



Gospel Atmosphere
I CORINTHIANS

Now turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 7. Paul in this chapter is going to address how the gospel should shape our thinking about marriage, singleness and divorce. And what is great about the way Paul approaches this topic, is it doesn't matter your marital state single, divorced, widowed or married, the way you glorify God is the same. Each of these conditions give you a unique platform from which you can testify to Christ's all-satisfying person.

Using that platform effectively is Paul's chief concern. Because the platform is just a platform. It's not a given by any means that you will use your platform to testify to Christ's all-satisfying person. You can say anything from a platform.

- Some people use their platform to complain. Married people will use their platform to complain about their spouse, this difficult person they are married to as if they are the only one on the planet to happen to marry a sinner.
- Or singles will complain about their unmarried state. If only I was married. If only I had kids. If only I could enjoy marital intimacy.

The question Paul wants all of us to address in chapter 7 is this, "How can I use my current state of marriage (single, divorced, widowed, married to a believer, married to an unbeliever) as a platform to testify to the all-satisfying person of Jesus Christ.

Paul will address that question for each of these groups in the weeks to come but today Paul is going to answer that question for those who are not currently married, for the single and widowed.

Now there are two sections of chapter 7 that deal with this topic of singleness and even though they are separated in the text we will address both of them together today. There's a few verses up front, verses 6-9 and then a much larger section below verses 25-40. So we will jump between those sections.

Now let's start in verse 6. Remember Paul just got done refuting the slogan that some had created, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." Paul says. Actually that is wrong. If you are married, that's the place designed place to touch a woman. But Paul is going to continue, don't think that marriage is everything. Don't think that the key to your happiness is marriage. Don't think that this is somehow you are incomplete without marriage. Far from it.

1 Corinthians 7:6-9, 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 burn with passion.

So Paul here speaks very favorably of singleness. In fact, when Paul compares being married and being single, he says it's BETTER to be single. Now we are going to look very carefully at that word BETTER. It's BETTER to be single. Now it's very important to understand the sense in which that word is used.

Now oddly enough, I think a good place to start in figuring out what Paul means by "better" is church history. Because the churches view of singleness through church history has not always been the same. And that is super instructive. Any time the churches view as a whole changes it's an indicator that we might be experiencing a current cultural blind spot.

Now to illustrate this, let's pick a midpoint between where we are now and when the church began. What was the churches view of singleness in say, 1000AD? Well there wasn't the divide between Roman Catholics and Protestants at that time. All you had was the Roman Catholic church. It was the only church. And how was singleness viewed in the church during that period of time? It was

highly, highly esteemed. It was the mark of truly holy people. In fact, this set you apart into an upper class of people who were viewed as exceptionally holy, exceptionally godly. You had the priestly class who lived apart from society, who had all taken vows of celibacy and this lower class, the lesser class, the common, domestic class, you know, the ones who were married, the laity.

Marriage and ministry don't go together. it was like oil and water. You can't mix those together. They were different spheres.

Now had did celibacy come to be esteemed in this way? Well, there's actually an answer in history itself. Let's move from 1000AD to something like 90AD under the persecution of Domitian. In the early church to be a Christian was to be persecuted. Paul's words to Timothy meant a lot more to them than they do us, "All those who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." And of those who were persecuted, the most esteemed were the martyrs. They paid the ultimate price to demonstrate their loyalty and love for Jesus Christ.

So in the early church, it was a big deal to be a martyr. It was an honor to be martyred even if you couldn't stay around to enjoy the praises of men for your martyrdom. The early church was highly focused on reward and the honor involved in the self-sacrificing of proclaiming Christ at the greatest personal cost, the cost of your life.

Well fast forward to 312AD. All that all changed when Constantine became a Christian and made Christianity the official language of the empire. Now nobody was being martyred. Nobody was being persecuted. Christianity was the official religion of the empire.

Unexpectedly, this took away one of the main ways you prove your

devotion to Christ. Freedom is all we have ever known, but for them this was new. So now how do you show your love and devotion to Christ in a land where it was acceptable to be a Christian. They wanted a way to express their zeal for Christ, their total devotion to Christ. They were asking the question, how do I get a reward for my faith? So slowly over time, virginity and monasticism became new expressions of martyrdom. You could die to self, you could actually become a martyr, by denying yourself, and with the added advantage of the fact that you were still around to enjoy people's praise of your ultimate sacrifice.

