

Marriage, Singleness, and the Family (of God): A Sermon

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The perception in evangelical church culture persists that one of our primary goals as a church is to create good, healthy, safe, Christian families. Sure, we might have singles' ministries in our churches, but even those are usually designed to help singles meet each other! It is no small secret that the ultimate goal of some singles' ministries leaders is to work themselves out of a job. Consider this note that I received from a friend after discussing this topic with him:

This is a very interesting topic for me as many of my closest friends are single. My best friend and I talk about this a lot because he desires to find a life partner and wonders why he has not found anybody yet. He also feels at the age that he is that a majority of people look at him as if he is "less responsible" or "more selfish" because of his singleness. As you know, the current church culture promotes marriage, which makes it extremely difficult to be single as a Christian (unless you have extremely thick skin and are okay with comments people are making about you at times). My question is: how does the church counter this view of marriage and make singles know that they are important, gifted, and even needed in the body of Christ? Personally, what can I do to help my friend and others know and feel like they have abilities and responsibilities that married couples don't have or can't do, and help singleness be seen as not a temporary thing but a very valuable and fulfilling thing?

To address these questions, I want to look at the NT to see what it has to say to this matter. Happily, we find that it is not silent on this topic. And, moreover, much of the NT instructions on this topic come from single people! Below I offer *three NT insights* on marriage and singleness in the church.

Paul offers these instructions about marriage and singleness in 1 Cor 7¹:

Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. . . . I say this as a concession, not as a command. I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. . . .

Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. (1 Cor 7:1-3, 6-9)

We might be aghast as we read Paul's instructions here. Is he really saying that the purpose of getting married might be to curb our own sexual immorality? Where is the romance, Paul? Aren't you the one who penned the "love passage" just six chapters later in 1 Cor 13—one of the most famous wedding texts there is? I doubt many of us have heard 1 Cor 7 read at a wedding ceremony! But here it is as plain as day—Paul instructing us to stay single unless doing so would cause us to be sexually immoral. A little later in this passage, Paul gives us further rationale for his recommendation:

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. (1 Cor 7:32-35)

In other words, Paul's instructions about marriage and singleness do not stem from a restrictive, prudish, anti-sex attitude. Rather, his view of marriage and singleness is fundamentally Christ-focused. He instructs us to adopt whatever life vocation will offer us the best opportunities to serve Christ.

We often think of our vocation in terms of career, but that simply highlights our tendency to compartmentalize our lives. For Paul, vocation includes not only career but even our relational status. Paul says that we each have our own gift from God, some to singleness and others to marriage; some to education, others to tent-making. No one vocation is to be idealized or expected of all Christians; rather, we are to be fully devoted to Christ in whatever vocation we have been called. For some, we may be called to the vocation of singleness, to others the vocation of marriage. For still others, we might be called to the vocation of singleness for a period of our lives and marriage at a later period.

The first principle we glean from the NT regarding singleness and marriage is this: *The ideal Christian existence is not a fulfilling marriage but is fully committed discipleship to Christ.*

Jesus makes this abundantly clear in his call to discipleship. In Luke 14 Jesus states: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even life itself—such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26-27). Jesus is teaching that discipleship to

him requires a radical reorientation of perspective regarding your family relations. If you are not willing to suffer and to allow your family to suffer for the sake of Christ, then you are not his disciple.

Earlier in that same chapter Jesus instructs his disciples:

When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. (Luke 14:12-14)

In other words, even our social priorities must be restructured when we commit to Christ. Instead of showing favoritism toward our families, we favor those who will never have the opportunity to repay us.

When we begin to view discipleship to Christ, rather than happy families, as the chief aim of the Christian life, other insights regarding singleness and marriage emerge. To draw out these points, I want us to turn to a passage of scripture that you have probably never heard anyone preach from before: Paul's final greetings to the church in Rome found in Rom 16. But listen carefully to the way Paul describes the men and women whom he greets.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.

Greet also the church that meets at their house.

Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.

Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord.

Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. Greet Apelles, whose fidelity to Christ has stood the test.

Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew.

Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord.

Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.

Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.

Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them.

Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the Lord's people who are with them.

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings. (Rom 16:1-16)

Often, when we come to this passage, we are tempted to skip straight over it, or maybe to at best stop long enough to speculate what Paul means by a "holy kiss." (Was that on the lips or what?) But this passage is actually extremely instructive regarding the biblical perspective of marriage and singleness. For in this passage Paul not only greets married couples and entire households who serve the Lord together, but he more often greets individual men and women who are serving the Lord alongside him. He commends the woman Phoebe, as a deacon and benefactor. He greets the man Andronicus and the woman Junia, both of whom he calls "outstanding among the apostles." Were they a married couple? We cannot know for sure. Because Paul does not say whether they are married, we can infer that their marital status is not the salient point in his commendation of them. He greets Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis, all presumably single women who Paul states have "worked hard in the Lord." He even greets the mother of Rufus, presumably a widow, since Paul does not also greet her husband as well. In short, along with the households and married couples, Paul greets a number of single women and men as his fellow co-workers in the Lord.

A professor friend of mine recently recounted to me a conversation she had with one of her female students. This student explained that she felt a strong call from the Lord to serve Christ as a nurse in Africa. But she knew that she could not act on that call unless and until her future husband received the same calling. The only problem was that this student was not even dating anyone at the time of this conversation! But she had been taught that good Christian girls find good Christian husbands, and good Christian wives submit their own calling to that of their good Christian husbands.

In contrast, Rom 16 offers us a second and quite radical principle about singleness and marriage, namely this: Discipleship to Christ is more fundamental than marital status *or even gender identity*.

This is not to say that we erase or blur all gender distinctions, but it is to say that we must check all of our gender stereotypes against Christ's own view of men and women. This point is important for both single men and women, but I think it may be particularly important for single women to hear, so I want to spend a moment addressing women specifically.

In the familiar story of Mary and Martha, we are given a glimpse of Jesus's view of gender stereotypes. In Luke 10 we read:

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her

home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself. Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38–42)

NT scholar, N. T. Wright, explains this passage as follows:

Most of us grew up with the line that Martha was the active type and Mary the passive or contemplative type, and that Jesus is simply affirming the importance of both and even the priority of devotion to him. That devotion is undoubtedly part of the importance of the story, but far more obvious to any first-century reader, and to many readers in Turkey, the Middle East, and many other parts of the world to this day, would be the fact that Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet *within the male part of the house* rather than being kept in the back rooms with the other women. This was probably what really bothered Martha; no doubt she was cross at being left to do all the work, but the real problem behind that was that Mary had cut clean across one of the most basic social conventions. *And Jesus declares that she is right to do so.* She is "sitting at his feet"; a phrase that doesn't mean what it would mean today, the adoring student gazing up in admiration and love at the wonderful teacher.

As is clear from the use of the phrase elsewhere in the New Testament . . . to sit at the teacher's feet is a way of saying you are being a *student*, picking up the teacher's wisdom and learning; and in that very practical world you wouldn't do this just for the sake of informing your own mind and heart, but in order to be a teacher, a rabbi, yourself.²

In fact, when we look at Jesus's ministry, we see that he was constantly surrounded by women disciples. Sure, they were not numbered among The Twelve, but that does not diminish their importance to his ministry. In Luke 8:3, for example, we read that a number of women "were helping to support [Jesus and the disciples] out of their own means." These wealthy women were not derided by Jesus for not staying in the home. Instead, Jesus allowed them to contribute their gifts to his ministry.

So, women, whether you are single, dating, married, a mother, divorced, or widowed, let me make this biblical principle clear: Your worth and value to the body of Christ is not limited to your ability to find a husband, have a happy marriage, to have children, or to keep up a house. You are valuable as the individual God made you to be, and your individual gifts are vital to the life of the church, whatever those gifts may be. Women often

have unique gifts and insights that men often lack. Without your gifts, leadership, and service, our church will implode.

