



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 8th July 2007
by Mark Ashton

10p

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

Being Single

Introduction: Why we love rules.

“Show me the book of rules,”
the good boy said;
“I’ll be obedient”.

“The rules of God
are in this Holy Book”,
the parson said.

“But how can I
be sure that
you are right?”

[Then a third voice breaks in:]
“You can’t be sure.

I have created you
in my own image.
Do you think that I

Crave for security?
Go out upon
a limb, the way I do

Create a world,
be crucified
and be obedient

Only to what you are.”

“Get thee behind me,
Satan”, the good boy said;
“I only want

“To see the book of rules,”
the good boy said;
“to be obedient”.

I am afraid I do not know who wrote that little poem (which I came across many years ago); and I am certain I do not agree with its theology. But it does make a point. Most of us love rules, not so much because they tell us how to behave (although they are one of the ways the majority try to coerce the minority); but because we are all self-righteous. We like being right. I like to congratulate myself that I am right, to pat myself on the back for doing the right thing. And the rules tell me what that is.

So it is always unnerving to discover that there are areas in my life where there is no ‘right thing’. And that the Christian life is governed not by rules, but by a relationship. Now, that will not make much sense to you if you have not yet started the Christian life, not yet entered the relationship. But it may interest you to hear that I felt I was a much better person before I became a Christian, than I have since. You might like to think about that.

We have been learning in 1 Corinthians 7 that the Christian believer is to live within his (or her) circumstances and to work for God there, which calls for wisdom and a right understanding of our lives. It is not an accident that I am where I am, and that I am like I am. It is an opportunity for God.

Now, one of the presenting issues of the chapter is marriage versus singleness, and for the last two sermons I have been ducking that issue. And I can do so no longer. You have been very patient.

So, verse 25: *Now about virgins*: You can see from the long footnote at the bottom of the page that there is some uncertainty about what that term ‘*virgin*’ refers to—it could be an unmarried daughter, or a betrothed fiancée, or an unmarried person of either sex, or the not-yet-married for whatever reason. But, if we cannot reconstruct exactly the social conditions

which gave rise to this debate in 1st Century Corinth, we can extract its main principle:

1) Marriage and Singleness

It is not about sin...it is about expediency (what is most helpful). Marriage is hugely important, but singleness is more useful.

1a) It's not about sin (vv 25-28, 36-38)

Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned (vv 25-28a). That is Paul's main point: *you have not sinned...she has not sinned*. It is not a matter of sin. Look on to verses 36-38: *If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man also does the right thing. So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better*. Paul had advice to give: look at verses 26 and 27 again and notice; that it is immediately qualified by the next verse: *Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this* (vv 26-28). Marriage and singleness are totally outside the category of sin.

We are not to be pressurised by other people in this matter, *but the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man also does the right thing* (v 37). We are not to stay single because of the pressure of what others think, out of a sort of spiritual one-upmanship. The 'Good Boy' cannot find a rule about whether he should marry or not. So neither state can be used to boast his self-righteousness. There should be no sense of spiritual superiority about singleness nor about marriage.

The question is not: is it right for me to get married or stay single? The question is: am I getting married, or staying single, rightly? because

1b) It is about expediency

(vv 26, 28, 29, 31, 32, 35)

Look at these verses: *Because of the present crisis* (v 26a); *But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this* (v 28c); *What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short* (v 29a); *For this world in its present form is passing away* (v 31c); *I would like you to be free from concern* (v 32a). Christians live in the overlap of the ages. Jesus has come once, but He has not yet come again. If we are converted, Jesus has dealt with the punishment for our sins (so we are no longer separated from God because Jesus has taken that separation for us on the cross); but Jesus has not yet finished with removing the power and the presence of sin from our lives. We are still in the battle with sin—outwardly: trouble and difficulty; inwardly: as we fight with our own pride and selfishness. But it won't last forever. The final hooter has sounded. So we need to focus on what really matters. *For this world in its present form is passing away. I would like you to be free from concern* (vv 31c-32a).

There is something worth living for, outside and beyond our present circumstances: *I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord* (v 35). A new relationship—to God!—has taken over our lives as Christians. And therefore, within our circumstances, we need to be wise. Our age so worships the right of the individual to choose, that we can over-spiritualise some of our choices. We think that God is desperately concerned about whether I do this or that, whether I live in Cambridge or Hemel Hempstead? (and that, if I chose wrong, I will never be able to get back on the right track again); when actually in many cases, God could not care less what I chose. It is why I chose, and how I chose, that matter to Him. Whether I remain single or whether I marry may not actually be as big a deal to God as it is to me. It is the why and the how that matter to Him. Perhaps I need to ask myself some rather difficult questions: *I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord* (v 35).

2) Marriage is hugely important (vv 32-35, 39)

So important that it is up there with our service of God. *I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord* (vv 32-35). Notice what Paul is saying here. He is not saying that the unmarried person is right, and the married person is wrong. He is saying that the married person has to cope with two hugely important concerns in his or her life (both right concerns); while the unmarried person only has to cope with one such concern.

