



# SINGLENES

## SERMON TRANSCRIPT

Sunday 17 September 2023

Today we are talking about singleness... Singleness in the kingdom of God.

Before I get into this, I just want to acknowledge a few things:

Singleness is something that can be encountered in many different ways. Just like each marriage is different, each experience of singleness can be different too. Being single in our teens and twenties is different in our thirties and forties and sixties and eighties. Singleness is different for people who might be separated or divorced or whose spouse has died. The reality is, people are single for all sorts of reasons - sometimes by choice, sometimes not by choice. People in a relationship or marriage, can still feel like they are single.

Secondly, I just want to acknowledge that this is a big topic, so we are just barely touching the surface. You might be thinking or hoping I will touch on an area that you would like to hear about, but the reality is (like a lot of what we have been speaking about in this series) is that it's broad.

Which brings me to my third point...

Lastly, I think we can acknowledge that today's topic of singleness is not often preached about, not often talked about full-stop. Yet, there are many people inside and outside the church who are single. So I'm really hoping that by speaking about this today, it might encourage us as a church to open up this conversation, to think about it, to seek God on His thoughts around this and to reflect on our response to it.

A new report from the Australian Institute of Family Studies has found there has been an increase in Australians living alone, with over a quarter of households occupied by one person. And this is rising.

The problem is that when we look around our society, it seems to be set up for couples. Romance is so central to our culture – we're actually obsessed with romance, the happily ever after. You have all your reality TV shows of someone finding their perfect match...

Even to travel can be expensive if they don't have a single supplement.

It's in Scripture – Genesis 2:18 tells us that it is not good for a man to be alone. It feels deeply engrained in our values.

It's also something that, dare I say, even from a young age, there is a pressure to be coupled up with someone, to have a boyfriend or girlfriend; otherwise, you're 'missing out', you aren't valued, accepted, 'in', you're not cool etc.

One of the biggest problems we have in our culture is that we don't have many positive pictures of singleness. This is certainly true outside the church. You only need to look at our movies: on one side you have the lonely and desperate, miserable single person – think 'The Holiday' with Cameron Diaz and Kate Winslet or 'Bridget Jones' Diary' or 'The 40 Year Old Virgin'. These movies subtly tell us that there is something wrong with being single – that you don't have a happy ending without the match up.

Or on the other side of singleness where it is portrayed of one sleeping around with whoever and whenever they like... Either is not really a positive portrayal of singleness.

And unfortunately, even in the church, we just don't seem to have a compelling picture or vision or theology of singleness either. I remember taking myself off to a Christian singles conference so I could hear about what my life was meant to look like to help me get a vision of my life as a single woman in the church because it just wasn't talked about in the church. Dare I say it: being single sometimes felt like or had me believe that it was like a second-rate existence, like I hadn't yet made it until I got married. And this is so far from the truth it's not funny.

And the reality is that the Church can be very much geared towards marriage... You know, finding that lovely Christian partner and settling down and having a family. That marriage is the ideal...

However, the unexpected message of 1 Corinthians 7 is that Paul presents being single as a lifestyle on par with marriage – equally good! In fact, if anything, it's actually possible that Paul is slightly valuing singleness over marriage.

Let's take a read of our passage today. I am going to break it up in chunks and speak into it and also spend some time thinking about what this might mean for us today as a church. Whether you are single or married here today, I pray that as His body, the family of God, together we can learn and be an encouragement for one another.

*Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them. (1 Corinthians 7:17-20)*

Let's stop there. Can't help but think that this is a really weird way for Paul to start his teaching on singleness.

What does singleness have to do with whether you were circumcised or not when you became a Christian?

Stay curious with me for a moment, and just hold onto your thoughts there while we read the next bit...

*Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings. Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation they were in when God called them. (1 Corinthians 7:21-24)*

Yep, still weird. But can't help but notice that Paul is actually making the same point and using circumcision and slavery as two different illustrations.

Paul is making sure people are not too anxious or worried about their life situation. Verse 21: *"Don't let it trouble you."* Why? Because it doesn't have any bearing on how spiritual a person is.

Paul is saying, if you were a Jew, the circumcised, with thousands of years of heritage with the Lord, you could tend to feel superior to someone who might just have become a Christian. And on the other hand, if you have just come to know Jesus, you might feel inferior to Christians with a long cultural heritage. Paul is saying it doesn't matter, don't let it trouble you. The only thing that matters is whether you are faithful to God. (verse 19 *"Keeping God's commands is what matters"*).

