

## **Sermon 26: 1 Corinthians 7:25-40: Singleness and the End of the World**

### **OUTLINE**

Single service  
Marital duties  
Decision making

### **INTRODUCTION**

What are some attitudes towards singleness today? Today we hear views that range from the extremes of apathy; applauded and antagonism. Apathy in that people are getting married older and older, there are more singles in society than in any other generation, this is due to education and careers being pursued; but also because of our modern age people losing their ability to converse with the opposite sex in person, and because pornography detracts from the necessity. Applauded in that some view marriage as a relic of the patriarchy; or maybe some are influenced by the opinion of Andrew Tate who sees marriage as holding no benefit for the western male. But there is also antagonism towards singleness. Loneliness is seen by some as a crime against humanity; the single person can be viewed as someone who is deficient, unwanted, a shame. In the ancient world there was the same spectrum of views of singleness. There were those who glorified it in the vestal virgins, others who viewed marriage as a distraction from reaching self-sufficiency like the Cynics. Augustus Caesar penalized singleness and made marriage a law in order to promote good morals in the Roman Empire. We come now to the longest sustained discussion of singleness in the Bible and we see that Paul and God are pro-singleness and pro-marriage, but in our section pro-singleness for different reasons than all the other views we are familiar with.

I am sure you have heard of the word eschatomania. What is the difference between eschatomania and have an eschatological perspective? The word eschatos refers to end things, those things related to the end of time and the second coming of Christ. Eschatomania describes those who enter into a type of panic and overreaction to what is thought to be an imminent arrival. Some have been known to give up their jobs, sell their houses, buy a tent and camp out on Mount Olivet in Israel to await the arrival. Paul gives advice to those who are betrothed that singleness is a worthy pursuit in light of the fact that this world is passing away. Paul is pro-singleness not because he is encouraging eschatomania but by reminding us that this life is not all that there is. The portion that we have before us is a stark reminder to the single and the married that this life is temporary and we should all be living in such a way that recognizes that fact.

As we go through this section we will note Paul's advice and his motivations to the single or rather betrothed in light of this truth. Secondly we will see how Paul shows that married life adds extra duties and responsibilities which are not evil in themselves but make the fuller opportunities for service that singleness offers unavailable. And finally Paul gives some further guidance on the decisions that the betrothed and widowed can make.

### **Single service**

V25, '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.' V25 notes a subject change. You will remember that Paul has been speaking to the single and the married and given instruction on not divorcing. Paul then took a little detour to lay bare a guiding principle, 'remain as you are called' applying it not only to domestic, but also to racial and social status. Paul returns now to the questions put to him in particular about those who are betrothed. The word betrothed here is 'virgin' and occurs throughout this passage, the reason for the translator's choice is because of Paul's use of the word virgin in this cultural context and the implied context of a formal arrangement in v36-38. In the Ancient Roman world betrothal was a formal contract between two parties usually arranged by the male members of the family which would precede the actual marriage. Paul is addressing those single members of the congregation who are in this particular situation. They are technically unmarried though formally betrothed. Paul here reflects the traditional view that a person is a virgin until they are married. This word is most often applied to females in the bible, though there are some rare references to males being virgins as well, Rev. 14:4.

You will notice that Paul says that there is no command from the Lord concerning those in this type of situation, but as an apostle he will give his opinion. Paul's opinion is not to be taken lightly, as can be seen by his final words after giving advice to remain single in v40, 'And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.' This helps us up front to put the proper weight on what Paul is going to advise.

V26, 'I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is.' Paul restates his guiding principle, 'it is good for a person to remain as he is.' But here we see some added motivation for why he says this. Paul has pushed back at overreacting being driven by bad theology about uncleanness with regards to marriage, or needing some external ceremony with regards to circumcision, or needing some external circumstance to be able to be a good Christian with regards to slavery. The goodness of marriage as a gift from God; the sufficiency of the gospel apart from racial or ceremonial additions; and our ability to be content and serve God even in slavery have held this principle up so far. Paul adds one more reason for this principle, 'the present distress.' What is the present distress? Preterists will say it is the looming fall of Jerusalem; some suggest a terrible famine that hit the area and caused widespread poverty in Corinth; some have suggested that Paul thinks that the second coming is going to happen at any second and is referring to the signs of the end that will make life difficult. There may be some local problem that Paul is focusing on that is known to the Corinthians but I think that Paul is seeing any local distress as merely part of the larger birth pangs that characterize this entire age which remind us of the fact that this world is going to pass away. This will become more apparent in v29 and 31.

V27, 'Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife.' Paul restates what he has already stated earlier in the chapter in v8. But lest it come across as a command he adds v28, '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.' Paul repeats the sentiments he gave earlier, that not everyone has the gift and it is not sinful to marry. Here he unfolds why he gives the advice he does, 'those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you.' Marriage comes with a set of duties and cares that hinder one from the freedom to serve

God which singleness affords. Marriage is not sinful or bad, but it does come with baggage. And lest we think that Paul is catastrophizing marriage as some jaded bachelor might do, he goes on to make himself clear.

