

# *Making Love Bloom Again – Part 6*

**Excelling at Singleness**

**1 Corinthians 7:25-40**

**June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006**

In a scene from the movie *Dead Man Walking*, a named Sister Helen Prejean visits Matthew, a young man on death row, and becomes his spiritual adviser for the last week of his life. At one point Matthew asks her, “Don’t you ever wish you had a husband to go home to, and children?” She answers, “If I did, I’d probably be home with them instead of here with you.” Sister Helen voices a profound truth from our Bible reading this morning: bloom wherever God plants you, even if you’re a single person. God uses and blesses married people; but God will also bless and use single people. Excel at being a single person.

This ancient text from the book of 1 Corinthians has incredible relevance for us today. According to the most recent US census there are 86 million single Americans. In 1970, 36% of American adults were unmarried; today that figure has risen to 44%. For most people in this country if you live to be 70 years old, you’ll spend more of your adult life as a single person. Campaign managers and advertisers have begun to pay attention to these statistics; churches, by and large, are thirty to forty years behind the times. Of course the church values singles because they singles matter to God and singleness is an honorable platform to serve God.

We often act like singleness is an aberration or at best a holding pattern. We – society and perhaps especially the church – tell single people that you’re incomplete and defective until you meet your future spouse. So sociologist Lisa McMinn says, “Sleeping alone, we’ve come to believe, is bad. Fear of being alone, being marginalized ... and dealing with unmet needs characterize the malady called singleness.” Instead what we find in this passage is a radically contemporary stance towards singleness: bloom where you’re planted. Live life to the full, take advantage of the opportunities of every situation of your life – marriage or singleness – and live fully alive for God’s glory.

Last Sunday we noticed that when Paul wrote to this unruly bunch of believers in the wild port city of Corinth he hammered home this point over and over again: bloom where God plants you. They kept looking over the fence and wondering, “Hum, looks pretty good over there.” So married people wanted to act like single people or maybe even ditch their spouse. Single people were anxious to find a spouse. To which this passage says, “If God is your Heavenly Father through Jesus, those less than ideal circumstances are not an accident. God is bigger than your circumstances; Jesus is present in your circumstances; the power of the Holy Spirit is available regardless of your circumstances. So bloom wherever God plants you.” We found this message three times (see 1 Corinthians 7:17, 20, 24 – the word “remain” means to stay put, hang in there, don’t run away, grow deep. The original Greek word that Paul used is what’s called a present continuous, which means keep doing it and don’t let up.

But for many single people this advice is particularly challenging. Listen to the words of a few single people:

- ❖ “I went through a time when my greatest fear in life was imagining my life single – forever ... being single had a stigma attached to it. If I were to be single for life people would look at me and wonder what was wrong with me.”
- ❖ Or as one single mom said, “I have friends who let their husbands handle the finances (or the children’s bedtime ritual) because it’s not their thing ... They have permission to not be an expert at everything. But when you’re single, and particularly a single parent, (you have to be) good at everything ... This increases the burden and the guilt.<sup>1</sup>”
- ❖ A young woman writes, “In my church, communion is served by the elders ... often accompanied by their wives. This makes sense ... but it leaves me with a few questions: How does being married to an elder make one more qualified to serve? Will I be able to serve in this capacity only if I get married – and to someone with elder potential?<sup>2</sup>”

This morning I want to validate these feelings. It can be tough to be single in a couples-oriented world. But I also want to look at singleness through the lens of the Bible and state that singleness is also a sign and an opportunity. As a sign it points beyond itself to declare something valuable to all of us – single or married – about the Christian path. As an opportunity it implies that we can embrace singleness as a gift and not a curse.

Back up in this passage to verses 7-8 where Paul begins the Christian view of singleness. “I wish that all men were as I am.” In other words, Paul is saying, “I like singleness. I wish you could all see what a gift it is to be single.” But then he goes on to say, “But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.” Singleness can be a gift from God; marriage can be a gift from God. One isn’t necessarily better than another; it all depends on how God has called you and where God has planted you. Now in verses 25-40 he’s going to unfold some of the advantages and opportunities hidden in the state of singleness.

Then let’s jump to verses 25. Isn’t that a strange thing to say for someone who was supposedly writing God’s inspired word to us? What did he mean by “I have no command from the Lord”? Paul was saying that Jesus did not directly address this issue while he was on the earth. But as one who had been touched by God’s mercy and found “trustworthy” to bring God’s word, Paul will say that singleness provides some gifts and opportunities.

First, singleness reminds us of the urgency of life. It reminds us to live life to the fullest no matter what happens to us. Read verses 26-29a. Throughout this letter Paul is saying, “No matter what state of life you’re in – married or single – don’t waste it. Don’t waste your life! Make your life count because you don’t accumulate life, you use it or lose it. So don’t waste your life; don’t just coast; don’t just accumulate and consume. Leave a legacy and blaze a trail for God’s glory.”