In preparing Christian couples for marriage, I find I often have to convince them that it is the third most important thing to happen in their lives: We get born, we get born again, we marry. Along with having a child and dying, that is about it for first-order events in life. So marriage is not something to be squeezed in between medical electives, as though the career is equally (or more) important. For me, if being Vicar of St Andrew the Great threatened my marriage, I would stop being vicar. There are plenty of other careers in which I could serve God. We are not to sacrifice our wives for our service of God (nor our husbands). When the news broke of the collapse of the marriage of one evangelical church leader here in Cambridge some years ago, I am very grateful for the St Andrew the Great churchwarden who immediately rang me up to tell me to bring my diary to church the next Sunday, so that he could check through how many evenings I would be able to spend with Fiona in the next three months.

That is why we encourage couples who marry here at St Andrew the Great to treat the first year of their marriage as a special 'foundation' year—in which they can reorientate their lives around one another.

It is why Paul added those words at the end of verse 39: *A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord.* The only mixed marriages (between a Christian and a non-Christian) which Paul countenanced were existing ones. Marriage is far too important (it is far

too spiritual) to be entered into with someone who does not share our faith.

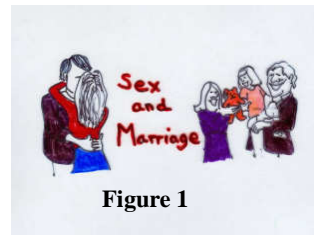


Figure 1

Marriage is so important because it points beyond itself. This world worships sex and marriage. It's diagram time again [Figure 1]. It believes them to be the

ultimate—the ultimate physical ecstasy to be sought again and again, and the ultimate personal relationship to satisfy all my longings for love and meaning [Figure 2]. But the Christian knows that the real importance of marriage is that it points beyond itself [Figure 3]. It is only penultimate reality.



Figure 2



Figure 3

Marriage is no one's ultimate destiny. All earthly marriages end in separation... eventually. For Christians, they point us beyond themselves.

And so, important as it is, we must not pin too great hopes on it. The single may dream of married bliss, but the reality may turn out to be a wife who has depression, a husband who is never at home, and children who are out of control. Marriage can only point us to ultimate reality. It can not bring us to it.

And Paul's own advice would be to stay single.

3) But singleness is more useful (vv32-38, 40)

There can be no doubt that is Paul's opinion: *An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord* (v 32b); *An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit* (v 34b); *I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord* (v 35); *So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does even better* (v 38); *A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God* (vv 39-40)—'Happier' because she can be more useful in serving God. Remember God turns our notions about happiness upside down: - for

me, happiness is about getting my needs met; in reality (God's reality), happiness is about me meeting the needs of others. ***"Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it"***, (Matthew 16:25) said Jesus. What a vital gospel key to human happiness that is!

So we are not to ape the world in thinking of the single as missing out. Singleness is not an inadequate state. Singles are not relegated to God's second best. In God's economy, there are no "unclaimed treasures"; there is no 'shelf' for anyone to be on; there is only a living dynamic will to be in. And remember that will (God's will) engages with us existentially here and now. It does not ask the single to accept singleness for life. It asks them to accept it for today—and then to get on and serve Him to their utmost while it is today. We leave the rest to Him. We leave our futures in His hand. He knows best. How did the old hymn put it?

'God holds the key to all unknown
And I am glad:
If other hands should hold the key
Or if He trusted I to me,
I might be sad.'

Joseph Parker
(1830-1902)

So what a waste to be single, and not to be more use to God than the married! How does verse 35b put it? ***But that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.*** What a waste, if our singleness just makes us bitter and fretful and anxious and frustrated, feeling as though we have failed, or life has cheated us! Rather than seizing the opportunity of our present circumstances to serve God and the gospel.

And God forgive us older married folk whenever we have been less than biblical in pressing others inappropriately towards marriage, as though it were a better state than singleness

'There is a higher throne
than all this world has known,
Where faithful ones from every tongue
will one day come.
Before the Son we'll stand,
made faultless through the lamb;
Believing hearts find promised grace:
Salvation comes.'

Keith Getty & Kristyn Lennox
©2002 Thankyou Music
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And we need to keep our eyes upon that. When I was a small child on a long journey with my parents, my sister and I would keep up an endless chorus from the back seat of, "When are we going to get there? When are we going to get there?" We could keep it up for hours on end, and, with hindsight, I am amazed at my parents' patience with us. (It casts light on the remark I heard from one older friend, who said, "Grandchildren are the reward God gives you for not killing your children". In my parents' case, I think it must have been a very close run thing).

Now, such behaviour may be lamentable in the small child. But it is right in the Christian. "When are we going to get there?" The whole issue of singleness and marriage cannot be governed by rules. But it can—and must—be controlled by our ultimate destiny. "When are we going to get there? When am I going to get there?" Could this be my last day on earth? Could a face-to-face meeting with Jesus await me tomorrow? I need to live now in that expectation. ***What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away. . . I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord*** (vv 29-31, 35). So make the most of today, of the present. A chance like today may not come again.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)