

**TRAVELING ALONE
1 Corinthians 7:7-9, 25-40**

I. INTRO

- A. How many of you can remember the first time you drove—**all by yourself?** The day I turned 16, I went and got my driver's permit—and then a few months after that, passed my driver's test.
- So, I'm driving my Dad's big lime green Mercury land yacht home from the test, when he asks me to pull over, gets out, and asks me to drive the car around the block while he picked something up. So I did. In the process, I drove the wrong way down a one-way street with people honking, children running for cover. By the time I made it around the block, I was shaking all over. I have to admit, though, even though I was scared, traveling alone felt empowering. It felt great!
- B. But traveling alone doesn't **always** feel great, does it? In fact, as I talk about singleness today, I may be trespassing on what, for some, may be the deepest source of pain in your life. And you would say, "It's **not** empowering—and it **doesn't** make me feel great." Others of you might say, "I can't relate to that. This is the **best** time in my life!"
- If you are among those who would describe themselves as single adults, you are part of a rapidly growing number of people, especially in North America. Right now, at least 42% of the adults in Canada are single. Last year in the U.S., the number of single adults increased by 10 million—reaching the 100 million mark.
1. People find themselves single—or single again—for a variety of reasons. And that's what leads to a lot of the pain people feel.
 - *You may have grown up into it—and chosen not to marry.
 - *Or it could be that you find yourself single by default. It's not what you would have chosen—ever—but the right opportunity has never come along.
 - *It could be that you find yourself single again because your marriage crashed and burned—or you were widowed—or you were abandoned.
 2. I want to proceed very sensitively here because I know this can be a **very** painful—maybe aching area of life. And, of course—like most people, I've been single. But I've been married so long I've lost any authority I might have to speak to that on a personal basis.

-A disclaimer—there is **no** way I can answer every question, de-mystify **any** mystery—or heal any pain. At least on my own. But I do offer you my best friend—Jesus—who knows what it's like to be single in a world of duets. And my simple prayer is that Jesus, Prince of Peace, will at the **very** least lend His peace to you.

II. WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT SINGLENES

- A. Paul, who was also a single man, had some very surprising things to say about singleness to the church he was writing to in Corinth. Like us, this church was made up of married people, engaged people, people who had never married, widows, and people whose marriages had crashed and burned. So, we do have that in common with this group—even though they lived in a different culture. Let me read specifically what Paul says:

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 Corinthians 7:7-9 TNIV).

-Let me continue, starting with vs. 25:

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 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 TNIV)

1. Let me summarize as best I can what these passages are saying. First, being a single person can be a really good and positive thing. Being single can enable you to have a huge impact on the world—undistracted from all the normal things that come with marriage. Being single **can** be a gift, depending on how you see it.
 - Paul had very likely been married at one time—given what we know about that culture. What he's saying here is that for him—for what he was called to do, being single was a very good thing. He goes so far as to say, "I wish everyone had the gift of being single!"
2. Sometimes people who are not single imply that being married is normal—and that if you're single, you need to somehow **fix** that problem. The Bible says, "That is a defective view of singleness—and it's wrong!"
 - It's **very** important to understand that Paul qualifies his statements about singleness. being a really good thing—and I'll talk about that in a few minutes, okay? There are some qualifications he lays out.
3. Paul then talks about **why** singleness is a good thing. He makes a statement that sounds quite odd to us; "Now, about virgins (current terminology then for an unmarried daughter), I have no command from the Lord..."
 - In our world, you would tend to look either in your own circle of relationships in college, university or friends at church—or through an online service to meet people you would be attracted to. It's a very personal thing.
 - Paul is talking to a culture where marriages were arranged—sometimes when children, particularly females, were quite young. Singleness was something **parents** addressed. Are there any women here who would entrust that to your Dad and Mom?
 - To put it as simply as possible, I think the question being asked was, "Should we go ahead with our plans to marry given the fact that Jesus is coming back and time is short—and persecution could happen?" And Paul says, "When it comes to being married or **not** being married, it's **up to you and what you want to do! Really!** If you want more freedom to serve the Kingdom—wherever and whenever possible—well, singleness makes that **easier** than marriage. Period!"

