



Sermon Transcription • Abbotsford

Modern Family March 11/12, 2017 - Greg Harris
Christians Mingle - 1 Corinthians 7:32-38

[Please Note: This transcript has been lightly edited for ease of reading. Also, some headings have been added in square brackets to aid the reader in locating portions of the sermon.]

[“Single People Stand Up...” in church]

Jeff Bucknam is our lead pastor and this past week he and I were having a conversation about his time in New Zealand. He was at a church one time, just as a visitor, and he was sitting in the pews and he looked at the bulletin and it said that the topic of the sermon was going to be about singleness. So the pastor comes up and he starts his sermon by looking at the congregation and he says, “*Can the single people please stand up?*” And so some people slowly stand up and he says, “*There's more, I know there's more. Can you please, if you're single, please stand up?*” More people slowly stand up. Sorry, you don't actually have to. Sorry, sorry, brother, context of the story.

So standing up, like our dear friend there was, and he looks at the single people in the room who have stood up, and he looks at them, and he says, “*We need to love these people. They're beautiful. They're no different than you and me, they're just like us, they're ... they're people just like you and me.*” and I heard this story and I thought it was going to be my intro and it has to be, and then someone in the office said, “*Greg if you actually make people stand up though, it's not going to go well for you the rest of the sermon*”. So, that wasn't my intention, brother, was to get you to stand up.

Look, maybe you're here and you're married, maybe you're single and maybe you're a young adult. You've always been single, you're hoping to get married one day. Maybe you were married but now you're single because maybe your spouse died or maybe your marriage just fell apart and now you're divorced. Marriage and singleness is where all of us fit on that spectrum, and the Bible actually talks about both marriage and singleness. It addresses the real life situation that we find ourselves in.

[What does the Bible say about singleness?]

So we're going to be looking at the passage that deals with marriage and singleness in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, particularly verses 32 through 38. But 1 Corinthians is a letter that Paul the Apostle wrote to the church he planted in a city called Corinth and he's talking about a lot of different issues, some core Gospel issues, some core identity of who you are in Jesus issues, but he also talks about some really practical stuff; and in this section, he addresses marriage and singleness. So let's actually read the text together. I'll read it, 1 Corinthians chapter 7 starting verse 32.

“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.

If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man also does the right thing.”

So then, he who marries the virgin does right. But he who does not marry her does better. So we're going to look at this text. We're going to look at five ideas that this text raises about marriage and singleness. OK, so five ideas from this text. They're about divided interests, undivided devotion, an obvious reason for marriage, marriage is good, and singleness is better.

5 Ideas from this passage:

- 1) Divided interests.
- 2) Undivided devotion.
- 3) An obvious reason for marriage.
- 4) Marriage is good.
- 5) Singleness is better.

[Divided Interests]

I think we're gonna have fun this morning. So first let's look at what this passage says about divided interests. Verse 33 of 1 Corinthians 7 says,

“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.”

Here's what Paul's saying in these verses is that married people have divided interests. They want to follow Jesus as Christians and yet they find in themselves this pull in their brain, and in their thinking that they also want to be mindful of their spouse. They're concerned about worldly things, not just the Lord, they're concerned about their husband or their wife. They have divided interests.

So I don't know if you saw this video, that's kind of become viral. I think since Friday night it's this interview from BBC One. A professor who's being interviewed, Professor Kelly. He's a political professor whose expertise is in Korean political dynamics between South and North Korea. So he's



being interviewed from his home office on national television on BBC One, sitting in his home office, right? He's got his desk beside him with some books on it and the nice background and he's talking about really important things and then the door bursts open and out comes his daughter with like some kind of ski goggles on or something. She waltzes her way up to the front to go to her dad and she knocks the books off the desk and she's just doing her thing as she probably does all the time at her dad's office. Which is funny. The second part of the video that's kind of funny is that the baby, the younger sibling, comes in on like some kind of roller, keep-baby-upright contraption, and so they're walking in this roller thing and the baby's knocking over stuff and the babies coming near the toddler. This whole scene is a mess and then the best part of the video is when the wife enters the room and she's just full on stealth mode. She's like hands and knees in the room, thinking she's not in the camera shot, grabbing the baby in the rolley bag, grabbing the toddler and like trying to get out of the room and close the door and all of it's on live television. It's fantastic.