V29-31, '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, <sup>30</sup> 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, <sup>31</sup> 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.' Here we see what is driving Paul, it is his eternal perspective. He says that the time has grown short. This is not Paul pretending to know the date of Christ's return merely that he knows He will return. This world, this life, even marriage, has a due date, it has a shelf life, it will not go on forever and ever, there is something else, something better that is coming to replace it. Paul is giving advice to live in light of these realities, not the usual things that those who do not have this hope live for. You see we have a future that cannot be taken from us, it is sure, and it is better than anything we have or could ever hope to have now. We await the coming of Jesus Christ who will judge all of His enemies, including our greatest enemies in satan, sin and death. Who will recreate the world free from sin and death. Where we will receive consolation greater than any pain we have ever had to endure. Where we will receive more good and gifts than we could ever hold in this life. And where life will not only be like the one we have now without sin, but a better life that exceeds this one. In this life we live for marriage and children, but there is no marriage in the new creation. Paul places these realities before us and shows us how they ought to impact our lives now.

If you are married, Paul says these truths should so impact your life that it looks like you are not married. Now let us be clear, Paul is not saying that you should enter into some sort of weird spiritual marriage arrangement where you stop having relations, live in separate rooms, and refuse to fulfil the God given duties and responsibilities of being a godly wife or husband. No, Paul is not contradicting what he has said earlier and in other places. He is trying to make a point. These truths transform our marriages to reflect these new realities, giving us new priorities. For example, we see many shows where people build their dream house, they work, they save, they sacrifice all to achieve the great ideal of a magazine cover worthy house. But the Christian couple realizes that we have a better more permanent dwelling in heaven that awaits us. We don't have to live like those who don't have but those who have something better. We are freed from having to pursue the ideal dream house, in fact we can be content if we never own a house in this life because our permanent holdings are all in the next life. The focus, the sacrifices that we would have made for something fleeting and ultimately irrelevant in the larger scheme of things is no longer a weight around our necks stealing all our time and resources from the Lord's work. Suddenly that dream career that you would sacrifice family for is no longer the goal instead you want something that is sustainable that will give you liberty to serve God more. This perspective helps us to restrain ourselves from making idols of our work, but it also helps us be more content with imperfect situations freeing us from the complaints and the frustrations that we can obsess over. So coming back to his first admonition, let married couples live like this is not all there is, like their marriage is not intended to be their heaven on earth, and allow sacrifices, and inconveniences that enable a better service to God. This can mean giving up domestic bliss to practice more hospitality. This can mean giving up those romantic get-aways and using the time and money in service of

others. It does not mean neglect your spouse, or allow the problems in your marriage like a lack of communication or intimacy to stand allowing this verse to act as cover for your unwillingness to overcome your cowardice and have transparent and honest communication about your problems.

Next Paul talks about those who mourn as though they did not mourn. Paul again is not saying do not mourn the loss of your loved ones, but rather mourn as someone who realizes that their Christian loved ones are not permanently lost to them but will be returned to them better than before and permanently never to be separated again. Many mourn their lost loved ones as a permanent loss, they carry scars so deep and debilitating that some are crippled by it. The Christian is someone who mourns knowing that tears will give way to joy. Paul not only addresses sadness but joy, that those who rejoice because of Christ's coming should live as though they don't rejoice. This is not a call to live joyless lives, as if Christians are to be those who live walking around with sullen faces refusing themselves any happiness in this life and subjecting themselves unnecessarily to hardship. No, Paul is saying, the greatest joys to be had are not in this life, any joys you experience be they first love, marriage, children, success, etc, don't lose sight of the fact that they will all pass away. don't be so smitten and taken with them that you are distracted from service to God and are enthralled to these joys instead. Many have their identity and ultimate satisfaction wrapped up in those things that give them joy. We have something that gives greater joy than anything else on earth awaiting us.

Paul applies this same point to worldly possessions. No this is not a call to give up all worldly possessions as if ownership were a sin. This is a recognition that this world's goods do not last forever and we have a new world where our treasure is stored that cannot be taken from us. When we lose possessions it does not destroy us; when we want something we do so with the realization that our hearts are only truly satisfied in God and all the things of this world that we own are temporary.

Paul also talks about those who have dealings with the world, this is likely talking about business dealings or large businesses, they should live as though they had no dealings with the world. Again this is not teaching that you can't make business deals or own a business or be the best in some field. What it means is that being a believer whose final goal is not in this life but the next, we do not pursue things, hold onto things, celebrate things, treasure things that have to do with this life in the same way as those who lack this perspective. We use but do not abuse the things of this life.