4. As I mentioned last week, Paul lays out the principle he's been using all through this teaching. It's very simple. **Remain as you are.** The wisdom behind that is it contradicts one of the biggest myths that's out there. "I will be happy **when...**" When **what?** Of course, the answer we give is a moving target. I'll be happy...when I'm 16 and can drive. When I'm 19 and off to university. When I get a good paying job. When I get married. When I have kids. When I feel financially secure. When...
- Paul cuts through all of that and says, "Why not assess where you are now—and be **contented** there. At least for now?" This is really **quite** profound—so I don't want you to miss it: **A change in your status, for the most part, is not going to permanently make you happier and freer and more peaceful.** The problem I face—and you **may** face is—is that I have to take **ME** wherever I go!
- Listen to what Paul says:

Those who marry will face many troubles in this life and I want to spare you this. (1 Corinthians 7:28 TNIV)

Paul is **not** putting down marriage. He's just saying that singleness has advantages **and** problems that go with it—and so does marriage. Does marriage **solve** some problems? Of course. But it creates some, too. That, friends, is a **very** realistic approach to life in general.

- B. There's another qualification Paul gives for a life of singleness—and I don't want you to miss it. He says this:

...I wish everyone were single, just as I am. But God gives to some the gift of marriage, and to others the gift of singleness. (1 Corinthians 7:7 NLT)

-And Jesus says that same thing. Once when he taught that marriage is for life—his disciples were whining, "**Then it's better not to marry!**" Jesus response was,

Not everyone can accept this statement...Only those whom God helps. (Matthew 19:10-11 NLT)

1. Now, here's the tough question. How do you **know** whether God has given you the gift of marriage or singleness? You can usually tell what your gifts are by why you **enjoy** doing—and what you're **good** at doing, right?
- The clearest example is Paul's own gift of being single. He wishes everyone had the same gift as him. He **loves** it—celebrates it! He seems to see all the down sides of **not** having this gift! If you can read behind the lines, he's saying, "There's no way I could do what I do and have a happy, fulfilling marriage! I can face all the hassles and persecutions—and **joys** of my life without worrying about what's going to happen to my family or my spouse. I **love** that freedom!"
- But someone else—like me—would say, "I couldn't **do** what I do without my wife! I **want** all the stuff you seem to be so thrilled about avoiding—anxiety, having kids, having a house filled with children—sometimes chaos, noise and meals and braces and exhaustion

-So, do you have the gift of singleness? If you're newly single, it may take some time to figure that out because you're not used to it. There may be some times, maybe on a long weekend, or in a sad moment—or a really cool moment—when you think, “Wow, I wish I had someone to share this with!” And if you're married, you may occasionally think, “Why, oh *why* did I ever come to this place.” But if for the most part, you're okay with being single—you probably have the gift. And if, for the most part, you're okay with being married—***it doesn't matter! You're married. Too late!***

3. I want to be ***real*** clear about the part of this gift that Paul is clear about. Singleness means staying sexually pure. Let me say it again so you don't misunderstand me—***singleness means staying sexually pure.*** God intended sexual relationships to be protected by marriage vows. Period. When Paul talks about singleness, he is not talking about the ***Sex And The City*** or ***Playboy*** version of swinging singles.

-There is a ***lot*** of rationalization that goes on—even in Christian circles—for sexual involvement outside of marriage. You need to understand that people who justify that kind of behavior are replacing what the Bible has to say about sexuality with what our culture says about it in virtually every movie and TV show.

-Paul makes it very clear here—let me just read it for you:

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 Corinthians 7:9 TNIV)

- a. I just want to speak to this for a minute. The moral system of our world says, “Hey—if you can handle sex, you're an adult—just do it! It's no big deal.

Make sure you don't have any unwanted consequences—and you can do that with condoms, birth control pills and anti-biotics.”

-Sometimes people want to follow Jesus—and then live by the morals of a corrupt moral system—a system that has had a devastating effect on people over the past 35 years. And I want you to know—you have to make a choice about whose wisdom is right on this. Like, it's not like sexual purity is hidden in the sticky pages of the Bible—it's right here in this passage.