Here's the thing: Professor Kelly has a job that he's wanting to do in his interview, but he has divided interests. He has things like babies and wives coming in and disrupting his work life because that's what happens for married people. Married people have divided interests. So marriage divides our interests.

Now you're probably sitting there thinking, *"Man, you're sure talking down about marriage. You're making it seem like it's a negative thing. And I thought Christianity was all about this like "Focus on the Family-ee" kind of environment that's all about marriage and the family. That's like what the church, bread and butter of the local church is, marriage and family"*, and this passage is actually a really helpful correction I think for us. It helps those of us who might have a subconscious idolization of marriage and it helps check that, and make us think that actually, maybe in some circumstances, maybe in my circumstance, the way that I'm supposed to grow more like Jesus and grow in my love for Him and serve Him is through remaining single. See, in the Christian context we just assume marriage is what good, normal people do. And it's a gift from God and so God wants all people to be married and so it's just a normal thing that you do.

We as Christians in the Christian culture, we sometimes think that marriage is kind of like how *The Game of Life* talks about it. So like in the board game, *Life*, you get your little car and you get your little blue or pink peg and put it in and you start the game and my parents never want to play because they are like *"this is too much like life"*. But you're playing the board game, right? And you're on that little path thing and there's three spots that are red that everyone has to stop at. Everyone! Those three stops are 'get a job', 'get married', 'buy a home'. Doesn't matter what you roll, if you land on a red stop you have to do that. That's just what you do in *The Game of Life* - is you get married, it's just what happens and I think in our Christian culture we're more influenced by board games than the Bible. The Bible says that marriage will divide your interests so we shouldn't assume that God wants every single Christian to be married, because it will divide your interests.

[Undivided devotion]

Secondly, this passage talks to us about an undivided devotion. So start in verse 32 again.



“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.”

Here's what Paul is saying, singleness is a good thing. He writes in verse 35 that he's writing this stuff about singleness, about not getting married, for their own good. He says, *“I'm not trying to restrict you”*. The language of ‘restrict’ is this image, in the original language, of a noose. I'm not trying to kill you with singleness. I'm not holding you back from your true destiny of being a married Christian. No, what I'm saying to you about singleness, is it's a good thing. Earlier in the chapter, in chapter seven of 1 Corinthians, Paul writes these words in verse 7,

“I wish that all of you were as I am (which was single). But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.”

Here in this passage in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul is clearly saying that singleness is a good gift from God. So the question is, okay, well why is it a good gift? What makes singleness this good gift? Why does Paul say I wish that you were like I am? The reason is in the text, it's because singleness allows a person to be undivided in their devotion for the Lord. ‘Kay, so what does undivided devotion look like then? I had a friend of mine tell me a story this week where she was saying that in her youth group growing up, the pastor, a youth pastor, was talking one day about dating in high school and how you shouldn't do it, and all this kind of stuff. And then the pastor said, *“The reason you don't need a boyfriend, ladies, is because Jesus is your boyfriend.”* And then the friend elbowed my friend and said, *“Yeah, but I don't have a crush on Jesus.”*

See undivided devotion, there's a temptation for us in our culture to think that undivided devotion just means our love for Jesus, that somehow it's better to be single because if you're single you just walk around every day singing ‘Jesus is my boyfriend’ kind of songs like <sings> *“I love the way he holds me and he holds me so well”* </sings> and it's just great because you're single and Jesus is your boyfriend and life is great. That's not actually what's being talked about by undivided devotion. Of course, Christians have an affection, a love for Jesus as our Lord and Savior, the one whose blood earns our salvation. Of course we love him, but the language of undivided devotion for Paul, from his context, must mean his service for the church. This idea that ‘I wish everyone was like me’ who is single, because I can go to any kind of church and be free from any responsibilities of a family because I can...I can just go. I can serve and not have to worry about having divided interests. I can be totally devoted to the Lord in my service in the local church.

Here's the point. Singleness provides an undivided devotion to the Lord which will express itself through ministry in the local church. So what this looks like is something probably like what my friend Matt Glezos, who's on staff here and he's planting our Tri-City Church campus, he was telling me a story of



when he was involved in another church plant before this one. One of the key guys on their leadership team was this single guy, who served all over the place. Who heard the vision of this church being planted in the area where not a lot of gospel ministry is happening and he knows people have to hear the Gospel to be saved and so he realizes the importance and necessariness of the local church and so he looks at his life and his situation and he thinks to himself, *“I'm going to get involved in this church plant. Not just, like, attend it on the weekend but I'm going to give everything I have outside of my work time to this church plant. I'll serve in whatever leadership capacity I'm capable for. I'll stack the chairs. I'll stay late. I'll do whatever is needed for this Gospel-centered church plant to exist in this city”*. Because singleness allows an undivided devotion to the Lord, which expresses itself through service to the local church.

