



Potomac Hills

Presbyterian Church, PCA

By Grace Alone ~ Through Faith Alone ~ In Christ Alone

The Reverend Dr. David V. Silvernail, Jr.
1 Corinthians 7:25-40

November 19, 2017
English Standard Version

“Cross Words: Better”

The 12th Sermon in a series on The Book of 1st Corinthians

Now please take your Bibles and turn with me to Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. We’ve been working through **1st Corinthians** together. And we’re in the second half of chapter 7 this morning, where the Apostle Paul has been responding to some questions the Corinthians have asked him about **singleness** and marriage. He’s concluding this part of his discussion about **singleness** and marriage in our passage for today, **1 Corinthians 7:25-40**. You’ll find it helpful, I think, to have a copy of the Scriptures in your hand so you can follow along with me throughout the sermon. And before we start, let me say this — sometimes the Bible is marvelously clear and simple and straightforward in its message ... and sometimes it’s not. This is one of the times **when it’s not!** So I want to ask you to join me as we pray and ask God to help us not only understand His Word but to meet with Him as He speaks to us in it. Let’s read the text and then we’ll pray.

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. ²⁶ I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. ²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ 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, ³⁰ 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, ³¹ 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.

³² I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. ³³ But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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.

³⁶ 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. ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even **better**.

³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.”

Well, now that everything’s cleared up, let’s pray ...*Heavenly Father, this is Your Word and we need it. We need to be reminded of what makes the greatness of the Gospel, the Power of the Cross, and the Glory of Christ! Your Word is light and life. It takes us where we are and leads us back to Christ. It shows us how much we need Him and then it gives Him to us. And so that’s what we pray You would do, even by bringing this difficult part of Holy Scripture into our lives this morning. Lead us to Jesus, show us how much we need Him, and then give Him to us. And so we pray, by the power of the Holy Spirit, help us see Jesus, in His name we pray, amen.*

INTRODUCTION: “The Grass is Always Greener, I guess ...”¹

While Tara remained **single**, her brother and his wife settled into a big house in the suburbs and became parents. Tara was suited to her more cosmopolitan lifestyle, but **she envied** what he had. Driving home from family visits she would think wistfully about how easy life was for them. They never had to worry about spending a Saturday night alone, or any night, for that matter. Tara’s urban life, formerly a source of pleasure, paled as she focused on her brother’s big yard, so peaceful and quiet. So much room for gardening and backyard barbeques. Her little apartment lost a bit of its charm and appeal each time she made a visit to her brother’s home. ... It wasn’t until one evening when she was spending a rare moment alone with her brother that Tara’s outlook changed. ... Tara had gone up to visit that day and went out to keep her brother company while he grilled. As she felt the breeze and absorbed the suburban silence, she commented on how lucky he was to have all that. She admitted how **she envied** his life.

“That’s funny,” he said, flipping a burger. “**I envy your life!** Every waking hour I have is spent taking care of other people. I go to work and please my boss. I come home and tend to the needs of my family ... and this house. On weekends I have to grab all the time I can with the kids since I get so little time during the week. I have to mow the lawn and stock up at Home

¹ The Introduction is taken from [Fine China is for Single Women Too](#) by Lydia Brownback.

Depot. I have no time to myself except when I'm driving to and from work. You, on the other hand, have so much discretionary time! Once work is over, every weekend, every evening, is all your own. You can stay home, go out, cook what you want for dinner without considering what someone else wants to eat. You can sleep late on Saturday morning because there aren't kids climbing into your bed as the sun comes up. The grass is always greener, I guess ..."

Each wants what the other has. One of the commentators I was reading quotes a comedian who summarizes what many people think are **the only two options available** in this whole area of **singleness** and marriage. He summarizes it with a question, "Do you want to be **single and lonely ... or married and bored?**" **Those are the options.** It's a pretty cynical view. **Single and lonely or married and bored.** I suspect that some of us – however cynical those questions may be – some of us actually find it hard to shake the dark suspicion that **those two options** may, in fact, be the truth. At least marriage isn't **lonely**, but isn't it terribly boring and safe and predictable? **Singleness**, on the other hand, need never be boring, but every pleasure is surely diminished by having no one with whom to share it on a regular basis.

