

The Godly Single

The Godly Family

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Let's read again in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 19. Matthew 19, we can read from verse 10, Matthew 19:10,

10 His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry. 11 But he said unto them, All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given. 12 For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.

The 2013 US Census showed the lowest marriage rate ever recorded, only 50%, and that compares with 72% of the adult population married in 1960. So about 50% of the adult population is single. The figures for church circles may be slightly different. The only figure I could find was for UK churches which showed 35% of the adult population being single. So large figures both inside and outside the church.

You might be thinking, "Well, I don't see like 50% of people are singles, where do you get these figures from?" I think that shows how our definition of singleness is wrong. We maybe think of singleness as somebody in their 20s, 30s, maybe 40s, who has never married, but there are many different kinds of singles in addition to that. We can think of widows and widowers, those who have been divorced, single mothers, single fathers. We might also think of those who are in loveless marriages. These people are married in the law, they are not singles, but they are practically single. They are perhaps in the most painful singleness of all, being in a marriage to somebody who neglects them or who abuses them or treats them like an animal or just like dirt.

So singleness is much more widespread than we think and it's a trial plus an opportunity. We often think of singleness, really, primarily as a trial, but the Bible also presents it as an opportunity to serve and I've actually preached on that before in a sermon on 1 Corinthians 7. I don't want to go back over that territory again. If you're interested in that, you can follow it up on SermonAudio. But I want today to show you a different side of singleness. You might be thinking here, "But I'm not single. Yeah, it affects a lot of

people but I'm not single. I'm not a widow. I'm not a widower. I'm not divorced. I'm not a single parent. I'm not in a loveless marriage. What's in it for me? Why did I get up on this cold snowy November morning to come to church and hear about something that just doesn't affect me or impact me? It's just not a bit of a waste of time?" Well, first of all, I think you have to recognize it is in God's word. Both the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 and here Jesus in Matthew 19 teach us about singleness. It's a concern of theirs and therefore if it's a concern of Paul's and a concern of Christ's, it should be a concern of ours too.

Also, even if you are married, half of the married people here will be single one day through death, and therefore good to prepare for such in the future. Also, we need to build sympathy and compassion for singles in our midst. Those of us who are married tend to not think of people unmarried and therefore God puts these things in the word to sort of turn us inside out to make us less selfish. In fact, from what I've seen over some years of preaching and pastoring, I think it's a very good test of our spirituality as to whether we can listen happily to sermons that are more suitable for others than for ourselves. If we sit there griping and grumpy under sermons that are maybe not always directed to my situation, I think that's a pretty good indication of a poor spiritual state, of a great spiritual selfishness that really doesn't care as long as I'm catered for.

So you can test yourself with this sermon, but also I want to minister to singles today. Not just help the married be more sympathetic and understanding and prayerful for singles, but help singles in our midst and those who may be in the future with practical biblical instruction. And above all, above all I want to draw you to the Single, capital "S," the Lord Jesus Christ who chose to be single and stay single and to serve as a single in order to bring millions into the greatest marriage relationship of all. So be thinking of the Lord Jesus as we go through this sermon today.

I want to do this in two stages. First of all, look at Christ's teaching here in Matthew 19 and see three different kinds of singleness; and then proceed to counsel to singles. But first of all, let's look at this passage and see three kinds of singles that are brought before us. First of all, think of the context here, the cultural context was that marriage was greatly devalued even amongst those who were claiming to be followers of the Old Testament. Their view was marriage came with an emergency exit; that if marriage was not working out, there was a way out. And as you'll see here in this discussion, the disciples asked about putting away a wife and Jesus, for example in verse 3, "The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" So you can see there has been a great widening of the causes of divorce even amongst those who claimed to be readers of the Old Testament. And so Jesus makes a statement here and he quotes the Old Testament, he explains the Old Testament, he applies the Old Testament, and he narrows the Old Testament. He says, "Yes, Moses," as it were, "widened some causes, some legitimate causes for divorce because you were so hard-hearted towards your wives and towards God as well, but," he said, "that wasn't God's original design and now with my coming, we're getting back closer to the original design." So he here narrows the grounds of biblical divorce to fornication in verse 9, "Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it

be for fornication, and shall marry another, commits adultery." Later on the Apostle Paul widens it a bit further by also allowing desertion by an unbeliever. But you can see here Jesus is really narrowing it down as his emphasis is on permanence, on the binding nature of marriage.

