

Is Being Single a Sin? a Curse? a Blessing? / COB / 06.05.16

Introduction

- † **[1: statistics]** [After watching the video “With You” produced by Journey Box Media]. Loneliness is a problem, not exclusive to single people, but it is one of the top two complaints they have.
 - Living fully whatever your circumstances is a top line response, not exclusive to single people, but they are better positioned for it in some ways than the rest of us.
- † This year, about a third of the adults who are regularly attending our worship services are living as singles. Some are young, some are [shall we say] older; some have never been married, some were widowed, some are separated or divorced.
 - In our society, about 30% of adults have never been married and about 20% were once married but now are not, including fourteen million widows. 27% of households are a single person living alone. Studies show half of all restaurant meals are consumed by somebody eating alone.
 - Think about it, 30-50% of the people we know are single for one reason or another! That being so, we should try to understand their situation and how to minister to them.

Is it ok to be single?

- † **[2: ok?]** Let’s start by asking, is it ok to be single? Is being single a sin? a curse? a blessing?
 - One of our singles said, “...there is a pressure in this society ... to be married, or at least ‘with’ someone... there is a sense that with prolonged singleness comes incompleteness, a sense of failure, a sense of not being a full ‘adult,’ and a sense of being unwanted.”
 - When I turned thirty and was still single, people started asking me if I was homosexual. I made things worse by shaving my head, which homosexuals apparently were doing that year. Basketball player Michael Jordan shaved his head and won “sexiest man of the year”; I shaved my head and got asked more often whether I was homosexual.
 - Despite the sexually depraved times we are in, society still sees marriage as the norm and wonders about people who do not engage in it by a certain point. As a church, we might overly focus on the nuclear family as the ideal, causing singles to wonder whether they are in sin, somehow cursed to be incomplete, or at least unwanted by the church community.
- † **[3: Deuteronomy 7.14]** It’s easy to misunderstand the Bible on this subject, if you don’t understand dispensations. Dispensations are unique time periods in biblical history. God never changes, his character never changes, his original purposes for people never change, but God created unique time periods or dispensations which reflect what does change, including how God develops his plan in history, how God interacts with people, and what he specifically requires of his people.
 - I bring this up, because God gave a special promise to Israel as a reward if they would walk with him, and that promise might mess up our thinking today. **Deuteronomy 7.14 NIV: You will be blessed more than any other people; none of your men or women will be childless, nor will any of your livestock be without young.** If Israel stayed intimate with God, living his way, walking in step with him, then God would bless all of them with marriage and children.

- For the most part, this was a communal promise: if the nation of Israel walked with God, they would be blessed; if not, they would be cursed. But people often interpreted these promises and threats individually. Israel had a proverb which said [**Proverbs 18.22 NIV**] **He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the LORD.**
 - And there are scriptural examples of God blessing people with marriage and a fruitful womb, or cursing them with barrenness. So in Israel the barren couple usually was thought to be under a personal curse from God and both marriage and children were seen as a personal blessing.
 - [**4: New Covenant**] Here's the thing: we don't have that promise today. We're not living under the Law of Israel, the Mosaic Covenant. We have the New Covenant, which replaced the Mosaic Covenant, which Jesus said he would usher in with his blood on the cross. Ours is a better covenant, but it is a different covenant. This promise is not for us – even if it were for our time period, we are not Israel! – so we should not interpret our singleness or barrenness as a curse.
- † [**5: OT**] Nor is singleness a sin. We might think so the way some churches teach! Those who teach you must get married to raise children usually teach raising children is the only purpose of getting married and having sex, and both views show a lack of biblical understanding.
- Even in the Old Testament, there are some inspiring single people. Jeremiah was single and was one of the greatest prophets ever! Nehemiah also was single, and instrumental in God's plans.
 - Think of Ruth. As a widow and a loathed Moabite, she believed in the true God, and from that point on she always made what we call "top-line" choices, by acting in faith and obedience despite suffering in many ways.
 - Think of Joseph, who lived by faith and obedience despite far worse curses than his celibacy and singleness, including being sold by his brothers into slavery and being imprisoned in a foreign land. Because of his top line choices during his suffering, he was in place to serve God by saving God's chosen line of the seed of the Messiah, his brother Judah's family, when the famine came.
 - Jesus himself was single in that culture in which marriage and children were thought to be favor from God. As John Piper wrote, "The most fully human person who has ever lived, or ever will live, is Jesus Christ, and He never once had sexual intercourse" [*Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, xix]. Also single were Anna, John the Baptist, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.
- † [**6: Matthew 22**] In a future dispensation, when we are resurrected to new physical life, there will be no marriage. When some religious leaders were trying to stump him with a trick question in **Matthew 22.29-30 NET**, **Jesus answered them, "You are deceived, because you don't know the scriptures or the power of God. For in the resurrection they [people] neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven."**
- So singleness is what God plans for everyone in Christ's kingdom! Right now we are in a time period when most think of marriage as desirable, but in which singleness is also acceptable.
 - [**7: 1 Corinthians 7**] **1 Corinthians 7.7-9 NET:** [Paul wrote] **I wish that everyone was as I am. But each has his own gift from God, one this way, another that. To the unmarried and widows I say that it is best for them to remain as I am. But if they do not have self-control, let them get married. For it is better to marry than to burn with sexual desire.** Paul thought of his celibacy as a gift from God to empower his ministry for Christ, not as a curse or a sin!