There is the suspicion, perhaps, lurking deep in some of our hearts that when we move from one state to another – from being **single** to being married – maybe all we're really doing is swapping out one set of challenges for another; one set of burdens for another. And to be sure, there's some truth to that. I mean, let's be honest, there are particular challenges and burdens that come with **singleness** ... and other challenges and burdens that come with marriage. And Paul is pretty straightforward and realistic about both. Naïve romanticism shouldn't blind us to the challenges of both marriage and **singleness**. But the message of our passage this morning is that Christians have the resources to cut through both **bleak cynicism** on the one hand, and **naïve romanticism** on the other hand when it comes to the whole question of marriage and **singleness**.

And the way that Paul does that is to call us to **Profound Contentment**. The Corinthians have written to Paul asking whether or not to pursue marriage now that they've been converted. And in **verse 25**, if you'll look there, Paul says, "*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.*" He admits he has no particular word of Christ's to quote them on the matter, but **he does have some pastoral advice of his own to give**. As an inspired apostle of Jesus Christ, by the mercy of the Lord, he is one whose **judgement** is trustworthy. And here's his judgement. Whatever state you're in, whether **single** or married, you demonstrate your trust in the Lord through **Profound Contentment**.

And then Paul gives us three ways in which we can get to the place of **profound contentment**. The first thing we need to do, he says, is ...

v. 26-29a: BE AWARE OF THE TIME ²

2 The Exposition of the text is adapted from the books, The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God by Timothy & Kathy Keller, pages 77-109, 192-218; The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament: First Corinthians by Dr. Kim Riddlebarger, pages 187-196; 1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary by Dr. Anthony Thiselton, pages 114-122; and The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The First Letter to the Corinthians by Dr. Roy Ciampa and Dr. Brian Rosner, pages 266-307, 328-364. **And the sermons, "Marriage, Divorce, & Singleness" 4/22/90 and "Sexuality and Christian Hope" 4/18/04, both by Dr. Timothy Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, The Tim Keller Sermon Archive, Logos Bible Software 7.10; "A Sacred Bond" 7/2/17 and "Marriage at the End of the World" 8/20/17, both by Dr. David Strain, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS, www.fpcjackson.org; "Living in the End Time"**

*“I think that in view of **the present distress** it is good for a person to remain as he is. ²⁷ Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ This is what I mean, brothers: **the appointed time has grown very short.**”*

There are a number of translation and interpretation issues in this text, and the first one comes to us in **verse 26**. What does Paul mean when he says, *“in view of the present distress”*? The commentators are divided as what this is referring to. Some of the best ones argue that there is a massive famine going on at this time and who wants to get married during a famine? They also argue that this underlies the temptation in the next chapter about eating food offered to idols. But I don't think that's it since it's not specifically mentioned anywhere else in the book. Others think it refers to the persecution of the early church, but it's not likely that's started yet in Corinth, and although a great concern in other New Testament books, it's not brought forward as a major issue in **1st Corinthians**.

The majority of Biblical scholars think that this phrase means the issue is not **just** one of marriage versus **singleness**. The issue is living in this world as a **stranger**, the issue is the dedication of our lives to **the cause of Christ**, the issue is living daily under the looming prospect of **the judgment and the world to come**. Look at **verse 29**, *“This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short.”* And the end of **verse 31**, *“For the present form of this world is passing away.”* **That's the real issue** and these questions about marriage and **singleness** are meaningful **ONLY** in respect to that far larger issue.

“I'm happy to see a man or woman marry, if he or she lives for eternity,” is what Paul is saying, “and I don't much care for a man or woman who **stays single**, but lives for this world.” When the Apostle says that those who have wives should live as if they had none or that those who are happy should live as if they were not, he is, in characteristically Biblical fashion, using hyperbole, or exaggerating for effect, to make his point in a way that's supposed to **jolt us, to stagger us, to grab our attention, in a way that forces us to face facts**.

It's language like Jesus used in **Luke 14:26-27**, *“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.”* Whatever else such striking language means, in a book that has so much to say about the love a man owes his wife and children, it certainly means that the believer's relationship to Jesus Christ **EASILY** takes precedence over every other relationship, even the most sacred of life's earthly relationships. Those relationships **exist for the sake of Christ** and not the other way round.