- b. If you're looking for wiggle room for God to put his blessing on sex outside of the vows intended to protect it and all it means—you won't find it. By the very nature of the sexual act, when you become one with another person, you don't just connect with their body—you touch their soul—and they touch yours. To mate, then rip apart, mate, then rip apart is very destructive. Believe it or not—God is not trying to cheat us when he tells us to reserve sex for marriage. He's trying to keep us whole!
- c. The advice from the Bible here is that if you can't handle the sexual pressure of being a single person—then get married; you probably don't have the gift of singleness.

-I would imagine, for some of you, that is precisely the issue, right? *I don't have the gift of singleness—and I can't seem to find a partner!* And I know—that's really, *really* hard. God makes two promises to people like you. First:

No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it.
(1 Corinthians 10:13 MSG)

Not *most tests or temptations*—**NO** test or temptation. Zip. Nada.

-Second:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take. (Proverbs 3:5-6 NLT)

God will guide your way. My sense is that the answer God gives us most is not **Yes** or **No!** It's *wait!* Be patient—and let me work in you while you are waiting!

In the era of fast food, microwaves, and one minute managers—we don't *want* to hear that, do we? But we have to!

IV. 'HAPPILY EVER AFTER'—AND OTHER SORRY MYTHS

A. Anyone here ever experienced *buyer's remorse*? I have. Like the time I bought a 1969 Ford van with gold shag carpeting on interior—that I just *had* to have. I bought it at night. Duuuh!

-If you're married—or were married—how many of you have experienced at least a split second of *marrier's remorse*? How many of you can't say—because the person you would be remorseful about marrying might ask you tough questions after the service?

-I think most of you who find yourselves single know that marriage sometimes creates more problems than it solves. You're smart people. If you really, really feel that you want to get married, I think that's a good thing. But you do want to do it without believing the hype. You know, the Walt Disney stuff.

1. For example, I think one of the most profound feelings we have as humans is our sense of aloneness. Sometimes the agony of that is almost unbearable. We long to belong to someone; to have someone to share our hopes and dreams with. Someone who *knows* us! That is a very important human feeling—and it draws us, hopefully, beyond our fears into deep relationships.

-The myth is that marriage takes care of that need forever—and that marriage is the only solution. And that's where you want to be careful—and get on the solution side of aloneness outside of marriage. God created us to live in relational intimacy. When God solved that problem it was a *very* good thing. And marriage *is* intended to give a man and a woman connectedness and intimacy.

a. The problem is when we seek marriage thinking that aloneness won't be solved until we get married. The companion problem is that marriage instantly solves it forever. The truth is this:

*Some single people, like Paul—and Jesus—have very close friendships in their lives with both women and men—and may never, ever marry. And these friendships fill their hearts with joy.

*Some people get married, they work out the knots over time—and find a very close, intimate relationship. Again, that doesn't just **happen** because they're married. It takes work.

*Some people get married—expecting their loneliness to get solved—and it doesn't.

