to be reminded that living as a Christian—giving ourselves completely to the service of Christ—can happen *now* in any condition we are in.

This is not to say that a person shouldn’t try to change his or her circumstances. There’s no room for apathy or indifference here. Paul’s comment to bondservants makes this clear enough: “If you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.” If a single person wants to get married, she can pursue opportunities for marriage, while at the same time embracing her current singleness as God’s gift to her. (This is no easy balance to strike, to be sure!)

Second, it addresses the way we think about and treat single people. The Bible’s teaching on singleness leaves no room for thinking of singleness as “Plan B” or even jumping to the conclusion that a single person is desperately hoping to be married. Well-intended comments (“God will bring the right person in his time”) are like the advice of Job’s friends: possibly true but terribly misapplied. When we make such comments, we are ignoring the reality that, for that person, singleness *is* God’s gift to them.

Third, it addresses the way we think about the role of the church for married and single people. Of all places in the world, the church ought to be a place where unmarried people find a loving family.

Discussion

1. In what ways do churches often struggle to accommodate and minister to unmarried adults?
2. How does the Bible present a different perspective on singleness compared to societal views, whether ancient or modern?
3. Why does the Bible consider both marriage and singleness equally valid paths for Christians, and how does the gospel message relate to the honoring of singleness as a valid path?
4. How does the principle of contentment in one's condition apply to other aspects of life beyond marriage and singleness?
5. What role can married individuals play in supporting and ministering to unmarried members of the church, and vice versa?
6. What practical steps can churches take to better understand and meet the needs of unmarried adults in their congregation?