We could apply this to every area of life. Those who have the vigor of youth as though they did not; those who have good looks as those who did not; those who are born into advantageous positions as though they were not, etc. That is not to say that we despise these things but rather that we recognize that this world is passing away. Paul is not despising the world; demonizing the world; saying that we should depart from this world but is rather putting this world into perspective. For Paul the truth about the new creation is not only a comfort, it also has a bearing on how we live our lives today. It is not only a promise for when we die but motivation for how we live today. Do you live in light of eternity? Are you putting too much value in things that are passing away? Is your sense of happiness or sadness dictated by things that will fail or in things that cannot fail? Does the truth of what we have in Christ shape everything about you? What do you need to change to reflect these realities?

## Marital duties

V32, 'I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord.' Paul is explaining why he is seriously recommending singleness. Here he points out that being married you will have many anxieties, but the single person can be anxious about the things of the Lord. V33-34, 'But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, <sup>34</sup> 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.' Marriage is not bad because it defiles you; marriage is not bad because it is somehow a capitulation to sin and for the weak; rather, marriage being a gift of God is full of responsibilities that those who seek to do it well will have to sacrifice much in time and care as they fulfil their marital duties. Some have described Paul's thinking here in terms of a syllogism: major premise, less anxiety over worldly matters means one can be undivided in their devotion to the Lord; minor premise, being unmarried means having less anxieties in worldly affairs; conclusion, the unmarried life which leaves us freer from worldly cares frees us up to be more undivided in our service of the Lord. Paul is not saying marriage is bad or evil; or that the fulfilling of these duties is bad or evil, just that with this world passing away and a limited time to get things done for the Lord, singleness affords the best opportunity to do much with this valuable resource. V35, '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.'

Despite Paul's advice to pursue the best of single service not only the good of marriage, we must not fail to see that Paul does expect married people to be appropriately invested in their marriages. A husband because he is married must seek to please his wife. A wife because she is married must seek to please her husband. Feel the weight of that. Do not get the impression that marriage is an inconvenience that we have to put up with. No it is a God given institution that comes with duties. Is your wife pleased? Is your husband pleased? Is there some duty that you are neglecting that makes your marriage not the gift God intends it to be? Does a wife receive sufficient affection; encouragement; security; communication; willingness to do jobs around the house; a partner in parenting; smiles; kind words; gifts; freedom to pursue hobbies and interests; a listening ear; some money of her own; a husband who is clean and keeping himself in decent shape, etc? Does a husband receive sufficient affection; support; verbal affirmation; space for down time; the helper he needs keeping the home; respect and submission; a happy wife who creates an environment of lightness in the home, and a wife who pays attention to her appearance, etc. if you are married then it is your duty to embrace these things and rightly so.

The single person on the other hand is not burdened with the responsibility to do all of these things but instead has freedom to pursue the things of the Lord. The question I have for the singles is this: are you sanctifying your singleness and using it for the Lord? Today there is many a young man who is consumed with video games and who can't wait for the weekend so that he can do an all-nighter playing games or binge watching his favorite series. If you are single take Paul's teaching to heart, the time is short how are you going to proactively use it to serve the Lord. There are jobs around the church that need doing; there are elderly folk to visit; there are meals that need to be made for the needy; there is wood that needs to be chopped for those who need it; there are those who are

new comers who need someone who invite them into their friend circle and give of their time to help them feel at home; there is a tightening of the budget to save to give to the Lord's work; how are you using your singleness for the Lord. Every single one of us is going to be single at some point in our lives and have to think about how we are going to use this freedom from normal domestic obligations to give extra to God.

## **Decision making**

V36-38, 'If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. <sup>37</sup> But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. <sup>38</sup> So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.'

Paul brings matters back on track to the issue of what should the betrothed do, stay single or marry? He outlines some key principles around how to make these decisions. Firstly, he notes that there is another party involved, the betrothed. This is not your decision to make alone and your decision may have a negative effect upon your betrothed. Betrothals were official arrangements that united families and advanced business and other interests and were not merely a matter of personal sacrifice. All of this may have a bearing on how the decision should be made. Secondly, Paul recognizes that not all are gifted for celibacy and struggle with lust. He is realistic about this and does not pretend everyone can ignore this issue. So thirdly, he underlines that this decision has to be made within their own hearts, not by outward pressure; and that they should only choose singleness when they can honestly say that it will not result in sins related to lust down the line. Fourthly, they should realize that marriage is not sinning at all, and that this is a matter of recommendation not commandment. Only then, should they commit to celibacy. It is not a matter to be taken lightly. My experience is that 99% of the time those who think they can make the decision and think they have the gift don't. So I advise talking to an older Christian to get some advice on the matter. Too often I have seen those who are on the rebound, or those who are seeking a severe solution to sexual sin, or those who have been abused wrongly thinking this is the path for them when it is not.

Paul ends out his advice on marriage and singleness section with a word about widows saying what we have already stated, that marriage is not a sin, singleness is better, and remarriage is fine in the Lord, v39-40, 'A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. <sup>40</sup> Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God'.

What is the take away? The time is short, life like eternity is true, married or unmarried we should all be challenged to live a fully consecrated life to God.