So for my single friends here, what this means for you is in this season of your life, I don't know if it's going to be for a short time or for your whole life, this text is telling you that your season of singleness is for the purpose of being able to serve in the local church in a way that married people don't necessarily have the same opportunities to. 'Cause married people have babies coming into the back of our interviews when we're being interviewed live on national television. But singles can serve the church with undivided devotion.

Here's what I'm not saying: is that if you're single you can't have hobbies or you can't go on vacations or you can't watch Netflix. I'm not saying that, but I'm saying that this passage tells us that singleness allows an undivided devotion to the Lord, which will express itself through service in the local church.

[An Obvious Reason for Marriage]

Third, this text talks about an obvious reason for marriage. Verse 36,

“If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin — this man also does the right thing.”

Here's what this part of the passage is saying to us. Is that strong passions between the two genders is a God designed thing. That sex, in the appropriate context, is a God designed, good thing. So the fact that couples, when they date and they're getting to know each other more, the fact that there is this building up of passion inside of them is not this unholy thing to suppress and ignore. It's actually a God designed thing because sex is something that God designed. The Christian church is really good at talking about all the ways that sex is misused in relationships and in the culture and all that kind of stuff. But I think in the church, we need to be better at thinking through the proper and good-ness of sex. Being used in the context of a marriage between a man and a wife. So what this means is that if you're finding yourself in a dating relationship and you are finding the passions becoming too strong, Paul says you should get married. Now look, all the parents of like twenty somethings are thinking to themselves, *“Ahhhh...that's not a good reason to get married”*. But sure, there's other good reasons to get married. But let's not forget that actually sex is a good reason for marriage. It's an obvious one. It's



not the only one, but sex is a good gift given by God to be enjoyed in the context of a marriage between a man and a wife and that's a good thing. We don't have to be embarrassed by it. We can affirm it as a good thing and say you know what, *"If you're at the point in your relationship where even if you don't have all your plans sorted out and you don't have that perfect job, you don't have the house, if the passions are building too strong, you do well to get married."* Sex is an obvious reason for getting married.

[Marriage is good]

Fourth, marriage is good. Verse 38 says:

"So then he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better."

You hear that language *"he who marries does right"*. It's a good thing to be married. Marriage is a good gift from God. Remember that passage I quoted earlier, 1 Corinthians 7:7, where Paul is writing saying, *"I wish you could be like me (like single) but I know not everyone has that gift. I know other people God is gifted in other ways."* Meaning, some people don't have the gift of singleness, they have the gift of marriage. Marriage is a good thing, it's a good gift. Paul wrote Ephesians 5 and describes marriage in beautiful ways as a picture of the Gospel and the goodness of marriage. He writes it for a reason because he actually thinks marriage is a good thing. So don't miss here, Paul saying that marriage is somehow worse off or that you're worse off if you're married. That's not at all what he's saying. Marriage is a good gift. So is singleness. And the two aren't actually at war with each other.

Here's what I found this week in talking about this text, in just bringing it up with people around me, even preaching the sermon over this weekend. Some of the consistent feedback I've heard from married people (I haven't just got this in between these two services), was when you talk about singleness in a way where you're elevating it as this great thing you're making marriage seem like it's not a good thing. But marriage is a good thing? Right, marriage is good; marriage is a good gift. Because it's a good gift, if you're single and you want to get married it's okay. It's actually good for you to talk to your heavenly Father and ask him for a good gift, like marriage. But we also need to recognize that marriage and singleness are both gifts from God. It's not like when it comes to marriage and singleness that God is like this cosmic Santa who gives some people gifts and some people coal. Singleness is not a coal in your stocking. Marriage is not a coal in your stocking. Both singleness and marriage are good gifts given to us from a good God for good reasons. So marriage is a good thing.

