

Christians Gone Wild!
1st Corinthians, week 18
Single Like Jesus (1 Corinthians 7:8–9, 25–38)
May 7, 2006
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...it is better to marry than to burn with passion.
1 Corinthians 7:9

Perhaps half of the people who attend Mars Hill Church are unmarried. This is not surprising as Seattle has the fifth largest concentration of twenty-five- to thirty-nine-year-old college-educated singles in the country. Nationally, nearly half of American adults are single. Roughly 96 percent of Americans will marry at some point in their life and, while single, 41 percent of women will cohabitate. Men are waiting longer to marry so that they can get the youngest and hottest wife they can afford (the average man is married at 27.1 and the average woman at 25.3 years of age, compared to 1960 when the averages were 22.8 for men and 20.3 for women). Consequently, Paul's instructions to singles remain pertinent.

Sadly, this section of Scripture remains wildly misunderstood so we must establish a few basic biblical truths regarding marriage. Theologically, singleness is not ideal (Genesis 2:18; Matthew 19:4–6), marriage should be honored by all (Hebrews 13:4), and it is demonic to teach against marriage (1 Timothy 4:1–3). Practically, however, there are seasons and reasons that provide exceptions to the rule of marriage for some people, as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 7.

Be holy

⁸Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. ⁹But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Here Paul speaks to singles who were already in sexual sin (today this would include fornication and other lusts such as pornography) and Paul urges them to marry rather than burn in their lust and burn in hell (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:9). Of all women born before 1900 who were ever married, 92 percent were virgin brides; however, between 1960 and 1965, only 43 percent of brides were married as virgins, and from 1980 to 1985, that number dropped to 14 percent.

Be wise

²⁵Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. ²⁶Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. ²⁷Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. ²⁸But 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. ²⁹What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; ³⁰those 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; ³¹those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

Chaste single virgins were encouraged to remain single because of the “present crisis,” which may have included the coming bloody persecution at the hands of Nero and/or a deadly famine that had been prophesied in Acts 11:28. Singleness is often preferable in some seasons (e.g., persecution, famine, grave illness, war). Those who are able to refrain from marriage until a crisis has ended will save themselves and any children they may birth many heartaches and hardships. But if someone is married, this crisis is no excuse for a divorce, and if someone is married they have not sinned. It is important to remember that Paul is not elevating singleness as generally preferable, but rather only preferable for some people and some circumstances.

Be devoted

³²I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. ³³But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—³⁴and 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. ³⁵I 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.

In times of peace, many of the issues in a church are best dealt with by married leaders (1 Timothy 3:4–5; Titus 1:6; 2:3–5). But in times of crisis or when ministry results in danger, single people are able to do more ministry because their time and possessions are more easily freed up and the risk of death is less frightening than for someone who is a spouse and parent. Therefore, in the circumstance Paul is addressing, singles are being called upon for vital ministry though this call is not a restriction. Obviously, Jesus Christ is the perfect example of someone who remained single for the purposes of living in poverty and suffering for the cause of ministry in a way that He could not have if he were a husband and father.

Be reasonable

³⁶If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. ³⁷But 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. ³⁸So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better.

With the “crisis” of that day, men who were engaged to older virgins were considering backing out of their wedding. Paul counseled that men are free to do as they wish but must consider all of the theological and practical variables surrounding their potential marriage.

Verses for next week: 1 Corinthians 7:10–24, 39–40