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<sup>1</sup> Both examples come from *Sexuality and Holy Longing* by Dr. Lisa McMinn, pages 70, 71 and 75.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in *Real Sex* by Lauren Winner, pages 136-137.

What is the “present crisis” of verse 26? It could mean all kinds of things, but I think that Paul gives us a clue in verse 29 when he says, “What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that life is short.” And then he hammers it again at the end of verse 31 – “for this world in its present form is passing away.” What is the “present crisis”? If you’re alive this morning, you’re in the “present crisis.” Life is a crisis because life is short and you only get once shot at it. Another New Testament author, a contemporary of Paul named James, put it this way: “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and make a profit ...’ What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” (James 4:13-14). Life is a crisis because your life – the one and only life that you’ll ever get – is a vapor, a breath of steam on a cold day (James 4:13-14).

When you’re growing up you never think about the brevity of life. When you’re done growing up you do your best to avoid the reality of life’s brevity. But it keeps catching us by surprise (i.e. “I just held my daughter in my arms and now she’s getting married?”). The Form (or schema) of this world is passing away. So Paul says, beginning in verse 29, “Time is short.” Then he lists five things that will pass away: “From now on those who have wives should live as if they have none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something as if it were not theirs to keep (this is one of the few references to shopping); those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed by them.”

He isn’t advocating a Stoic aloofness (“yea, whatever”) or an apocalyptic escapism (“the world can go to hell because I’m out of here”). Paul is calling for a radical new stance to the world predicated on Jesus crucified and risen again and living within us. It changes everything we do. Christ – knowing him and making him known – becomes our greatest treasure and our first priority. This doesn’t turn us into wild-eyed religious fanatics who are out of touch with reality; it actually turns us back to reality and it floods us with peace and joy and love for others. Knowing Christ and making Him known changes the way we grieve and the way we go to the mall and the way we use our homes or cars. (Hold up the following items: MP3 player, my check book, a trophy, an electric gadget – they have something in common: I won’t take them with me when I die. They are all part of what Paul calls “this present world in its present form” which is passing away. They are temporary states of existence and temporary possessions).

What does this have to do with marriage and singleness? Simply this: married people, generally speaking, can easily forget this truth. They get distracted. That’s the point Paul makes in verse 28 – “But those who marry will face many troubles – and I want to spare you this.” What does he mean by troubles? Well, he spells it out in verses 32-33. Now, the Bible has repeatedly said that marriage is a beautiful gift from God. It’s not unspiritual to be married. The Bible even declares the inherent goodness of creation, including our bodies and sexual union within marriage (see 1 Corinthians 7:1-5). But marriage can cause us to lose focus and a sense of urgency. We forget that life really is short; it’s a vapor; it’s a crisis and we’re in the crisis right now. We get a little too cozy in our marriages.

So husbands and wives – especially in our culture – get on a slippery slide that goes like this: George and Kathy get married. As single people they were daring, adventurous, “on fire” servants of Christ. They were spiritual leaders in their church. They were actively sharing their faith with those who don’t know Christ yet. They were growing in their knowledge of the Bible. But then they have a few kids and their faith starts to cool. Now they spend every free minute driving Johnny and Suzy to soccer games and cello lessons. They need a bigger house to store all their stuff so they both have to work more to pay their tax bill. They’re both exhausted – all the time! They can’t get involved in church. They have to plan for retirement so when they finally do retire they can travel, play shuffleboard and card games.

Now the New Testament blesses our parenting and our marriages. Some of what George and Kathy have experienced is inevitable and even God-honoring. It’s part of what it means for them to bloom where God has planted them. But do you see how George and Kathy can easily lose their focus and vision for God? In the midst of this lifestyle they can slide into becoming complacent, middle-class, spiritually lukewarm, unfocused followers of Jesus who are more engrossed in the American dream than they are in what Jesus called the Kingdom of God. They start to live like their marriage and their family is life’s summa bona, life’s highest good. It’s not, the Bible says, because even your marriage is going to pass away. “From now on, those who have wives should live as if they have none,” Paul says. Yes, work on your marriage. Yes, spend time together. Yes, romance your spouse. Yes, go out to dinner. Yes, walk and enjoy one another. But always remember that God didn’t design you and give you breath and put you on this earth just to work on your marriage. Your life is short. Leave behind a legacy of a great marriage – by all means – but let your legacy and your impact be larger than your family.

Most people are shocked to learn that Jesus said the same thing. Singleness teaches us something about the urgency of life and the nature of eternity. In one Bible passage a bunch of religious leaders called the Sadducees came to Jesus with a dicey question: “Okay, so let’s say there’s a woman who is married but then her husband dies and then she marries one of his brothers and he dies and so on until she’s been married to and survived seven different men. When heaven rolls around, how are they going to sort out who she’ll be married to?” It’s a trick question posed by a bunch of religious “meanies” because they don’t even believe in the afterlife. But Jesus doesn’t miss a beat. He replies, “You guys don’t understand the Bible or the power of God.” And then Jesus hits the theological punch-line’ “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage” (Matthew 22:23-30).