† So there is no shame at all in being single. It is not a curse, it is not a sin. Whether it is a blessing, that depends on each person. But I want you to come away understanding that single people are just as important to God and the church as married people.

- Dallas Seminary President Mark Bailey wrote, “Parallel to the differing spiritual gifts God has given us for the good of the Body... each person is also a gift God gives to every other person. We all belong. And we need each other.”

Advantages of being Single

† Of those who have never been married, only 53% say they are certain they want to get married at some point. Doesn't that figure seem low? The average age for getting married has now climbed to the late twenties. There must be some advantage to being single, at least for some of these people.

† One thing is avoiding being hitched to someone who turns out to be someone to whom you would rather not be hitched!

- **[8: Proverbs 27]** To my amusement, I have found there are several verses that talk about the quarrelsome wife. **Proverbs 27.15-16 NIV: A quarrelsome wife is like the dripping of a leaky roof in a rainstorm; restraining her is like restraining the wind or grasping oil with the hand. Better to be single than to live the rest of your life with someone you don't like!**

† **[9: Matthew 19]** Perhaps thinking along those lines, when Jesus taught against divorce in **Matthew 19.10-12 NET, The disciples said to him, “If this is the case of a husband with a wife, it is better not to marry!” [pause] He said to them, “Not everyone can accept this statement, except those to whom it has been given. For there are some eunuchs who were that way from birth, and some who were made eunuchs by others, and some who [effectively] became eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who is able to accept this should accept it.”**

- Jesus suggested there are some who choose to remain celibate for the sake of the ministry, and God empowers them. One of our singles told me, “If I'm honest I also see it as a calling to be single because God made us all to be sexual beings.” Of course, we think of monks and nuns, but in Dallas, professor Abe Kuruvilla was someone I met who has chosen celibacy for his lifetime, to focus more on his ministry for Christ.
- **[10: 1 Corinthians 7]** Paul wrote about such a choice in **1 Corinthians 7.32-35 NET: An unmarried man is concerned about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the things of the world, how to please his wife, and he is divided. An unmarried woman or a virgin is concerned about the things of the Lord, to be holy both in body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the things of the world, how to please her husband. I am saying this for your benefit, not to place a limitation on you, but so that without distraction you may give notable and constant service to the Lord.**
- So it is ok to marry and it is ok to be single, but being single has an advantage for ministry. One of our singles said singleness might also hold an advantage for worship. She said, “I have no idea why He [God] has not brought a man into my life; maybe it would be more of a distraction from the love and devotion I give Him.”
- The same argument could be made for sacrificial giving or how much you invest into your career. As one of our singles said about being single, “... basically you're unencumbered and free from any entanglements.”