This was very countercultural just as the Christian view of marriage is today and the disciples' reaction to it is, again, very similar to the reaction of people today because they say here in verse 10, "If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry." They're saying, "Well, if God's wrath is going to be on those of us who marry and then leave our marriages, then it's better not to marry at all. Better not get into it if I can't get out of it." Of course, that's a very common view today, isn't it? Although many people are refusing marriage not because of the divine consequences but because of the financial consequences of divorce settlements.

So this is a common reaction, but Jesus then comes with a wonderful reassurance and he says in verse 11, "All men cannot receive this saying." He's saying, "You're right. This is tough. This is a high standard. This is going to be difficult to put into practice." "All men cannot receive this saying, but save they to whom it is given." So he's saying, "Yes, we are talking about something that's going to be a test and a demanding experience, perhaps, but God can give the grace. God can give all the needed help to stay in marriage as well as to enter it happily." However, he then goes on to say there are some situations in which marriage may not be for you. So, yes, it's difficult. God gives grace for the difficulty, but you're right, there are some situations where marriage is just not for you. And that's where he then defines three kinds of singleness.

So he says in verse 12, first of all, "there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb." You might call this a providential singleness. That's the first kind of singleness, a providential singleness, and here Jesus is describing a man that is born without male anatomy and, therefore, unable to fulfill one of the core obligations of marriage and he's saying they were born this way. This was their providence. Painful, hard, but providential singleness means that marriage is not going to be for them. And this can also be true in a figurative sense. It may be in God's providence, you may have all the physical equipment required but just in God's providence he has not provided marriage for you. It's not his plan and it's not his purpose. From the moment you were born, even before that, in his plan no marriage for you. A providential singleness.

Then, secondly, there's a forced singleness. Jesus here says, "and there are some eunuchs which were made eunuchs of men." This was a cultural practice in these days where kings would take some young boys and would remove their male anatomy and the purpose was so that they could serve in the king's harem or the royal court for women without the risk of them falling into temptation and entering into physical intimacy with the king's wives or concubines. This was extremely cruel, obviously. This kind of singleness being forced upon this young lad, these young men, really out of the cruel selfishness of these tyrannical kings. They were forced into it and, of course, this is not happening in our midst physically but there are those, again figuratively we could speak

of, who have been forced into singleness against their own will, against their own choice, and I'm thinking here of two kinds of people.

First of all, there are those who maybe they had a really strong relationship with a man, with a woman, and it went on for many years and there was a great hope and prospect of marriage at the end of it, but despite the years passing, the man, usually it's the man, didn't commit or the woman didn't commit or one eventually just went off with somebody else and, really, it's often resulted in a forced singleness upon those who are left because of the agony of that tear, of that rip in their own hearts and minds that somebody has almost like taken away a part of themselves and it's so hard to recover from, so hard to get over that. They just never can trust any man or any woman again and they are, in a sense, forced into singleness by the selfish cruelty of another.

And then there's another kind of forced singleness and it's something that's very much talked about in our midst today and I've been asked a few times to speak on it, and it's what's commonly called same-sex attraction where this singleness is forced on someone through faulty wiring, you might say, in their identity and their set in themselves. And I don't believe this is the place to enter into this with so many young children here, but I do hope to have a forum either midweek or after a church service one Sunday where we can really try and address this from a Christian perspective and talk freely about this that's facing us increasingly in our midst. But this is another kind of, you might say, forced singleness.

And then, thirdly, there's a voluntary singleness. So we have people who are born such, there are those who have been made such, and then, thirdly, there are eunuchs, "which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake." Now, some people in church history have taken this literally. For example, the church father, Origen, physically removed his male anatomy because he thought this was more holy and he would do it for the kingdom of heaven's sake. But this is not what Jesus is speaking of here. It's speaking of men and women who choose singleness because they see it as a state in which they can serve the Lord better and also suffer for the Lord better, especially in days of persecution, and that's covered in 1 Corinthians 7:2 where Paul speaks of it being better to stay single because of the persecuting times that were about to start.

So this is not literal, it's figurative, it's a choice not to marry. He's not saying here, neither is Paul, that this singleness, this celibacy is better than marriage, more holy, he's saying it's given to some people just as marriage is given to others, and the key is to serve God in whatever state he has put us. And it's interesting how this is bookended. At the beginning you'll notice he says after speaking of marriage, "All men cannot receive this saying, save thee to whom it's given," and then it ends in verse 12 after speaking of this singleness, "He that is able to receive it, let him receive it."

