

A New Covenant:

Biblical Singleness, Marriage, Divorce, and Sexual Purity

Presentation 2: Biblical Singleness

A sermon by Larry Kirkpatrick

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This is the second presentation in our series titled: A New Covenant: Biblical Singleness, Marriage, Divorce, and Sexual Purity. In our first presentation, “We,” we studied how we are bound together; how we are a congregation; and, how the behavior of one member impacts God’s covenant with us as a collective. We studied especially the stories of Achan (Joshua chs. 6, 7), and of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). In John’s account, we learned that God’s community affirms God’s moral boundaries but that in so doing it must *never* be hypocritical.

We warned that some presentations will make this a difficult set of messages to hear. It was also pointed out that your pastor is praying that, at its conclusion, every member of this congregation will desire voluntarily to sign a special statement, a new covenant between us all, affirming our agreement with and commitment to God’s moral boundaries, and our urgent desire to live according to His counsel for us, particularly with reference to biblical singleness, marriage, divorce, and sexual purity.

What is Biblical Singleness?

And so, enough of reprise. Let us proceed to a perhaps unexpected topic: biblical singleness.

So, what is biblical singleness? Biblical singleness is the situation in which a Christian lives unless he is biblically married. All Christians should be either biblically single or biblically married. Another way of saying this would be that the Christian—in the living-out of his faith, in practice of being a Christian, of being a disciple—that in the area of his relationships, he affirms God’s moral boundaries.

(One caveat; we do not mean “biblical” as in those mentioned at various times in the Bible who engaged in polygamy, or in moral crimes such as *porneia* or adultery, but “biblical” in the sense of living out the highest principles and implications of God’s Word.)

It is a fact that most of the central figures of the New Testament were biblically single during all or part of their experience. These include John the Baptist, Jesus, His mother Mary, the Apostle Paul, and Timothy.

Can a Single Person Be a Whole Person?

Can an unmarried person be a whole person? If two marry and two flesh become one flesh, does not this mean that one person alone is only a half flesh? Half a person?

It does not. Until a person marries, he is one flesh. He is a whole person already. God does not make half-people; He makes whole people. Mark four illustrates the process of plant growth: First the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. At every point of development, a plant may be perfect. A plant that has not obtained to full maturity, nonetheless, may be perfect for its stage of growth. That is, it may be a whole plant. The same holds true for people. A person who is five years old or fifteen or fifty-five, is to have from God what? “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3).

The ultimate example of a biblically single person in all human history is Jesus Christ. He was as whole a person as one can be.

Some might feel that being single is a mark against a person. Now it is true that a marriage partner is a special help sent by God. “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord” (Proverbs 18:22). But is biblical singleness a gift from God?

Jesus and the Pharisees are having a discussion about divorce (which we will explore at a different time). But starting at Matthew 19:10, we have an interesting teaching from Jesus.

Consider:

The disciples said to him, 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.' But he said to them, 'Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. 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 19:10-12).

There is, according to Jesus, a gift of singleness. Jesus said it was only for those to whom it is given. He mentions three kinds of Eunuchs: Those who have been eunuchs from birth, that is, those who cannot father or mother children perhaps because of some biological issue. Then, there are those who, at a later time in life, are made eunuchs by men. These also cannot bear children.

Here, the fundamental meaning of eunuch comes to the fore: literally, "bed-guarder." Sometimes an invading monarch would take captives from among the elite of the nation and some of the men would be castrated, thus rendered unable to father children. Often such were given duties pertaining to the king's harem, as his many wives would be safe with such.

These first two classes became eunuchs involuntarily. God gives free will in many areas, but not all. What we are born as, the natural color of our hair, and so forth, are "givens" which we are to endure and live through with the strength and help of God. If one is born a eunuch, or, in the process of circumstance, taken captive and made a eunuch, there may not have been very much free choice involved. But Jesus especially draws our attention to the third class of eunuch.