To illustrate this, Ambrose in the 4th century was speaking of this girl who had been martyred. And not only was she martyred but she was also part of the monastic order so of course she was a virgin. He said about this girl, "You have then a twofold martyrdom, that of modesty and that of religion for virginity not because it is found in martyrs but because it itself makes martyrs."

And then of course, this whole connectedness of virginity and holiness was compounded because of the fact that the medieval church celebrated Mary and her perpetual virginity.

So you can see that in the medieval church you had this extremely high view of celibacy. And you can see why? When you read 1 Corinthians 7 how is celibacy viewed? Good or bad? Good! Better than marriage. You have there the word BETTER. It's better. So HOW did they read that? In what sense was it better? Better meant more holy. You were MORE HOLY if you were celibate and of course MORE HOLY is BETTER than LESS HOLY. So celibacy is better. And this wasn't the only place they could point to.

In Matthew 19 in the context of Jesus' teaching on the permanence

of marriage and how divorce should never be an option for believers the disciples marvel at this and say, "If such is the case with a man and his wife, it is better not marry."

And Jesus does not disagree.

Matthew 19:11-12, But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given... Let the one who is able to receive this receive it."

So take all this and put it together. Prior to the reformation, celibacy was the highest, most impressive form of spirituality.

Now the reformation essentially reversed all that. Martin Luther married a nun that he helped free from a nunnery. Martin Luther helped people to see the balance of Scripture. Marriage can't possibly be bad. God created it. Marriage can't possibly be some lesser form of spirituality, it's design was to showcase the relationship between Christ and the church. And so the reformers pointed to Song of Solomon. They pointed to Ephesians 5. They pointed to God's view of marriage.

So you have this great shift during the reformation trying to recenter

things. And now I think we have experiencing a swing in the complete opposite direction.

To the point where the spiritually mature are the ones who are married with families. As a Christian culture, we've gone from worshiping celibacy to almost seeing it as a stigma, "Well, there's probably something strange about him. Who are we looking to hire as a pastor? Probably our first instinct would not be to hire a person who has chosen to live as a single for Christ. We need someone who understands marriage. How can you be an effective pastor if you aren't married and don't understand the constraints of marriage? He needs to be a good example in his marriage as part of the ministry." Do you see how violently we've swung? It used to be that they idolized singleness and now we've perhaps idolized marriage.

Now Paul's point in this passage of course is neither of these are correct. It seems kind of obvious when you step away, that the object of our worship should not be a state of marriage. Paul's concern is how do we serve God in the state of marriage we find ourselves?

And Paul says, you want to serve the Lord? You want to honor God with your life? If your single, maybe it's better if you stay that way.

Now, we will spend the rest of our time in verses 25-40 and try to define what Paul meant when he said that singleness was better. And I think this is important because if you are single, you need to understand why singleness is an extreme advantage for you and how you can really use this time of your life for kingdom purposes. Because again, being single is just a platform. There are lots of singles who use their freedom as singles to play lots of fortnight and waste time. That's not what God is talking about.

So here's what we'll do. Let's just read the passage and let Paul speak to us and then what I'm going to do is try and categorize everything he says into a few points. And as we read your going to notice something a little bit strange here. Paul is going to interject his personal opinion. And for us that is odd. As we read the Bible, we know Paul is writing but we take it as God's Words. What Paul says about justification in Romans 3 we take as God's very words through Paul. But when Paul says, "Hey this is my opinion, not a command of the Lord," that throws us for a loop. What do we do with that? And I think the best answer is just do what he says. Just pretend you were listening to the counsel of a very wise, godly man who was giving his opinion on marriage. You can make a different choice in your life and not be in sin, but listen to his reasons.

1 Corinthians 7:25-40, 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.

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.

WHY SINGLENESS IS BETTER

1. Principle of the BBQ

Here's what we mean by this. Now here in Idaho, a BBQ can mean pretty much anything. We BBQ chicken. We BBQ some hamburgers. If you go to Texas and dare to use language that loosely you will be sharply rebuked. That is not a BBQ. BBQ is a ritual and you have to choose your ritual. East Texas, Central Texas, West Texas or South Texas. The meat is slowly cooked to the point that it is "falling off the bone." It is typically cooked over hickory wood and marinated in the right sauce. We are talking double digit hours. This is a serious ordeal.