So here the Lord is recognizing whether it's marriage or singleness, there are difficulties. There are trials. There are challenges. It's not easy to accept at times and therefore we need the help of God whether we're married or single to receive God's providence for us, to live it out, and to serve him in it. And that's why I'd like this morning to give biblical

counsel to those in singleness to help you receive it by God's grace. And as I do so, I hope also to be addressing non-singles among us in the sense of how we can serve our singles better. But first of all here, how to receive singleness, we have to focus on submission rather than rebellion. Now this, of course, applies to providential and forced singleness more than chosen but if we are in these situations where by God's providence or the cruelty of another we are single, we have two choices: we can accept it or we can fight it. And clearly the instruction of Scripture throughout is the need to accept and approve of God's providence for us rather than fight against it, and to see God's providence for us as good, as right, and as wise. That is not easy.

I was reading an article by a single woman, Fabienne Harford, recently and she said this, "In some ways in dark and frightened places, I feel forgotten and betrayed and confused because I know He knows me. I know He knows my body and my heart and I know He designed and wired this desire inside of me." You can feel the agony of that, can't you? She's saying God's made me with a desire for marriage, for this intimate relationship with a man, and it's not working out. She's saying, "I feel forgotten. Betrayed. Confused." And yet as you read the article, the general tenor of it is submission. It's not saying this is easy, as you can see, but it's saying, "I accept. God knows and God has ordered this." Submission not rebellion.

Secondly: trust, not anxiety. We can receive this better if we focus on building faith and trust and dependence upon God and oftentimes a single person, especially as they get older in years, can have tremendous fears about the future. Married people, well, they'll have a wife or a husband to look after them or children who grew up and look after them, but what about me? The actress, Anne Hathaway, who is hardly old, she put it like this in a recent interview, "Loneliness is my least favorite thing about life. The thing that I'm most worried about is just being alone without anybody to care for or someone who will care for me."

Again, the Lord Jesus speaks of this frequently, doesn't he, the need to trust our heavenly Father for our food, our drink, our clothing, our shelter, for everything. So when fears start rising, whether we're young or old, to start also building faith to break down that fear, to ask for that trust, even when there's nothing around us that says it will be well to trust God, our Father. We have sung some Psalms together about it, God's care for the single and the solitary, and how he will put them in families to be cared for. Trust, not anxiety.

Thirdly: friendship, not loneliness. Sometimes single people can withdraw from friendship. They might say, "Well, I'm never going to be married so I'm just not going to have any friends whatsoever." And they can live a very solitary and isolated life and, again, the Bible makes clear how much we need one another. We need friendship and especially in a single state. You see even the Lord Jesus, how much he needed friendship. He had 12 friends. He had three very good friends and he had one best friend. These singles needed friends.

So also we need to cultivate friendship, above all with Christ. He is the greatest friend and there is a tremendous opportunity for single people to build an intimacy with Christ that really married people cannot enter into because they have such a solitary focus, it's just them and Christ and there is nobody else to care for. Paul speaks of that in 1 Corinthians 7, how they can serve the Lord alone.

There are many verses in the Bible to encourage in this. "Your Maker is your husband. The Lord of Hosts is his name," says Isaiah. "I have loved you with an everlasting love," says God through Jeremiah. Jesus comes down to this world and people say, "Your mom and dad, your mom and brothers and sisters are outside. Go to them." And he says, "Who is my mother? Who is my brother? Who are my sisters? Those who do the will of my Father in heaven, they are my mother, my brother, my sister." He's saying, "My friends are those who do my will." So seek to build friendships and here is, again, an area where non-singles can help in befriending and building relationships and involving singles in our midst.

I was struck, again, in that article by Fabienne Harford who spoke of this pain of singleness and how it has helped her to be a blessing to others. She says, "This pain has blessed me by forcing me to be all in with God, banking on Him for my joy." Our God is a God of pleasure. He's not calling us to hunger because he wants us to be miserable. He's calling us to hunger because he wants us to experience the greatest pleasure available to man, himself. So this is a call to singles to bring this hunger for intimacy and closeness in relationship to the one who alone can satisfy more than any husband or wife. Friendship, not loneliness.