Now that I have addressed the women, let me also say a word to the men: whether you are single, dating, married, a father, divorced, or a widower, let me make this biblical principle clear: Your worth and value to the body of Christ is not limited to your ability to find a wife, have a happy marriage, to make babies, or to provide for a family. You are valuable as the individual God made you to be, and your individual gifts are vital to the life of the church, whatever those gifts may be. Men often have unique gifts and insights that women often lack. Without your gifts, leadership, and service, our church would implode.

To restate our second principle: *Discipleship to Christ is more fundamental than marital status or even gender identity.* Discipleship is our identity as Christians. Paul sums this up well with his statement in Gal 3:26–29:

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

This passage in Galatians not only speaks to the fact that our fundamental identity is in Christ rather than our gender, nationality, or social standing, but by calling those in Christ children of God and fellow heirs, it also points to our third NT principle regarding singleness and marriage, namely, that *the most fundamental social unit for Christians is not the family but the church—the family of God.*

In Paul's greetings in Rom 16, Paul says of Rufus's mother that she "has been a mother to me, too." And he often refers to the recipients of his letters as brothers and sisters. Such language is not mere window dressing for his letters, but actually points to a foundational theological point: the church family is more fundamental than the biological family. This may sound extremely unusual to our modern ears, as we go about "church shopping" until we find the right kind of church—"seeker sensitive," "missional," "emergent"—church that will "meet the needs of our families." But Jesus confirms this view in his own ministry. When his family comes to visit him and Jesus is told that his "mother and brothers" are there, Jesus responds: "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice" (Luke 8:21).

This new family identity is poignantly illustrated by Jesus on the cross, when he addresses his mother, Mary, and his beloved disciple, John, saying to Mary, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to John, "Here is your mother" (John 19:26–27). Jesus was not merely looking out for the well-being of his widowed mother, but he was declaring a truth about the fundamental identity of the church. The church is not an institution that requires family ties for membership and care. In fact, the church does not require families to maintain its existence. Entrance into the church is

not by birth after all, but by conversion—a spiritual rebirth. The only healthy family that the church is called to maintain is the family of God.

In Acts, this vision of the church as a new family structure becomes a lived reality. Acts describes how in the early church, “All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need” (Acts 2:44–45). These are the kinds of sacrifices that people only make for their families, which, of course, is precisely the point. And because of these sacrifices, Acts states that “there were no needy persons among them” (4:34). Indeed, the church even went to great lengths to take care of the many widows who were among them, as recorded in Acts 6. As Paul states in 1 Tim 5:1–2: “Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.”

At my church growing up we had a Sunday night service that was often referred to as “family night.” It was a smaller, more intimate setting than the Sunday morning service, and oftentimes we even had a meal together after the service. But interestingly, at “family night” we rarely sat together as families. The youth would sit in the middle section of the sanctuary together, while our parents would sit in the outer sections. And even at the family style potlucks afterward, people would sit with their church friends rather than in family units. I’ve since come to realize that family night at church was about the church being a family together, not about the church recognizing our individual family units. This image of the church as a family

was firmly etched into my brain by an old, campy, corny song that we often sang on Sunday nights. In fact, I often ended up requesting that we sing this song, especially once our church became too hip to sing it anymore. And so I conclude with the lyrics for this old song, “The Family of God”³:

I’m so glad I’m a part of the family of God
I’ve been washed in the fountain
Cleansed by his blood
Joint heirs with Jesus as we travel this sod
For I’m part of the family
The family of God.

Notes

1. All biblical quotations are from the NIV.
2. N. T. Wright, “The Biblical Basis for Women in Ministry,” *Priscilla Papers* 20, no. 4 (2006): 7.
3. Bill and Gloria Gaither, “The Family of God,” 1970.



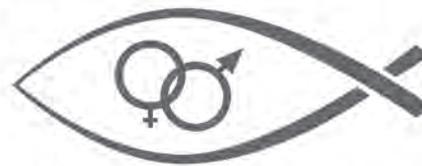
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