So what I also don't want you to be thinking here, married people, is if you're sitting there, I don't want you to be thinking that I'm saying that your marriage was a bad idea. That like you would have been able to do way more good stuff for the church if you just didn't get married. Like, *"Oh! You missed God's plan for your life because you should have stayed single and done awesome things in ministry but instead you decided to get married and now [pfft]...Missed it."* It's not at all what I'm saying marriage is a good thing. It's a good gift that God gives his kids for good reasons because He's good. And He's going to use your marriage as a way to make you look more like Jesus and to serve people so that they can love Jesus better. Marriage is a good gift even though it divides our interests, marriage is good.

**[Singleness is better]**

Fifth, singleness is better. Verse 38:

“So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better.”

Ok, what does this mean? You just went through this whole thing about it's not a coal, you don't have a coal, you don't have a coal. No one gets a coal. It's all a gift, it's all good, marriage is good. You just said that and now you're saying singleness is better. What does that mean? Well, I mean, we have to think about the context of what the Apostle Paul is writing here, right? Earlier in the chapter he says, *“I wish all of you were like me”* (single). Why? Well, because it provides him the ability to be undivided in his devotion. He can serve the church in some really incredible ways because he doesn't have to worry about leaving or deserting his family behind. He can plant churches in really dangerous areas. He can serve with his time. He doesn't ever have to wonder can I make that elders meeting or do I have to stay home with the sick kids because my wife is at work. No, he's undivided in his devotion, which means that singleness is better because it provides that opportunity for undivided devotion and service in the local church. But here's the thing, in our context single people don't often feel like singleness is better. Like living and doing life in the local church doesn't feel better when you're single. I've read this verse to some people in my life who are single and say I'm preaching this text and their response is, *“Yeah, but that's not actually how it feels being single in the church. It feels much, much worse. Feels like there's two classes of citizens in the local church. Those like ‘good, normal people who get married’ and like ‘the rest’.”*

I have friends who have gone to Bible college and gone to seminary and they're gifted in ways for ministry and they... they aren't married. They're trying to find pastoral placements in churches or they're being discerned if they should be in certain leadership positions in their local church, and one of the things that's preventing them from serving is their singleness. Because some churches and some church leaders view marriage as a qualifier for ministry. They'll point to verses like in 1 Timothy where it says that a leader should be an elder, should be a husband of one wife and they take that in a strict sense, not as the sense of the person should be pure sexually. They say no, they actually have to be married and therefore the Apostle Paul couldn't be an elder or a pastor of their local church. See, single people have a hard time sometimes trying to get jobs because marriage is treated like this normal, maturing, qualifying thing and there must be something weird with you if you're not married yet. That's why single people often feel like second class citizens, not only trying to find ministry positions but just trying to do life in the local church. They feel like less than the married people around them.

Imagine the young adult man who moves from Ontario to British Columbia to go to school at Trinity Western University. And instead of living on campus this young adult guy lives in the basement of a family friend because it's cheaper and he thinks, *“You know what, I won't have the community on campus but I know there's a church down the road that I can get connected with. That can be my community because church is a family, right?”* So single guy comes in and out of the doors of this small or big church week after week and no one really makes an effort to get to know. Sure the ushers say “hi” but that's about as far as it gets. He sits single and alone. Weeks turned into months turn into years and it's been four years now of a degree and a lot of loneliness. Or imagine the divorced woman, who



she did the married thing. She had the kids, they were in the church, they felt like they were in the 'in group' and the marriage fell apart and now she's divorced and she comes in through the doors of the church alone. No one sits near her, no one talks to her, they say hello and that's about it and she leaves the church doors alone and she goes week after week, month after month, year after year of being told church is a family and yet feeling desperately alone. See for our single friends it doesn't feel better. It feels much, much worse. And look, good intentioned Christian people who are married don't often make it easier on them because they'll say things, like *"Why are YOU still single, like you're totally normal, and kind of good looking. It just doesn't make sense that you would still be single"*. Or they say something like, *"Man, you're so special I just could not manage having that gift from the Lord"*. Or they'll say something like, *"Don't worry, your prince charming is out there, it's not an IF it's a WHEN"*. See really good intentioned Christian people sometimes make it harder for singles in the church because we don't say it with our words that it's worse that they're single but man we kind of think it because of The Game of Life, right? Everyone does it.

The Bible says that singleness is better because of an undivided devotion to the Lord and the way you could serve in the local church, but for many singles it does not feel better it feels much, much worse. So how do we fix this? This is a live issue in our church. How do we leave this weekend having this be better for us as a church family, as Northview? I'm going to suggest two ways for us to help make singleness seem like a good thing, a good gift that God is given to people for their good. So here's two things that I think we can do to renew our vision for the greatness of singleness.