Now here's the question. When do you decide to have a BBQ? You look for an opportunity when you have some margin - when the pressures of life have lifted. You look to a three-day weekend. You look for a holiday. The more pressure, the stress, the more tension, strain, turmoil, chaos, the less ideal the timing is for a BBQ. You don't start a BBQ when there's a tornado on the horizon. It's not BBQ time if you hear air raid sirens and invading troops are storming your city.

Now you have to remember who Paul was talking to. What was the climate for Christians in the 1 Century. 1 Corinthians was written in 50 AD. What did people think of Christians at that time? Answering: They viewed them with increasing suspicion. Starting with Nero in AD 64 Christians would experience some pretty serious persecution.

So Paul says in verse 26, "In view of the present distress..." Is now the best time for a BBQ? Marriage takes time and a certain amount of margin to do it well.

It's not to say you can't get married and it won't honoring to God, but there is no question that the present distress will effect the overall ability for you to both honor God and honor your spouse. You just have to take it into account. Is it worth it?

My brother got married to his wife right before he was deployed to Iraq. Wow, I really respected that decision because that's tough. No marriage counselor is going to recommend that as a start to your marriage. Will you learn things. Absolutely. Will it shape you? Yes. But it will be a trial. Going to Iraq single vs going to Iraq single has wildly different emotional strains.

- When you are in risky situations a single person is more free.
- When your spouse expresses her loneliness and it rips your heart out but you can't do anything about it, that's anxiety you have to carry.

That's the concept. It's not wrong. Just take into consideration, the current distress. In Paul's day that meant real persecution.

WHY SINGLENES IS BETTER

1. Principle of the BBQ
2. Principle of the Zip Tie

Now here's the idea. If you've ever played with zip ties (and honestly who hasn't), you know that it's a one way device. You slip that little end through the notch and you press and you press ever so slowly and gently but the second it ratches over that first indentation, it's over. You ain't undoing that thing. The only way to open it up after that is to cut it with a knife.

And that's the way marriage works. We are going to see in the weeks to come that marriage is intended by God to be permanent. God designed it that way. And so once you get married you stay married. Of course we can get out the knife and cut it open in extreme cases, but there is damage. It's never going to be the same again.

In verse 39 Paul says "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives." Do you hear the principle of the zip tie? Bound. You use zip ties to bind things. As soon as you say I do, there's the click. You can't go back. Verse 27 uses that same language. Bound. It's not to be undone.

Now it's not that being bound is bad. In fact, it's the being bound that makes marriage so wonderful. There's a lot of security in being bound. Both Lisa and I have promised to be faithful to one another for better or for worse which means that when either of us have a bad day and we are mean or short or say things that aren't fair, when one of us gets sick or disabled or disfigured, neither of us are thinking, I hope that what I did doesn't spell the end. Of course it doesn't mean that because we are bound. That is good.

But there's a trade-off. You can't have intimacy and freedom. They are opposites. The zip tie removes the freedom of singleness. Marriage changes pretty much every single aspect of how you live your life.

I am committed to my wife and kids first. They get my best time. They get my most meaningful attention. Why? Because I bound to them, I can't focus on others the way I would want to. And that is a true reality. If someone is sick or tired, I will cancel our engagements, not because I am feeling that way, but because I am bound to my family. They are a priority.

So singleness is better in ministry because you are not bound to a family. Let me ask you, do you believe this?

Now I want to encourage parents to think about this. What are you communicating to your kids. Are you communicating that the real goal of life is for your kids to get married, start a family, provide us with some grandkids. Basically, everything is just leading up to that moment. Everything prior to marriage is just appetizers getting ready for the main meal. And if you never get to the main meal, boy, that's a bummer for you.

Think about the way you talk in your home, what they absorb. Let me ask you this. Would you be disappointed if your child communicated that they didn't want to get married, but instead wanted to serve God in a more undistracted way as a single. Do you hear that and go, man that would be better? Would that disappoint you? Have perhaps you made an idol out of marriage?

If you have made an idol out of marriage, it comes across. Ask any single person. It's so easy for married people to make single people feel like they are sub-human, like they have less to offer when Paul actually says, "They are in a better state to serve God in an undistracted manner than married people." Let's praise them.

And perhaps you need to apologize to your kids for not talking about this correctly with them.