Then he says the same things to slaves. It's easy to imagine wealthy Christians acting like they were favoured, more blessed than a Christian who was a slave. And really easy to imagine a slave feeling less spiritual, less favoured, less blessed than a free Christian. Paul says nope, don't let that trouble you because Jesus doesn't work like that. How wealthy you are is not a sign of how spiritual someone is in the kingdom of God.

Can you see the point Paul is making?

Paul is NOT saying that God is in charge, so whatever situation you face in life, no matter how hard it is, you should accept that and not try to pursue a better life. He is not saying this. He says if you can get freedom, go for it. Don't feel less than anyone else.

All the ways that our world measures value - your wealth, heritage, what's been handed down to you, ethnicity - none of these have anything to do with the Kingdom. Paul uses these illustrations to set the basis for what he is about to say in regard to singleness.

*Now about virgins [ie. meaning single people who have not yet been married] 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 a man to remain as he is. Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? 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. (1 Corinthians 7:25-28)*

Let's pause there. We can see that Paul is essentially saying the same thing. Just like he was suggesting earlier that he didn't want people feeling inferior because of their cultural background or economic situation, he says the same about relationship status.

Are you single? **Don't let that make you feel inferior.** Don't feel like you need to be married to be as spiritual as everyone else.

A personal illustration is when I've felt inferior as a single woman. I was invited to a wedding - one of a long string of weddings. After you are a bridesmaid many times and not the bride, sometimes weddings can be hard spaces. Anyway, I turned up and was looking for my name on the seating chart - and all my friends and peers (who, at this stage, were all married) were all placed at a table together, but Lara got to sit on the kids/youth table because it was easier to sit me with other singles, even if they were the kids/youth... I know, seating arrangements can be hard work but this was a classic example of feeling inferior, like I didn't fit (yes, I did need some therapy around that).

This passage is reminding those who are single: you are not inferior. Don't let your status of being single make you feel any 'less' than your married counterparts, married friends,

married people in this church.

And when Paul says in verse 26, '*because of this present crisis*', it's likely that he is referring to a big grain shortage and famine that they were experiencing, which led to years of social and economic unrest. So this could also be why he's telling people not to marry.

But there are other places in the passage where he holds up the advantage of being single that has nothing to do with the current crisis.

What about the last sentence where it says, "*Those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this...*" Is Paul saying don't get married, it's hard work, there will be trouble! Commentators, and I would agree, that along with the famine, he's talking about the added responsibility of caring for a spouse and possibly children. It's a lot of work.

So why is being uncircumcised, or a slave, or a single person, NOT inferior?

*What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; 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. (1 Corinthians 7:29-31)*

The Message version puts it in this way:

*I do want to point out, friends, that time is of the essence. There is no time to waste, so don't complicate your lives unnecessarily. Keep it simple - in marriage, grief, joy, whatever. Even in ordinary things - your daily routines of shopping, and so on. Deal as sparingly as possible with the things the world thrusts on you. This world as you see it is on its way out. (1 Corinthians 7:29-31)*

There is a day coming, soon, when Jesus will return and turn everything we know upside down.

If you have ever journeyed with someone who knows they are walking in their last days or weeks here on earth, it becomes obvious that the things of this world, the things we hold onto so tightly, the things that might define us in our lives here, really do start to dim... Any wealth you might have had, special possessions, achievements, even marital status, all start to slip away because what we have left, what we take with us, is Jesus - our relationship with Jesus.

Paul is trying to encourage us. A great reminder to hold onto things loosely. Don't get too

attached to the things of this world. Get ready, because a time is coming, "for this world in its present form is passing away..."

So if Paul is saying that marriage and happiness and mourning and possessions are not the most important thing, then what is?

Let's read the last little bit of the passage now - and see how Paul applies it directly to singleness.

*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 Corinthians 7:32-35)

Paul is NOT saying that it is a bad thing to be a caring and loving spouse. He is not saying that married people should neglect their spouse and just focus on God.

He IS saying that a married man or woman are concerned with how they look after their spouse because they need to be - that is what marriage is about.

Paul is encouraging us that the most important thing in life is our relationship with God. Pleasing Him, serving Him, loving Him, living in a way that our attention and devotion is set on Him.