- b. My caution is that **marriage in and of itself doesn't end aloneness!** In fact, to put that kind of pressure on the person you marry may be too much for them. See, we'd like to think that ending aloneness is a one-shot deal where we go through the drive-thru, order what we want, and get it. It doesn't work that way.
 - c. There is an **extremely** important thing to understand about our need for closeness and intimacy. There's a part of it that only God can fill. The philosopher, Blaise Pascal said that in every person is a God-shaped vacuum that only God can fill.
 - Know what we sometimes try to do? Fill that empty space with something or someone other than God. And because this space is so huge, it's like a black hole—it consumes everything we throw into it. When you're expecting another human to do something for you only God can do? **Big** trouble!
2. There's another issue that sometimes comes up that we need to be careful of. Sometimes life has a way of breaking us. Divorce and rejection cuts us really deeply. It's so important to understand that there are no shortcuts to healing. And marriage can't heal brokenness and rejection. It can't.
 - Sometimes movies project that myth. A girl gets treated rotten by two sisters and an evil stepmother—but a prince falls in love with her tiny, tiny feet, finds her—and they live happily ever after. A prince finds a comatose maiden under glass in the forest, kisses her—she horks up a piece of poison apple—and they live happily ever after.
 - We **know** that stuff is just fairy tales—but sometimes, deep down, we actually believe it. As much as we'd like there to be, there are no shortcuts to healing the brokenness that comes with life. You can't wall-paper over this stuff. The fair thing to do is work on this stuff and figure it out before you get married. Marriage doesn't heal brokenness; it **complicates** it.
 3. Everyone wants to be happy. And sometimes we think that marriage is the key to that. But here's the truth, okay? If you're not a happy person before you get married, you won't be a happy person after you get married. Marriage changes your status—but it doesn't change you. I honestly think that's what Paul is trying to get at here in this passage. He's not laying down a bunch of laws when he says, "Remain as you are." He's talking about a very important principle in life.
 - Know what it is? **Be** where you are. Live **fully** where you are. Take advantage of each moment, each opportunity where you are—without always thinking you'll live fully and be happy in some other place, with some other status.

-Know why you can do that? Cause God is there. Right where you are. Right in the space you find yourself. **With** yourself. With your body, with your personality, with your history. Just you. And a God who loves you more than you'd ever dream!

B. I think one of the **hardest** things Paul says in this passage—totally countercultural—is that singleness can be viewed as a gift.

1. If you're going to see it as a potential gift—maybe one of first things you'll have to deal with is how singleness has made you feel. Of course—that depends on why you find yourself single at this juncture.

-A single friend of mine who was in her forties and had never married said that the question she wrestled with was, "What's wrong with me?" If that's where you find yourself, the answer to that question is...**Absolutely nothing!** Any more than Jesus marital status meant that there was something wrong with Him.

-In our world system, the **temptation** is to take your cues from the lies that get shoved in our faces every day—that your desirability is based on how attractive you are, how buff you are, how important your job is, your age, the color of your hair, eyes, teeth—or something else totally irrelevant. And you will have to resist having your brain—and your heart stuffed into this mold.

-And then you will have to simply believe what Jesus says about you. That you are loved. That you have incredible worth. That you have something to offer this world that no one else can offer. So. Who are you going to believe?

2. The **huge** question that comes is—how can singleness be a gift—when what you really want is to get married?

-Let me tie it to something Paul said—after all—he was single. He says that when you're single, you can give your **full** attention to serving God in amazing ways—without the distraction of a spouse or family making demands on you.

-Let me give you my **one** experience—if you promise that you won't make fun of it. Promise? When I graduated from college, I got to travel with a band all over the US and Canada—doing concerts in high schools, shopping malls, churches. If I hadn't been single—I would've missed that. Now, I know, that's a little lame—but there are **all** kinds of opportunities these days to serve God—and serve others in amazing ways. Most of them, however, are not conducive to a person being married.

-I'll tell you what—doing that beats using all your time and money on yourself. The point of life is **servicing**—and when it comes to serving, singleness is a **gift!**

3. Remember the song Blaise played earlier? **One?** Anyone know who first recorded it? Three Dog Night! **One is the loneliest number that you'll ever do.** -But one doesn't **have** to be lonely. The wisest man who ever lived said,

**Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed.
(Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 NLT)**

From the outside, you'd think he's talking about marriage, but at the end he says that three are even better—a triple-braided cord isn't easily broken. He's talking about friendship—how close friends can stand together!

-But, to find friendship—you have to—what? Overcome your fear. Your fear of rejection. Your fear of being known. Friendship has risks. But so does marriage! One guy said that people trying to get close to each other is like porcupines trying to snuggle and keep warm on a cold night!

-Here's what I'm saying. When you're single, don't be so frantic in your desire to marry that you miss what is a fantastic opportunity to build **great** friendships. Friendships that aren't complicated by having to compromise, sleep together, raise kids and figure out who gets to sleep in. Everyone feels lonely. Staying lonely is a choice we make—sometimes out of fear. God says, 366 times in the Bible, **Don't be afraid!** Don't let fear rob you of what you want and need most!