Fourthly: opportunities, not difficulties. Yes, there are difficulties, we've acknowledged these, but there is also tremendous opportunity to do good, to help others, to care for those who are needing care. Fabiennne Harford said again, how this gift helps her serve others. She said, "Pain has taught me how to hold my infertile friend and cry with her when Mother's Day rolls round again. This pain has given weight to my words. When I explain to a mom with three kids the Friday nights alone on the couch really aren't as amazing as they sound." And this is one of Paul's great emphases in 1 Corinthians 7, that singleness creates availability. It creates flexibility. It provides opportunity for service that are just not open to married people.

Fifthly, we can receive this by focusing on contentment, not envy. As Fabienne Harford said, "There is a tendency among singles to look enviously at the married and their families," and yet many married people will tell you, it's not all what it appears to be. It might look perfect on a Sunday morning as these big families roll up with their minivans and outpour all these perfectly clothed behaved, well, maybe not behaved but perfectly clothed children but behind this there is a lot of complexity, there is a lot of burden, there is a lot of difficulty. There is a lot of trial and I think it behooves those of us who are married to be more sincere about this and less plastic, putting on a show, so that those who are singles know the reality.

Every state has its complications and its trials and its difficulties and, therefore, to build this contentment. There are worse things than dying a single. Far worse. You ask any woman in a loveless marriage what they would have preferred, they would have preferred to stay single because there can hardly be a more cruel experience than this, to bring somebody into a marriage and then not love them, in fact, treat them with contempt and hatred, no position, neglect. It's so offensive to God. So build contentment, not envy.

Sixthly: focus on forgiveness rather than bitterness. Now, it's easy to get angry with God but that accomplishes nothing. God doesn't need to be forgiven for his providence for us, we need maybe to be forgiven for our response to his providence. We need that forgiveness from him to wipe it clean away, that rebelliousness and that discontent. But also, a single may need to build forgiveness rather than bitterness with somebody who has mistreated them. Maybe that guy who left you at the side of the road, who abandoned you when marriage looked so inviting and so promising and then just left you alone. Well, what good does it to just dwell on it bitterly and angrily all your life? You have to give it over to God, seek his help to be forgiving to others as he has forgiven us.

But also in a loveless marriage, there is daily forgiveness to be given, daily grace to be given. We were just reading as a family this morning at family worship Hosea 3, where Hosea was told to go out and take to himself this woman who had betrayed him and had committed fornication and to marry her and to love her, and here's the key phrase, "like the Lord loved Israel." And this is what we're to continually remember when we are feeling that betrayal and that abandonment, how many times we have betrayed and abandoned the Lord and yet he has come after us, come to love us, come to draw us back. Forgiveness, not envy.

But also to non-singles among us, the married, we also need to cultivate a greater sensitivity to singleness. Recently I was in a situation where I prayed and somebody had shared something about marriage beforehand and in my prayer I was really rejoicing with this person's marital blessing, and probably went on too long about it, then afterwards a friend came up to me and said, "You know, David, Such-and-such was there who has been single for many, many years and your prayer really hurt her quite a bit." As soon as he said it, I realized it was so true. I was just completely insensitive. There was no recognition of the sensitivity of others around the table. And we can be particularly insensitive at things like Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, weddings, and so let's not give our singles cause to be offended and hurt and needing to forgive us for our insensitivity.

Seventhly: focus on patience rather than rushing. It's very easy when there's this yearning to be married, this longing to be married, or if you're widowed, divorced, to remarry. That can be very strong longing and the world and the church is sadly littered with those who have rushed into a marriage to try and get over the pain of singleness without thinking it through, without really looking objectively, without taking the counsel of others and end up in a disastrous relationship. So singles need to work on patience rather than rushing.

Eighthly: focus on hope, not despair. It can be very easy for a single just to despair about their condition, their state, and just see all the negatives and the downsides, but God may change your state and he may change it sooner than you think. I was reading about a number of stories, really, of people who married late in life and also read this testimony from an unmarried church elder, this was how he put it, "Run after Jesus with all that you are. Then one day you may look up and see a woman beside you running on the same path." So what he's saying here is focus on Jesus, run after him with all your might and it may well be God will give you also the desire of your heart. He said then, "But regardless of if that day comes, you gain Christ in the end whether she comes or not." So he's saying don't give up praying, don't give up hoping, make Christ your priority, he may give you this, but even if he doesn't the last scene of your life and the eternal scene of your life is a wedding. The engagement to Christ is consummated upon death or at the end of the world.