- † One of our singles mentioned he has flexibility in decision making, personal freedom and spontaneity to do as he wants without worrying about neglecting the desires of others.
 - He said, “There is also a high possibility for predictability and simplicity ... if you cleaned the apartment it will probably stay relatively clean, if you didn't it'll be left dirty until you do. Things you leave in the fridge won't be eaten unless you eat them, the book you left on the table will be on the table...”
 - Another woman cited as an advantage, “the fact that as a female I answer to God directly [as] the Head of my family. I understand that the female defers to the husband in a holy union and I’m not putting that down, but I do like my freedom.” At least with God, you know you are always getting godly leadership!
 - Another single said, “... it is like being back at college in a way. You are on your own and can do just about anything you want without asking or reporting to a parent or spouse. There is no rush to be anywhere or pick someone up...”

- † When I was single, I enjoyed meeting new people [especially those of the opposite gender].
 - Others think being single makes it easier to go on adventures, reflecting the flexibility and spontaneity. Though if you love rock climbing and paragliding, I would think you would marry someone with similar interests. If LeeAnn was willing to jump out of an airplane with me while we were single, I expect she would have again once we were married.
 - Being single does most likely provide better sleep. If you get married, you better buy ear plugs and a foam mattress! If you get married and have cats... well, never mind.
 - Some people say you are more likely to invest the hours necessary to stay in shape if you are single, though a spouse who is a built in accountability partner might be helpful.

Disadvantages of being Single

- † **[11: frustrations]** So there are some advantages perhaps, but there are disadvantages too. The top two I hear about are loneliness and celibacy.
 - One of our singles told me, “...with singleness comes crushing, persistent loneliness ... It's the ‘romantic loneliness’ of the heart, not something that can be resolved by surrounding yourself with people.”
 - Because of this, online dating has become the third-highest income generator on the internet. There even are several Christian dating websites, such as eHarmony and Christian Mingle.

- † One of our singles spoke about sexual frustration, and said our culture makes this harder. He said, “This country ... is enormously saturated with sex. It's in everything, from movies to television to video games and advertising, let alone the unbelievable, endless warehouse of pornography on the internet. You can't go anywhere or do anything without seeing it. Along with the societal pressure to get married there is the ‘status of sex,’ particularly for men. Men who are virgins are ridiculed and considered the lowest tier of ‘man’ if they even deserve the title. They are a joke, caricatured as either horrendously ugly and unlovable, and/or severely mentally deficient and naïve.”
 - **[12: Matthew 5]** Even without societal pressure, celibacy is hard. Professor Kuruvilla told *Kindred Spirit* magazine, “Like any spiritual discipline, celibacy takes work.”

- It starts with commitment: that you commit to honoring Christ and obeying scripture in this area of life, that you commit to not engaging in any sexual activity or lustful thoughts outside of marriage. Jesus said, **Matthew 5.28 NASB: “...everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”**
 - **[13: 1 Corinthians 6]** Second, it requires a common sense approach to protect yourself: don’t look at pornography or other revealing images, stay away from strip clubs, avoid being alone in your apartment with someone you find attractive, flee temptation if it does arise. **1 Corinthians 6.18 NIV: Flee from sexual immorality.**
 - **[14: 1 Corinthians 10]** Third, it requires discipline: you must take your thoughts captive and not dwell in lust; you must control your body, even when it feels normal healthy urges; you must learn to be empowered by the Spirit as you pray for strength to resist temptation. **1 Corinthians 10.13 NIV: No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.**
- † Besides the sex issue, singles also miss out on having a partner in life, someone with whom to discuss issues and decisions, experience relational intimacy, share accountability and encouragement. Also, while children usually are a drain on finances, marriage can create financial efficiencies that lower the cost of living per person.
- Professor Kuruvilla purposely seeks community among friends, colleagues, and fellow church members. While nothing completely can replace a mate, the biblical fellowship of the church as described by the Bible can provide a lot of the emotional and spiritual intimacy we need, and keep us encouraged despite what we lack in our lives.
 - One of our singles pointed out that sometimes churches have not embraced single people well. Part of the problem is singles often feel like the fifth wheel at family events, and part of the problem is that the church often emphasizes events that are oriented around children’s activities or focused on married couples. So the church needs to be more aware of the needs of singles and more attentive to including them in the community, and the single person needs to fully embrace that community and be immersed in it, not only participating in activities, but also leading ministries and becoming an indispensable person in that community.