It’s a hard teaching and the Gospel writer Matthew tells us that the crowds who heard this were “astonished.” I mean, am I not, in my very core of my being, the husband of Julie Woodley? How can God say that I won’t be married to her in heaven? I like my wife. At the end of the day there is no one I’d rather hang out with than my wife. Won’t I be disappointed in heaven not being married to my wife? No, because my basic identity is not husband, wife or even child or father or mother. Our basic relationship is not husband and wife but brother and sister in Christ. Our basic family is not the new

community called the church, the family of God, this new society created by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. My basic identity is “Matt Woodley – child of God through Jesus Christ.” Singleness reminds me – and you and the entire church – that is the basic, primary, fundamental, unchanging identity for all of us. That is our eternal destiny.

This doesn't make marriage bad or less spiritual. Paul says over and over again throughout this passage – bloom wherever God plants you (see verse 27). But there is also an underlying message here regarding singleness: it's a good thing. It's not a holding pattern. If God has planted you there, use it for God's glory. You are not a second class citizen of the Kingdom of God. Where has God planted you? According to Paul, most single people (single parents may be an exception to this) have less potential distractions (see verse 32b and verse 34b). So bloom in that place. Don't waste your life. Don't waste your singleness. Offer it to God. Pour it out to God.

But, again, all of this hinges on your calling and gifts. For instance, one of my heroes, John Wesley, the man on horseback, who traveled all over England and Ireland sharing God's love in Jesus was a married man. He wrote wonderful sermons, started hundreds of small groups, opened soup kitchens, defended the poor and enslaved, freed the addicted, ignited a spiritual renewal across Great Britain; but he did all of this while his wife languished back in their house. They had a lousy marriage. What would Paul say to him? I think this text gives us a clear answer: go home and work on your marriage. God doesn't need you to ignite a spiritual renewal. All you have to do is fulfill your calling; to bloom where God plants you.

But then there's another hero from church history, a Scottish preacher named Robert Murray McCheyne. He only lived to the age of thirty and died from the flu. But he knew from a young age that he was called to be single. He went to a tiny church in Scotland and poured his heart out for God and other people. A deep and rich spiritual awakening moved out from McCheyne's life, spreading through all of Scotland.

Singleness is a sign for all of us – married or single. It points to something beyond itself. It disrupts and challenges us. Specifically, it raises three profound questions:

1. **How Big Is Our God?** Is God big enough, is the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus, big enough, grand enough, is it a big enough story to capture your heart, to woo your heart, and to begin to fill your heart with true joy and ultimate satisfaction? Singleness reminds us that as human beings we were never meant to find our ultimate satisfaction and fulfillment in another person. It just doesn't work. C.S. Lewis put it this way: *God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on gasoline, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing*

2. **How Big is Our Love?** Will we as a church practice radical hospitality to singles and married people? It's not always easy being a single person. It's difficult to be a single parent. If you're married and you have children, imagine what it would be like if your spouse died or abandoned you? Or if you've already raised your children as a husband and wife, imagine what that would have been like to do it alone? Are you willing to ask single people, single parents simple questions like, "How are you? What's it like for you? How can I pray for you?"
3. **How Big is Our Mission?** If you are a follower of Jesus, you have a mission. If you're not a follower of Jesus this morning, let me invite you to know the Savior who not only forgives your sin and gives you the gift of eternal life but who also gives you a life-changing mission. That mission is bigger than your success or failure. It's bigger than your marriage. It's bigger than your family. It's bigger than you ever imagined. Whether you're single or married, don't settle for anything less. John Piper tells the following story in his book *Don't Waste Your Life*:

*In April 2000, Ruby Eliason and Laura Edwards were killed in Cameroon, West Africa. Ruby was over eighty. Single all her life, she poured it out for one great thing: to make Jesus Christ known among the unreached, the poor, and the sick. Laura was a widow, a medical doctor, pushing eighty years old, and serving at Ruby's side in Cameroon. The brakes failed, the car went over a cliff, and they were both killed. Was that a tragedy?*

*I will tell you what a tragedy is. I will show you how to waste your life. Consider a story from the February 1998 edition of Reader's Digest, which tells about a couple who "took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their 30 foot trawler, play softball and collect shells." This was the dream: Come to the end of your life – your one and only precious, God-given life – and let the last great work of your life, before you give an account to your Creator, be this: playing softball and collection shells. Picture them before Christ at the great day of judgment: "Look, Lord. See my shells." That is a tragedy. And people today are spending billions of dollars to persuade you to embrace that tragic dream. Over against that, I put my protest: Don't buy it. Don't waste your life.*

Brothers and sisters, as your friend and your pastor, as your fellow-struggler in Christ, I plead with you as well: don't buy that dream. God has something much better for you. Pour yourself out for Him and for His glory and for your joy.