First of all, singleness should not mean loneliness.

Rosaria Butterfield and Christopher Yuan are two authors and speakers who you would be really well served to listen to their talks and buy their books. They wrote an article together called *Something Greater than Marriage* and you can find it on the Gospel coalition. This is what they wrote:

"In the church we failed to show another option to marriage, which is singleness, lived out in the fruitful and full context of God's community, the family of God. This does not mean that singles are condemned to live in loneliness but that singles can have intimate and fulfilling relationships full of love. This is not a consolation prize. It can be just as rewarding and fulfilling as marriage."

For us as a church to have this kind of community, where singleness feels not like a consolation prize but just as rewarding and fulfilling, means we have to be proactive in this. If you're single you need to be proactive about this. You need to not just assume that because church is a family, you can come in and out of the doors of the church and expect everyone else to know if you're new, or if you'd want someone to talk to you. Single people, you need to get involved in things like community groups, to like sign up for one and actually get involved in one. And here's what's going to happen, you're going to go to one and the people are probably going to be weird... and then you're going to go to a different one and those people will probably also be weird, and you'll probably try a third one and you'll realize the only thing I have in common with these people is that we all love Jesus... Exactly. That's what it means to be living in the local church is that we do life with people totally different than us. We have no reason to be together other than we all love Jesus and so we gathered together in community to help each other love Jesus more.



But married people, we also have to be proactive in this. Look, if you've been in a community group for decades with the same people doing life together, it's time to probably split that group up. It's probably time to start a different group where you let different people in so you can welcome people into what it looks like to be known, to be loved, to have people come into church when someone says "Northview" that they have not just a stage and a preacher and a worship service in mind but they have people in their community group in mind. People who can walk through life with you. People that when your kid is sick or your spouse dies that you know who is going to be there for you. So we have a lot of groups who have a lot to offer if they would just split them up and open them up to let new people in. But it's going to mean we have to be proactive about it.

See the age and stage based ministry thing is a great tool for a lot of things. But one thing it hurts us with is if we only hang out with people who are just like us in our age and in our stage of life is that we don't have the opportunity to feel what it's like for the church to be a family. To have older people than us teach us the way. To have younger people than us encourage us to think new things and to try things differently. The Church is a family intentionally, it has to be inter-generational, which means we should probably be hanging with people who are different than us. And it's not just formal community groups. It's also just hospitality. Opening up our homes and being willing to welcome people in who are different than us and hospitality has come to mean in our circles that you have to have a Pinterest-worthy living room and all the epicure snacks. That's hospitality, and if you don't do that, man, you have failed. But look, we have to come back to a perspective of Biblical hospitality of just opening up our homes and calling people on the phone and inviting them to come and do life with us. Yeah, there's dishes in the sink and, yeah, our kid needs be put to bed, but come and do life with us. Cause that's what family does and the church is a family. But look, it's not going to happen by accident. We have to be provocative and we have to be proactive about it.

The second way that I think we can renew our vision for the greatness of singleness is realizing that our eternity is single. There's no marriage in Heaven. Your marriage is actually till death do you apart. Your future, if you are a Christian, is spent as a single person having an intimate fulfilling relationship with our Lord and Savior and with your brothers and sisters in the Lord for an eternity. Your passport in Heaven will say united in Jesus. Marital status: single. It's a picture of our future. Yes, marriage is a picture of the Gospel that Jesus came and won for himself a bride called The Church. But singleness is a picture of the Gospel because that Church stands waiting for her groom. See it's not a second class thing, they're both good gifts that God gives to people to help them follow Jesus better. Look, whether you're married or you're single, you need to view the gift that God has given you as a gracious gift to help you love Jesus more and follow him better. That whether you're married or you're single, the Church gathers together in big groups and smaller groups to help us do one thing. To help the anthem of our heart be: *"Thou and thou only, first in my heart. High King of Heaven my treasure thou art."*



Let me pray for us. Father, I'm thankful for your grace. I'm thankful for your kindness to us in the Scriptures. That you give us passages that challenge us and help us think about how things truly are. Father, I pray that you would forgive us of ways that we've treated people like second class citizens. God help us do better. Help us all be proactive in helping this church be a church family. We want to do this because we want to love Jesus more and we want other people to love him. So we pray that you do this by your spirit. We pray this for your fame and in Christ's name. Amen.