- C. I'd like to close this morning with just a few suggestions that, I think will fit us all.
1. Some of you, this morning, for whatever reason find yourselves single again. And right now it just feels awful. Depending on your experience—you'll face all kinds of temptations. You may be tempted to hate the opposite sex. Or, if your self-esteem is shot—you may be tempted to be a doormat. Or you may be tempted to live in contempt of yourself if you hurt someone else. And to move on—you will need the grace and healing of God.
 - It takes time. And you have to remember that you are coming, not to a drill-sergeant who will tell you to suck it up—but to a God with a heart more tender than yours; a God who says that He sees our tears; a Savior who will never break a bruised reed—or put out a smoldering wick. God is the one who heals the brokenhearted. Watch how Jesus handled people—and that's how He handles your life! Healing takes time.
 - Gene Appel was pastor of a large church in Las Vegas. In a message he simply called, **Solitaire**, he tells the story about how his wife left him for another man. The very next Christmas Eve, after speaking to thousands of people—he went to several fast-food places to get something to eat, but nothing was open. He wound up at this all-night diner at a Casino. He was feeling pretty bad already—and then dropped a quarter in the juke-box and Elvis' voice crooned over the speakers, "Are you lonesome tonight..." Gene said he laughed so he wouldn't cry.
 - Gene did a **lot** of study to understand the depth of his own hurt so his heart wouldn't collapse. He said that it takes at least 2 years for your emotions to settle down. His temptation was to jump right into another relationship—but he knew better. He'd watched as others who had done that had their relationships, almost without exception, end in disaster. If you've been hurt, you deserve better than that. Nobody can heal your hurt, so do what you have to do to get whole, to put your heart back together again.
 2. Second thing—and I've already talked about this. If you're single, God's expectation for your life is sexual purity. I know—in a world like ours, that sounds **very** unreasonable. This is what I believe; God **never** tells us to do something for His benefit—you know, where we're miserable and He's happy. He tells us things for our good.
 - What the Bible says about sexual purity, friends, is not at **all** hard to understand. The question is—will you obey God on this issue and believe that what He says has been said in love!

3. Karen Pascal, whom many of you know well, reads through all my messages before I give them. She is a very close and dear friend—and single. She really helped me with this message. She knows what it's like to have your heart broken—to raise young children alone—to feel the terror of wondering where the money will come from—and the dread of, “What will happen if I end up old and alone. Who will take care of me?”

-The **constant** theme of her insight was, “Tell them to find and accept and live in the friendship of Jesus—a single person who really **knew** how to love, how to give—and how lay down his life for his friends.”

-I don't know where you are—or what the deepest cry of your heart is right now, or what needs forgiven, or what needs fixed in your soul—but I do know the power of

Jesus to meet the deepest needs of your life. I don't care how long you've been married, or how many friends you have—**He** is the **only One** who can fill that

God-shaped vacuum in life. And He offers you his friendship, his love—right this very minute. And He's a friend who will **never** reject you, never let you down, never leave you alone. I don't know what your future holds—but I know it won't be complete without Him.

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

I have a dream for The Olive Branch: It's that **everyone** would feel accepted; that everyone would feel loved; that everyone would feel that they BELONG! That no one feels alone, or left out or left behind. Psalm 68 says,

Father to the fatherless, defender of widows—this is God, whose dwelling is holy. God places the lonely in families; he sets the prisoners free and gives them joy (Psalm 68:5-6 NLT).

If that's what **God** is like, well, that's what we should be like—right?

-If you're married, and you're having friends over—set your table for 5 or 7 or 9. Be inclusive.

If you're single—invite married people into your world. See, that's what this table represents. It was a single person who set it first—for a odd number. When he gave out bread and wine, He said, “When you take this—you're one with me! One with my mission. You're in this together. Protect the togetherness with extravagant love.”

-As we take communion—**together**—that's the deal. We're in this together. Together—we depend on Jesus. We care for each other. We say, “I've got your back! Whatever you're in—your not alone!” And I think that would be **exceedingly** pleasing to Jesus—the founder of our feast!