WHY SINGLENESS IS BETTER

1. Principle of the BBQ
2. Principle of the Zip Tie
3. Principle of the Puppy

Now I've never owned a dog and this actually makes me the right person to make this observation. So this is from the perspective of a non-dog owner observing dog owners. Now I get why people like

puppies. Who doesn't like puppies. Talk about a factory pumping out non-stop cuteness. Somehow you see a little puppy and you can't help but want to pet him. He's so excited to see you and he just licks you and he's tripping over his big paws. He's wagging his tail and he's just begging you to take him home. Who can resist.

I get it. But then there's something in me that goes. Hold on.

- Puppies come with trouble.
- Puppies don't let you sleep.
- Puppies chew furniture to pieces.
- Puppies will eat your plate of cookies and get sick and throw up or worse on your carpet.
- Puppies won't let you go on vacation.
- Puppies shed fur.
- Puppies eat tons of food.
- Puppies will jump on all your friends and annoy them.
- Puppies will need to go the vet.

So it's an opportunity cost. The puppy is super cute but am I willing to accept all the worldly trouble that comes along with that. Paul says, "Getting married is kind of like having a puppy.

My poor wife. I don't think she counted the cost. I won't let her sleep. I eat plates of cookies and get sick. I shed fur and eat tons of food. I annoy all her friends. I chew on furniture.

The principle is when you are married your worldly troubles increase. Decisions have to be made together which is much more difficult than if you were to just be alone. As a husband I need to provide security in a way that would be totally unimportant to me as a single person. Somehow I got along just fine with my entire life stuffed into a duffle bag for like 6 years prior to getting married. And

the second I got married, the amount of stuff that chained me to earth exploded.

Paul says, "Those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that." Paul is saying, being single allows you to be undistracted in the service of the Lord. You don't have to be home at 5:00pm to help with the family. Your time isn't going to be divided between ministry and the home.

Paul's simply saying, count the cost up front. A man who spent his whole career in medicine might say to his son, "You have the whole world in front of you. Since you have the choice, just be careful about going into certain fields of medicine because that lifestyle is hard on families." Are you in sin if you go into medicine? Of course not, but his concerns are valid. Let those concerns factor into the decision making process. At some point it will be too late to reverse the decision so now, while you have the opportunity, think about it, do.

Paul saying, "Marriage is awesome. It really is, but there is a cost to it." Just add up the amount of time used to address 'worldly trouble' and it's significant. So if you aren't engaged, if you aren't in a relationship, just stop and count the cost. The puppy is sitting there wagging it's tail in the window, but before you commit, ask yourself, "How will my ability to serve the Lord be impacted?"

WHY SINGLENESS IS BETTER

1. Principle of the BBQ
2. Principle of the Zip Tie
3. Principle of the Puppy
4. Principle of the Motel 6

Now in Paul's mind the day of the Lord is going to come any minute. And his thinking is, "the Lord might return any moment. It could be in the next hour. It could be the next ten minutes. It could be in ten days. A year. Who knows. But what's the point of getting married if God is coming back soon?"

Nobody tears out the carpet in a Motel 6 and redoes all the trim knowing that in 5 days you will be moving on. When we are in temporary states we can endure less than ideal situations much easier. We don't even try to change them. When you go into a nasty bathroom, you just endure it because you know it's the last time you'll ever see that place. But if it was your own house, you wouldn't endure it even one second. This place needs cleaning ASAP.

Paul says, "the appointed time has grown very short." That word short in Greek literally means to wind up, contract or shorten. Time is winding up like one of those self retracting cords. It's speeding toward the stop at the end. Of course if we had a thousand years the advice would be totally different. I'd encourage everyone to get

married because that's how God created us.

If you knew you would die of cancer in 6 months and you hadn't started a relationship yet, would it be advisable to start one? Why not? Because the time is so short. And that's what Paul is saying. When the time is ultra short, it really changes your priorities. There's not time to focus on earthly things when heaven is just around the corner.

The whole idea of Paul's teaching is to hold on very lightly to earthly things. Don't get invested in a way where your heart is going to get shattered in disappointment when we have to pull up our stakes from this place we call home.

That's why he says, just act as if all this stuff isn't even there. He says in verse, "For the present form of this world is passing away."

Another application of this is for those who are same-sex attracted. As we said in our previous message, our sexuality is universally broken. There is heterosexual versions of it and homosexual versions of it. But that brokenness is temporal. It will be made perfect in our new bodies. And for those who are same-sex attracted and feel they can't change, God may be calling you to a life of celibacy in service to him. And I think this is a helpful concept in this regard. In the scheme of things, yeah, it's not ideal, but life is short. We make relationships into a bigger deal than they are. Let's get on with serving the Lord in the short time we have left on earth and await the redemption he has in store for us.