He said: “And there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus is referring to a free choice. These are not people who go and physically remove parts of their bodies; these are men and women who intentionally choose to live for God and not to marry. They are voluntary eunuchs. This situation is not for everyone, rather, it is for “the one who is able to receive” it.

It is well to be understand that one’s sexuality, or trueness to gender, is not determined by some other person or some experience outside of oneself. A boy does not become a man by having a sexual experience with a woman; nor does a girl become a woman by having a sexual experience with a man. When God had finished His creation, Adam stood as a whole person; Eve stood as a whole person. The creation was good. Human sexuality was good. There was and is nothing “dirty” about human sexuality in itself. Only when our sexuality is bent does it become a problem.

The Teaching of 1 Corinthians 7

Our study today is dominated by one Scripture: 1 Corinthians 7. We proceed through the entire chapter, reading and then pausing for comment. First, verses 1-5:

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: ‘It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.’ But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul says that it is good not to have sex. And yet, we will see that it is good to do so—within the marriage covenant. This passage also says that husband and wife have rights to each other's body. This supersedes their right to their own body. Be careful who you marry, or who marries you; for in a sense, they have rights of ownership over you. A married couple may suspend the fulfillment of conjugal rights, but only for a limited time and only by mutual consent, with the express purpose of spiritual seeking.

We continue now with verses 6-11:

Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. 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 be aflame with passion. To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.

God here tells us that singleness is good. Do not let anyone else tell you otherwise. Marriage is good too, as we will see in the next presentation. And yet, singleness is not a second class position in any respect. In fact, marriage is here advocated only for those who have problems with self-control. Now, if you do marry, the Word is unambiguous: Those who marry should remain married to their marriage partner. If they do separate from them, they may seek reconciliation and restoration of that relationship.

Someone might say, "I cannot exercise self-control. Therefore, here is license for me to marry." In some circumstances marriage is not an option. There are situations where one does not have the privilege of remarrying; don't get yourself into one. If you do, then God's calling to you is to remain faithful—and single. Paul's counsel to marry is only for those who are biblically eligible to marry. A non-biblical marriage is an adulterous and sexually immoral one. Such must

be removed from church membership. The situation of one who lacks biblical grounds to marry will be addressed in more detail in an upcoming presentation.

Now, verses 12-16:

To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace. Wife, how do you know whether you will save your husband? Husband, how do you know whether you will save your wife?

Again, the counsel is very clear. Do not divorce your unbelieving spouse. Don't do it! However, if all that you can do to save the marriage fails, and the unbelieving spouse does leave you, then the union is dissolved. Please note that if your spouse leaves you but continues to profess belief in God, and to live in harmony with the teachings of the Bible, to attend church, etc., one would have little ground for claiming that the person is an unbeliever.

Now, a partial summary statement in verses 17:

Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.

This is a very important line. It reminds the reader that, while as members of the body of Christ we are connected in a collective, we are each individuals. God's calling to you is to lead the life that He has assigned to you. You cannot live someone else's life; nor should you try. You are made in the image of God and He has a reason why He made you a unique person. You are not to play the Holy Spirit for your spouse, nor is your spouse to play the Holy Spirit for you.

God's Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit, and He is to be the guide—for married and for single persons.

Next come verses 18-24:

Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

Becoming a Christian does not necessarily free one from previous situations or commitments. Becoming a Christian must not serve as excuse or an escape from responsibilities. Even referring to slavery, he says to gain your freedom if you can, but if not, then be a slave but be a living example of what a Christian is for those who are binding you.

Next, verses 25-31:

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. I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. 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. 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, 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, 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.

Those who are married should not seek divorce. Those who are divorced should not seek marriage. Nevertheless, to marry is permissible. But know that certain commitments, situations and anxieties are the consequence of marriage. The Christian should seek, so much as is possible, to recognize the temporary nature and reduced value of the temporal.