How the church can help

- † **[15: list]** In my research, I found several suggestions from single people about how the church could help them. Here are a few of them.
- First, include single people in multi-generational fellowships, like small groups or church fun nights. Intergenerational gatherings allow people to relate to each other like a family would, being blessed by those in different stages of life. So include them and even think about them when planning the event, so not everything is geared toward the nuclear family.
 - Second, invite single people to your social events, even if only with your own family. If they have no extended family around, include them in your holiday activities.
 - Third, invite them to sit with you in church. One single told *Kindred Spirit* magazine, “Often the worship service is the loneliest hour of the week for me.” That breaks my heart! At the least, look around before and after the service for anyone who might be feeling alone in the crowd.

- Fourth, have a genuine friendship with single people. Understand that singles can be painfully lonely or logistically and financially challenged. Pray for them and with them, care about them, be there for them. Call them once in a while to see how their day went.
- **[16: list continued]** Fifth, help single parents out once in a while with a meal or some other favor. Let them know they can call on you for help when they need it.
- Sixth, don't make promises which are not made in scripture. Not everyone who follows Christ gets married, not everyone who follows Christ and gets married ends up happy.
- Seventh, don't hold out marriage as the only good equilibrium outcome. Don't ask intrusive questions about why they are not married, whether they are homosexual, what they are doing to try to find someone.
- And eighth, unless a single person wants to discuss these issues, don't personally say any of the things I am saying from the pulpit. Don't tell them how they should feel about being single. They do need to have a good theological perspective about singleness, but trying to use theology to comfort someone who is grieving their loneliness sometimes backfires, just as it does with people grieving the death of a loved one. They just are not in a receptive mood.

Attitudes

- † **[17: attitudes]** Let's talk about what perspective the single person should have about being single.
 - Those of you who enjoy the advantages of being single, great, exploit them, live the abundant life, give yourself more fully to adventure, growth, and ministry than you could otherwise.
 - Those of you who suffer in your singleness, consider how biblical people handled their situations. Whenever I am struggling, I think of Paul in prison. The Philippians, among others, had the human perspective that Paul's continued imprisonment was evidence of failure for the gospel mission, the result of unanswered prayer, a sign of God's abandonment. On the other hand, Paul said his imprisonment was part of God's plan for the gospel mission and his own ministry, and through that imprisonment all the imperial guard and many others had heard the gospel, and thus the local believers in Rome were themselves emboldened to share the gospel.
 - So I always think about how God might be work through my struggles; I try to take the top-line perspective, walking by faith and obedience, trying to see things God's way, trusting God to do what is best, even if that means I have to sacrifice. Paul was both single and a prisoner, but he told the Philippians in **Philippians 4.4 NET: "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice!"**
- † We mentioned the examples of Ruth and Joseph earlier, how they chose to respond to their trials – which included singleness – by continuing to walk with God instead of wallowing in their sorrows or adopting some other worldly coping mechanism.
 - David Hoffeditz, who wrote a book on single biblical role models, wrote in *Kindred Spirit* magazine, "Jeremiah was able to serve productively and face loneliness because he recognized the Lord called him ... trusted in God's control ... possessed God's perspective ... prayed continually ... and benefited from the help of others..."
 - **[18: Luke 2]** **Luke 2.36-37 NET: [Anna] was very old, having been married to her husband for seven years until his death. She had lived as a widow since then for eighty-four years. She never left the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.** She was an elderly widow, but she found a way to serve God, and had the joy of meeting baby Jesus! Our worth is

not determined by, or reflected in, our marital status. Let us find validation, purpose, identity, significance in Christ.

