

Holy Matrimony, the Church, and the Mystery of the Gospel
Singleness for the Glory of God: Addendum Five
ICCEC US Theological Commission
April 15, 2024

For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.

Matthew 19:12¹

What does it mean to be single? Is being single abnormal? Should singles pursue marriage? Is being single less than God's best?

Definition

Singleness is defined as an unmarried state that refrains from any sexual behavior. To be unmarried long-term is to be chaste, celibate, and single long-term. For singles, sexual abstinence is not a short-term spiritual fast, but a life of abstinence that ends when marriage begins.

Eunuchs

In Matthew 19:2-12, Jesus is correcting the Pharisees in their understanding of divorce. In that discussion, Jesus' instructions regarding divorce are so strict that the disciples complain that it would be better not to marry at all. The disciples believe that singleness would be a better choice if one cannot easily divorce their wife. Jesus responds by saying, "Let the one who is able to receive this receive it" (v. 12). In contemporary terms, "Be careful what you ask for."

Jesus refers to those dedicated to the single life as eunuchs. Some eunuchs are single due to congenital defects, others are eunuchs because others emasculated themselves, and others choose a life of celibacy, "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (v.12c).² People are single for different reasons (Matt. 19:12). Some singles choose to live for Kingdom priorities dedicating their lives with all their time, energy, and focus to sharing the Gospel, healing the sick, ministering to the poor, etc. Singleness is an acceptable way of life if that life is dedicated to Kingdom priorities. Jesus warns that singleness can have its challenges and that the single calling

¹ Unless otherwise noted all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

² "Although eunuchs in Near Eastern royal courts could exercise power, Greco-Roman society often ridiculed eunuchs as effeminate or "half-men." Jewish people abhorred castration, and eunuchs were excluded from the covenant (Deut. 23:1). Speaking figuratively of long-term singleness, Jesus explains that there are some "who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." Apart from some Essenes, most of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries regarded marriage and rearing children as an important duty." —John H. Walton, Victor H. Hamilton, and Craig S. Keener, eds., *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, Bringing to Life the Ancient World of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2016), Kindle Edition.

can be very difficult. One needs a gift to walk through its challenges, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given” (v. 11).

Spiritual Gift

“In his writings, Paul always uses the word ‘gift’ to mean an ability God gives to build others up. Paul is not speaking . . . of some kind of elusive, stress-free state.”³ One needs a gift from God to be single and celibate and one needs a gift of God to be married: both states have their challenges. “I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own *gift* (emphasis added) from God, one of one kind and one of another” (1 Cor. 7:7).

No matter the state that one is called, single or married, Jesus must be looked to, relied upon, and loved to live a life that brings glory to God. Jesus is the gift of grace that enables us to live the Christian life. “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Cor. 15:10).

Grace is Jesus being the desire, ability, and power in us to respond to every life situation according to the will of God.

Jesus is our desire for he works in us a hunger for holiness.

Jesus is our ability for he enables us to make godly choices.

Jesus is our power for he strengthens us to overcome the world and its influences, our flesh and its temptations, and the devil and his falsehoods.

Grace is the person, Jesus, living his life in and through us empowering us to live a righteous and holy life whether single or married. Grace enables us to avoid sexual immorality. Grace fills us with joy when life is difficult and times are lonely.

To the disciples, Jesus says that the grass is not necessarily greener on the single and celibate side of the fence. “The fact is, marriage can be hard and so too can singleness. Each brings its own set of challenges. Neither option is the easier one, and the challenges of marriage are quite different from the challenges of singleness.”⁴ Christ is our all amid our weaknesses as we live a life of holiness whether in singleness or marriage.

³ Timothy J. Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2011), 207.

⁴ Allberry, *7 Myths about Singleness*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 23.

Sexual Desire

“To the unmarried and the widows, I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion” (1 Cor. 7:8-9). Paul will explain later in chapter seven why it would be good to remain single. But for now, his advice to those who are presently single is that they should stay single for the sake of the Kingdom.

“Remain single as I am,” is Paul’s encouragement to focus on ministry instead of “worldly things” (7:32-35). “I think that in view of the present distress, it is good for a person to remain as he is” (7:26). The phrase “present distress” may refer to the urgency of living in the last days or to some local or regional difficulty, such as a severe famine, that may have been afflicting the city of Corinth. No matter the circumstance, Paul gives freedom to those who yearn for marriage and desire a sexual relationship may do so. The apostle Paul realizes that a celibate life is not possible for every believer and that singleness would lead many Christians into sexual temptation. With that in mind, they have the freedom to marry. “Paul offers a single consistent position: celibacy is good, sex within marriage is good, and porneia is a disaster for the community.”⁵

Much has been written concerning the phrase, “It is better to marry than to burn, (7:8-9).” The best translation is “burn with passion” not burn in eternity. “In this case, then, Paul is not so much offering marriage as the remedy for the sexual desire of “enflamed youth,” which is the most common way of viewing the text, but as the proper alternative for those who are already consumed by that desire and are sinning.”⁶ In summary, if a man or woman is deciding between marriage or singleness and that single person has a desire for sexual intimacy, it would be best to marry.

Abstinence

Often Jesus is conveyed as sexually affirming, and tolerant of all who desire sexual fulfillment whether married or not. However, the Gospels paint a different picture. Jesus taught sexual sin outside of marriage is not his design or will. “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person” (Matt. 15:19-20). Jesus teaches that life with God is lived not by outward rules but by inward heart obedience. The heart dictates the outward behavior.

Jesus stated that sexual immorality is a sin. Sexual immorality is the Greek word, *porneia*. The Greek word, *porneia*, is translated in modern English as pornography. In the first century,

⁵ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians. Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), Logos edition.

⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 289.

porneia had a broader meaning, commonly translated as sexual immorality, *porneia* includes adultery, prostitution, incest, fornication, homosexuality, bestiality, or any other sexual perversion.⁷ Jesus gives no room for those behaviors in the life of an unmarried single or married person.

Anglican priest, Sam Allberry, relates:

Jesus is therefore not as sexually tolerant as people today commonly imagine him to be. Far from relaxing the common Jewish traditions on sexual ethics derived from the Old Testament, he actually intensifies them. For those wanting to follow him, being unmarried very much involves singleness with sexual abstinence.⁸

Jesus is concerned with outward behavior and the inward workings of our hearts. “You have heard that it was said, You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:27-28). For Jesus, thoughts and attitudes were as important as outward behavior. For example, we may refrain from adultery for fear of the consequences, but we may desire to engage in sexual relations with a woman, not our wives. The desire is sinful even if that sinful behavior is never acted upon.

Singleness: Good or Bad?

Is singleness good or bad? Is singleness a greater struggle than being married? The Apostle Paul addresses these questions in First Corinthians seven. The Corinthians were anxious to discover which state, married or single, was more spiritually-minded. Paul is pastorally-minded, so his purpose in writing is to free the congregation from anxiety over these issues (v. 32). “Paul’s main point is to allay any anxiety on the part of the Christian spouse that to remain with the non-Christian spouse might somehow imperil their status as Christians or their walk with God.”⁹

For the single unmarried man, he can focus entirely on ministry. “The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord” (v. 32). The single man has more time to study the Word, evangelize his neighbor, visit and pray for the sick and aging, and assist at the local church.

However, the married man’s attention is divided between kingdom activities and the needs of his wife and family. He desires to make sure his wife is provided for and her emotional needs are

⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew, Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 121.

⁸ Sam Allberry, *7 Myths about Singleness* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2019), Kindle Edition, 24.

⁹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2006). Logos edition.

met. “But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided” (v. 33-34). “Worldly things” are not sinful things, but things of this world that a family needs. Meeting those needs takes time, time is taken away from ministry, and time is not focused on kingdom priorities.

For the single person, more attention can be paid to walking with the Lord. “And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit” (v. 34). Singleness offers a less distracted life when it comes to serving God.

“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” (v. 34-35). Paul is not attempting to condemn those who decide to marry, he wants to make sure they understand what lies ahead, “let them marry—it is no sin” (v. 36).

Paul is not saying that singleness is more spiritual and marriage unspiritual. He is not saying that singleness is easy and marriage is hard. But, he is saying that marriage is more complicated and singleness is straightforward. Both singleness and marriage can be hard and both singleness and marriage offer unique challenges. Whether single or married, the individual needs God’s grace to live the Christian life. “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus . . . so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:4-7).

Both singleness and marriage have unique callings and those callings magnify Christ and benefit one another. “Single people need married people to show the type of love Jesus offers. Married people need single people to show that his love is more than enough for true and lasting joy.”¹⁰

Jesus and Singleness

Many treat singles as if they are deficient, living lives that are less than God’s best. Yet, Jesus was the most fulfilled, whole, and dynamic human being that has walked the planet. Jesus was not married. Jesus had no romantic relationships or sexual experiences. He was chaste, celibate, and single.

He is the most complete and fully human person who ever lived. So his not being married is not incidental. It shows us that none of these things—marriage, romantic fulfillment, sexual experience—is intrinsic to being a full human being. The moment we say otherwise, the moment we claim a life of celibacy to be dehumanizing, we are implying that Jesus himself is only subhuman.¹¹

¹⁰ Matt Hodges, “Upholding the Dignity of Singleness in the Church,” (The Gospel Coalition website, September 22, 2020); <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/dignity-singleness/>.

¹¹ Allberry, *7 Myths about Singleness*, 25.

Both our Lord Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul lived and modeled “abundant living” being men full of the life of God (John 10:10). Single or married, Jesus came to give us fullness, a life complete in him. “For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him” (Col. 2:9-10 KJV). Jesus and Paul were not emotionally or spiritually deficient in any manner even though they were single.

Challenges

Singleness in the 21st century has challenges at every turn. Whether your singleness is a short-term season or a lifetime circumstance, singleness presents a peculiar challenge: loneliness, sexual temptations, societal pressure to marry, and feelings of isolation. Jesus knows your struggles and emotional pain, but Jesus promises to be your ever-present friend, companion, and guide, your strength in weakness.¹² On the other hand, singleness can provide more time for ministry, opportunities for outreach, time alone with God, and deeper friendships. “Single brothers and sisters can demonstrate the sufficiency of the gospel and the call of discipleship with their lives in a way few sermons can.”¹³

Conclusion

The International Communion of the Charismatic Episcopal Church¹⁴ believes that singleness is a gift of grace and that all singles can provide a significant contribution to the advancement of the Gospel. In our parishes, singles should not be marginalized, dismissed, or looked down upon as second-class believers. Our parishes should aid our singles in every way possible so that they might find their lives fulfilled in our Lord Jesus Christ. Singleness is about a life lived to the glory of God. Lives that faithfully magnify our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁵

¹² Olivia Davis, “The Pain of Being Single; The Love That Holds Me Fast” (Looking Upward blog); <https://lookingupward.org/2024/04/11/the-pain-of-being-single/>.

¹³ Matt Hodges.

¹⁴ Mandatory celibacy for clergy is not the position of the CEC. Some Christian communions require single or married clergy, but this requirement is not mandated in the CEC.

¹⁵ Allberry, *7 Myths about Singleness*, 32.