Again, Fabienne Harford said this, "It might be that the pain of a life without physical intimacy was part of what equipped Paul to proclaim through the Spirit that to die is gain. To die is to gain a glorified body that feels and experiences the truth that all our needs are met in Jesus. To die is to gain the heavenly reality that earthly intimacy can only reflect in shadows. To die is to gain full oneness of God, fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore." One pastor told the story of how after preaching on heaven, an elderly lady came up to him full, beaming with joy and saying, "I can't wait until my wedding day!" So build hope, not despair.

Ninthly: focus on spiritual parenting, not physical parenting. Physical parenting has been denied you but you can still be a mother or a father in Israel. There are young people who are needing mentors and models and perhaps there are people that would really welcome your input, your involvement in their kids' lives, to take them and do things with them and encourage them in a sport or a hobby or a study of something good. Some of you remember Dirk who used to be in our midst. Dirk, as you know, was single for many years. He's getting married, God willing, in the new year to a young lady in Florida. But for many years he was single and he often got teased about it but he used his singleness because what you may not know is he mentored three young African American boys in downtown Grand Rapids. He became a virtual father to them. And what a good use of singleness. Spiritual parenting more than physical parenting.

Tenthly: holiness, not sin. Of course, in the single state there is a tremendous temptation to fall into sin. That might be mentally fantasizing or physically you fall into immorality because of these passions that become uncontrolled. But focus on holiness. Remember Jesus. He lived a single life for 33 years and, remember, he had a perfect humanity, a humanity that had these desires as well for physical intimacy with a woman. That's natural. That's God-given. That's good and that's holy and if anyone had them in their fullness, he did. And yet without sin, not mentally, not physically. In some ways, it's the most remarkable aspect of Christ's life on earth, his holiness in his single state, especially when there was no one who had a more loving and affectionate heart. There was no one who was such a friend, who had such a depth of love and compassion. You can just imagine the longings that he must have had for this kind of intimacy. So remember Jesus,

he has been tempted in all points like as you are, yet without sin. He can give you the grace, he can give you the strength, but don't stoke the fire, don't provide the fuel.

Eleventhly: focus on your spiritual identity more than your marital status. Yes, you're single. In some circles and with some people it carries a stigma, but not in Christ's eyes. He doesn't see you as single, he sees you as his child, as his future bride. He sees you in Christ. He sees you as forgiven, as justified. Think on your identity in Christ more than your marital status.

Then, twelfth: ask, don't assume. By that I mean, okay, you're in a single state, there may be a reason for it. Maybe you've made an idol of marriage and it wouldn't be safe to give you what you will turn into an even greater idol. So ask God, "Is there something in my life that is stopping this happening?" In most cases it isn't but in some cases it can be. If I could speak very personally here, I have to say that when I was converted myself, I just longed to be married to a Christian lady, Christian young woman, and I think I probably did make an idol of it. It became too much of a desire. I started church hopping, started going to all these places and it wasn't for spiritual reasons, it was purely social. It was purely to build and get a girlfriend and it wasn't until one day I confessed it to the Lord and it wasn't happening, it just wasn't happening and I confessed it to the Lord and I said, "Please help me to stop this. To start going to church for you and you alone." And I really believe the Lord enabled me to give it over and to say, "If it's singleness for me, then let it be." And within a few months probably, God brought Shawna into my life. I'm not saying that's going to happen to you but I'm just saying we can make an idol and so we should ask, "Lord, show me. Show me if there's something not right in my life."

Lastly: seek the Single one, the Lord Jesus Christ whether you're married or single, whatever your status. He lived a perfectly single life and died a perfectly single death. No one more than him knew forsakenness and betrayal and loneliness and solitariness. No one. No one felt more these awful emotions. No one endured that. No one plumbed the depths of that as much as he did, so much that he even cried out, "Why? Why even you, Father, have forsaken me?" But he did this and he endured this suffering of such solitariness in order to bring sinners like you and I into the greatest marriage relationship of all. His singleness both literal and spiritual, his solitariness was so that we could enjoy the richest, deepest, most soul satisfying and eternal marriage that there can be anywhere in this world. Seek him and through him find deep, rich, loving, affectionate, merciful, gracious marriage.

Let's pray.