- † **[19: 2 become 1]** Look to Christ, to God, to meet your emotional needs, rather than expecting a spouse to do so. When you are single and lonely, you tend to put too much of a burden on your imaginary or future spouse. What I mean is, you start to think what you don't have would cure everything that troubles you: if only you had a spouse, you would be healthy and happy! But it doesn't work that way.
- First of all, you are asking this future person to accept a broken down version of you that you haven't bothered to fix and you are asking them to then fix you, to be everything you need in life which you now find lacking. Besides being impossible and unfair to the other person, you are giving that person a responsibility that falls to you and Christ together.
 - Second, God's plan is not to take two half healthy, half spiritual, half alive people and make them into one fully healthy, spiritual, alive couple; rather, God's plan is to take two fully healthy, fully spiritual, fully alive people and make them into one fully healthy, spiritual, alive couple.
 - So prepare yourself now for that blessing! Take this opportunity you have while single to get right with God, get healthy in every way, get your life in order, so that when God is ready to bless you, you will be ready to receive it!
- † **Proverbs 3.5-6 NET: Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding. Acknowledge him in all your ways, and he will make your paths straight.**
- Trusting God means adopting his perspectives, walking with him whatever your circumstances, allowing him to heal you, make you whole, fulfill you in life, even when you don't have everything you want.
 - Trusting God also means you trust him to bless you with what is best. Don't look for some dating success formula; rather be yourself, pray, live right, and trust God with the results.
- † **[20: 1 Thessalonians]** What if God does not bring you a spouse, so you never get married, or if you find yourself widowed or divorced? That is a real hardship. Again your choice is to adopt God's perspective, live for him, and rejoice in the spiritual life or allow yourself to descend into sin, depression, or other problems.
- You might think it is unfair to never be married or to be separated, divorced, or widowed. I don't want to slight the pain you feel, but your situation is not more unfair or unbearable than to be handicapped, born into poverty or an oppressive country, childless as am I, or arrested for preaching the gospel as was the case for Paul.
 - You have to get over it, you have to accept that there is no fairness in a fallen world, and really what is fair – if we are honest about it – is that we would be condemned to Hell for our sins. So the fact that we are saved from that, restored into relationship with God, given eternal spiritual life, should be enough for us to have joy and peace. That's the real value of missions trips, you know: we who go get to see others with absolutely nothing in this world wake up each day with the joy and peace of the Lord, and we have to wonder why we who have so much and aspire to more have so little joy and peace, instead being burdened with covetousness and envy.

- So whatever your situation learn to live as Paul described in **1 Thessalonians 5.16-18 NET: Always rejoice, constantly pray, in everything give thanks. For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.** Whatever your sacrifice, live for eternity, live for Christ!
 - I love the words of eighteenth century missionary David Brainerd: “I cared not where or how I lived, or what hardships I went through, so that I could but gain souls for Christ. While I was asleep I dreamed of these things, and when I awoke the first thing I thought of was this great work. All my desire was for the conversion of the heathen, and all my hope was in God” [*Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, xx]. We should all think like this!
- † **[21: pillow]** I was not married until I was thirty-six. Those of you who are eligible for marriage should never give up hope. God works in ways that are mysterious to us. At the least, it makes sense to stay single long enough to find the right spouse!
- **Proverbs 21.19 NIV: Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and nagging wife.** [You listening, LeeAnn?] **Proverbs 25.24 NIV: Better to live on a corner of the roof than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.**
 - We might say, better to be single than in a bad marriage! The number one cause of divorce and misery in marriage is marrying the wrong person!
 - One of our singles told me she resisted the temptation to get married to a man who was not walking with God. Praise God for that choice, for having that courage and to trust that God would bring the right person later. Missionary Lottie Moon broke off her engagement when her fiancé confessed to believing in macro-evolution. She said, “God had first claim on my life, and since the two conflicted, there could be no question about the result.”
 - So focus now on becoming and remaining emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, and physically healthy, on living by faith and obedience, in an intimate relationship with God, and on making the most of whatever life situation you have right now. If you still hope to marry, trust God to bring the right spouse at the right time; be patient. And know all along that you are important to God and to this church, regardless of your marital status. Let’s pray.