I mentioned at the beginning of this teaching that I don't think we have a compelling picture or vision or theology of singleness. We do for marriage - Scripture tells us that marriage is instituted by God - a coming together before God to serve God - a picture of the kind of intimacy that will exist between Jesus and his bride, the church. And that being a 'spouse' helps us to become more like Jesus. But what about singleness? What does it tell us about God or teach us about the life of following Jesus?

I have been trying to read and listen broadly around singleness and looking at my beautiful friends who are single and watching them do life. And one thing that has really stood out to me is that both marriage **and** singleness can teach us so much and can reflect the goodness of God.

Pete Scazzero in his book 'The Emotionally Healthy Leader' says, "Married couples bear witness to the **depth** of Christ's love... their vows focus and limit them on them loving and

living with one person exclusively, permanently, intimately. Singles bear witness to the **breadth** of Christ's love because they are not limited by a vow of one person. They have more freedom and time to bear witness to the love of Christ to a broad number of people. Both married and single people point and reveal Christ's love in different ways. Both can learn from one another."

As a single person, I learned that even though I had a wonderful, immediate family, Jesus called me into a larger family called the Church. I found older women who loved like grandmothers and peers who were further along the Christian walk that I could learn from. I found children that I could share with and pour my life into that were not naturally mine. Teenagers that I could come alongside. This is the beauty of the local church... We get to be this for one another.

I also learned that everything I see here in this life - is not all there is! There is more. This short time on earth is not all there is. That we aren't called to feel like we have made it when we get married; nor are we here to find complete fulfilment in this life. That this is a warm-up to the life, the eternal life, to come when Jesus returns.

I don't want any single people to hear me suggest that this means you shouldn't want to be married... I get it. I really do.

Or that even though you love your relationship with Jesus and His Church, you want more! I get that too. The yearning, the longing...

However, I have come to see - and it is what Paul is teaching in this passage today - that neither singleness nor marriage is inherently better than the other. There is no less a calling - being single is not inferior. Both in unique and different ways equally reflect Christ and the calling on our life and point us to the time when we will ultimately find absolute fulfilment in Jesus.

So whether we find ourselves married or single, our ultimate destination is a future time when we will find our truest fulfilment through an intimacy with God, which we can't even imagine now.

So what might this mean for us as a church community? What can we learn? What can we pay attention to? We are going to be looking at this further next week, hearing some stories and testimonies and insight from those who are single. But just briefly, in our last few minutes, what might valuing singleness look like in a church setting? How do we value both married and single people? How do we make sure this place is somewhere where single people feel as central and included as married people? here are a few things we can think about, partly from my own experience of singleness and then marriage and partly from speaking to some single people over the years:

- Pay attention to our language. Saying we value singleness yet always joking about needing to set someone up. Needing to find someone for the singles, especially when there is a good chance that they might actually be happy single. Let's not assume everyone is looking for a partner in order to be happy and living a God-given form of the good life.
- Being willing to have conversations other than work. When we meet people, we often ask about marriage and kids... But if they are single, what else can we talk about? How can we ask creative questions without just resorting to the spouse and kids... eg. What have you been thinking about lately?
- Married people are prone to holding their immediate families very closely, sometimes at the exclusion of single people. How can we include better? How can we welcome others in, especially those who are single, to our special events, our dinners, our holidays...? To those who have families: What might it look like to include singles in?

When I was single, I loved nothing more than being invited into the space of a family. Of being included in. Now, I get it - I am a mum with 3 kids and I really do get how chaotic home can feel, especially with younger kids and the thought of inviting someone into that mess/chaos... As if that is what they would want? But for the majority of singles: YES, that is what we would want. To be included into a family. To be reminded that I am part of a larger community, a church family. I don't know if we do this very well... Not just as a church, but as a society.

I have had plenty of single people remind me that they don't just want to go out with other single people.

I get it practically: family responsibilities can challenge us in this area... (E.g. being invited to go tenpin bowling midweek with some of my single friends after work... Tempting, but the dinner needed to be cooked, and there was a Year 8 assignment that I needed to cast my eyes over, and someone needed to get a child to Acro and my husband would be expecting me home...) But it doesn't mean that you can't put some plans in the diary for a Saturday morning walk or coffee to include single people in.

Yes, we have responsibilities to our families and yes, we need to protect the core relationship of husband and wife - but welcome others in. Yes, there will be times when you might need to look in, to take care of family members that need some extra TLC (tender loving care); but there will also be times when we need to look outwards.

I pray that God will help us do this well as a faith community.