Finally, verses 32-40:

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, 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. 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. 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. 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. So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better. 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. Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

Several points here. First, in certain respects the single person has more freedom to seek God than the married. And why does Paul offer this? Because the goal of his counsel is to secure the reader's undivided devotion to the Lord. Nevertheless, if one has made a prior decision to remain single, but later determines that because of sexual temptation he should marry, then he may seek marriage. These verses also include a sanction for the practice of married celibacy—if both parties continue to freely consent to it. Obviously, this is a very private and personal matter. The point is also completely clear: marriage is a lifelong commitment to one partner.

Varieties of Biblical Singleness

There are several varieties of biblical singleness. Some are single simply because they have never married. Perhaps they are too young to marry. Or, have not yet chosen to marry. Or, some have chosen quite intentionally to remain single. Some plan on marrying but recognize that they must be careful or they will make a serious mistake, so they are waiting until they are very sure that they have found the right Christian partner.

Another class of single person was married, but their spouse has died. They may or may not choose to remarry. Paul writes to Timothy that

She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day (1 Timothy 5:5).

But there are also pitfalls to widowhood (1 Timothy 5:11-15).

There is another: Those who have married but gone through a divorce from their spouse and not remarried. They may simply have chosen, so far, not to remarry. There are other Christian persons who do not have biblical grounds to remarry at this time, and so neither marry nor court. These intentionally choose to live lives affirming God's moral boundaries, and recognize that they cannot marry, and reconcile themselves to this.

Life as a Biblically Single Person

There is a downside to biblically single living, but it does not come from God. Sometimes the church itself seems to leave you out. Without intending to exclude anyone, things still tend to be skewed toward couples and families. But again, we are a "we," a group, a collective, a congregation, a community of the faithful, married and single. From what we have seen in today's study, the single are not to be pitied, but, in some respects, almost envied. They

have challenges just as marrieds, but also opportunities. Indeed, in some respects, they can have a greater opportunity to seek God. But singles will have to carve that out. Just as marrieds, an avalanche of information and demands is always raining down. The biblically single need to learn how to take advantage of their advantage.

Remember, Scripture points out that the biblically single have a straight path to seek to do what is pleasing to the Lord, to seek to be holy in body and in spirit, to form their pathway with undivided interests, and to live a life of concentrated devotion (1 Corinthians 7:32, 34, 35).

But here is one secret to living as a Christian—a key principle, that will help the biblically single. Hear Paul in Philippians 4:10-13.

You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Paul was not born with this insight; he learned it by life experience. It is of universal application. It applies to every life situation. He learned to be content. He understood the secret of facing the situation of need and the situation of unanticipated abundance. Jesus was His Helper. Paul knew that He could do all things through Jesus who strengthened him (4:11).

Does this suggest that it will be easy? Not at all. We may thank God that it is not easy, for character maturation does not come when things are easy. And God is growing His garden of very mature followers of Jesus. Welcome to the garden.

Conclusion

We have seen something that may have surprised today. The Bible is very positive about believers choosing to be biblically single. We are used to hearing how special marriage is. And it is. But we are not so used to hearing that God, who knows humanity, who actually gave to us an Owner's Manual, calls us, if we are not married, to live godly lives as biblically single persons. Time is short. The challenges we face are great. In a world where 1,000 voices rain down upon us day in and day out, we believe that the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write, "Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife," and that "the present form of this world is passing away" (vv. 27, 31). Today we have included the excluded, and gone to the Bible for a viewpoint that we might not have before carefully considered. To all those who are biblically single, I say, welcome. This is your house too.

Next time, Presentation 3: Biblical Marriage.

Biographical note: Larry Kirkpatrick has served in the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church since 1994. He is a pastor of the American West, having led churches in Nevada, Utah, California, and Idaho. His writings include the books *Real Grace for Real People*, and *Cleanse and Close*. Larry and wife Pamela presently serve in the Upper Columbia Conference, ministering to the [Bonners Ferry](#) and Clark Fork churches in the incomparable beauty of Northern Idaho.