Keep the shortness of life in mind wherever you find yourself.

WHY SINGLENESS IS BETTER

1. Principle of the BBQ
2. Principle of the Zip Tie
3. Principle of the Puppy
4. Principle of the Motel 6
5. Principle of the BMW

Now here's the final principle. There are some really great things about having cars that are 20 years old. When my kids get into the car with sandy feet from playing at the beach I just shrug my shoulder. What am I going to say? Hey, get your sandy feet of the coffee-stained gum-matted carpet? But if I had an 80k BMW, I'd feel differently about those same sandy feet.

The principle of the BMW is you don't worry about the stuff you don't have. I don't worry about my Cabin in the Swiss Alps because I don't have one to worry about. I don't worry the European stock market because I'm not invested over there. I don't worry about the weather in Zurich because it doesn't affect me. Unmarried people are not anxious about pleasing their spouse because they don't have one to worry about. That sounds crass but the idea is be thankful because it's a big deal. Use it to your advantage.

Caring for your spouses feelings is significant. Don't take that lightly. Buzzing around in my mind dozens of times a day is

- "I need to make sure I fill my responsibilities to my family."
- "I don't want to disappoint them."
- "I want to keep my word on my promises."

If someone in my family is sick, it's like I am sick. If someone is having a bad day, I'm having a bad day. If someone was mean-spirited toward someone in my family, it's like that happened to me. It's a real thing. You mess with one bean you mess with the whole burrito.

You might argue, "Paul was dealing with a different time period where Christians were persecuted and you know, he thought the Lord was going to come back any time. But things are different now." And I think that is true. Paul's message might have a slightly different edge to it today, but this principle never changes.

This principle is universal to all marriages in any time (vs 33), "The married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided."

What if I Want to Get Married?

So what are we saying here. The point of Paul's words is quite clear. This is a needed word today to undo any messaging you've ever heard explicitly or indirectly that not being married is a lesser form. For all the reasons we mentioned, it is BETTER to not be married for the purpose of undistracted devotion to the Lord.

So if you are single, consider the very real advantage you have in this way. Don't just go haul off into marriage thinking, well I guess that's what I am supposed to do.

Now that being said, I do want to address those of you who may be

single and want to get married. Or maybe you know someone like this. They are very open about their desire to be married. Celibacy for some is not a result of choice but of circumstances. God just hasn't brought the right person into your life.

A few thoughts here.

1. It's not wrong to want this. Paul says it explicitly multiple times. It's not sin. If you have strong desires this way, go ahead. You are free to. You have my blessing. Don't be ashamed. Don't think you took the less noble route. Enjoy marriage and all it's associated responsibilities. Marriage will become your platform for glorifying God rather than singleness.
2. Don't get hung up on this whole idea of the gift of singleness. As I've heard this talked about, practically speaking this is one of the least helpful concepts that I can conceive. First of all, when do you know if you have this gift? And what happens when I don't have the gift but my I am circumstantially single?

I think the better way to think about it is this. If you are single, you have the gift. God is giving you grace to be single as you are single. God's Spirit can empower you to be strong in different seasons.

3. Don't play the "If only game" You are fully human as a single person. After all, the person who saved us was single. Jesus was single. Are we to say that Jesus was somehow less? At one point in our life we said, "If only I was in HS, College, Graduated College, Had a real Job, made a certain amount of money, had a car." None of those things made you happy. Don't think marriage is any different. We aren't happy because we are sinful and until that changes, we will always be unhappy. If anything, marriage provides you more opportunity to sin than ever before. So just be careful in your heart.

4. Obey in the interim. We have all these questions and it may seem to you that your life is on hold until this one major question gets answered. What do I need to do to get married? How long is it going to take? Whose the person going to be? Here's the answer: I have no idea. And sure you'd love to know. You'd love to have a roadmap. But that's never how God works. But until that path becomes clear, you have a responsibility to do what you do know God wants. You could articulate it this way, "If you want to know God's will for the rest of your life, obey God for the next 15 minutes." God gives his best light through obedience. Serve him in ministry while you are single and you will serve him while married. Ignore him while you are single and you will ignore him more when you are married.