All of this is what Paul means when he says *“The time is short.”* But, how are we to read this today? After all, it's been nearly 2,000 years since Paul wrote that **the time was short** and that Christians should live in the **active expectation** of the world to come and **judge their relationships** and **evaluate the meaning of their lives** in terms of that coming world. Well, as a matter of fact, the Bible often speaks this way. In **Romans 13:11-12**, Paul writes, *“Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to*

10/26/03 and “Single vs Married” 11/2/03, both by Dr. Marian Clark, Lake Oconee Presbyterian Church (PCA), Eatonton, GA, www.dmresources.com; and “The Main Thing” by Dr. Robert Rayburn, Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA, 8/18/02, www.faithtacoma.org.

us now than when we first believed. ¹² *The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.*”

And it's not only Paul who says such things. Virtually the last words of Christ to us in the Bible are these at the very end of the last book, **Revelation 22:20**, “*He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*” It may be many years and in some ways it seems like a very long time – considering two thousand years have passed – but it's not; not in the real sense; not when considered from the vantage point of **eternity**. When we look back upon it from the next world, it will seem as if the whole of that history passed by in a moment. Some of our own days seem to us as if they would never end; but, as we look back upon our days, months, and years, we find that they have flown by. In the same way, the next world is hurtling toward us and, by any real measurement, **the time is short**. But, there is another way in which **the time is short ...** according to the Bible. Our life, our own individual existence in this world, is but a brief moment. We're going to leave this world shortly! How often are we reminded of that in Scripture ...

Job 9:25, “*My days are swifter than a runner; they flee away; they see no good.*”

Psalm 90:10, “*The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.*”

Psalm 102:3, 11, “*For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace. ... ¹¹ My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass.*”

James 4:14, “*yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.*”

And **you know** that it's so! Those of you who are older than I know it better than I do; and I know it better than those of you who are younger, though, if you are honest with yourself, you know it too. You know, when you look in the mirror, that your body is growing old, even wearing out; yet your soul seems to be as young as ever. You cannot believe that you have aged so quickly and that your years are flying by so fast that it seems like it was just yesterday you were young.

I recently read about the amazing and heart-rending story of a young married couple who had been climbing in the Swiss alps back in the 1960's. The husband fell to his death into one of the huge crevasses of the glacier they had been walking across. 40 years later, with the very same guide who had been with her on that fateful trip, the wife stood at the foot of that very same glacier, its progress down the mountainside having been measured to the month and the day, waiting for it to give up its precious cargo. She waited patiently in the hotel not far away until at last her wait was rewarded. Her husband's body was released from the ice and she was able to see again the man she loved, who had vanished from her sight **in a moment, disappearing in a blink of an eye, some 40 years before**.

Much of the sadness of the story lay in the realization that she was now an old woman, but the recovered body of her husband was just as it had been 40 years ago – perfectly preserved in the ice – the body of a young man. The fact of her own life's passing away, of it being nearly over, struck her with full force as she looked upon what she and he had been: how young, how full of life, what **seemed just a few moments ago**. Oh, yes, **the time is short**. Shorter than any of us knows. And it will be gone before we know it. I cannot believe that I'm 59-years-old. To me the sound of that number evokes an age, a time of life, far beyond my own. But, of course, it is my age. I cannot believe that I am well beyond the half-way point. But, of course, I am.

Now do you see Paul's point? The issue is not marriage, and the issue is not **singleness**. The issue is that our present life is **shaped by**, and it derives **its meaning from**, the future. In a very short time, we will no longer be husbands and wives, or sons and daughters. You will have to give your children back to God who gave them to you for your wise stewardship. Are you living in the active expectation of that? Is your life being lived in faithfulness to that truth? Whether you are **single** or married, are you **living** for eternity and **servicing** Jesus for the sake of His purpose in your life? Or, are you living like those who have no understanding of the fact that this world in its present form is passing away?

Be aware of the time! That's the first way Paul gives us ... to the place of **profound contentment**. The second thing we need to do is ...

v. 29b-35: LIVE UNDIVIDED IN THE LORD

*“From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none,³⁰ 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,³¹ 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.³² I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord.³³ But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife,³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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.**”*

How do you know if you are living this way, as if **the time is short**? How do you know if you have taken this truth to heart, that your interests are undivided, in your life? Well, Paul tells you. **First**, you know you're living as faithful Christians if you have a loose grip on the best and dearest things of this world. *“Those who have wives,”* Paul says, *“should live as if they had none... those who rejoice, as though they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep...”* In other places Paul and other biblical writers tell us how wonderful and important marriage is and that God has given us all good things to enjoy. **He is not asking us to despise God's gifts. But he is reminding us in powerful language** that it isn't by marriage or by childbirth or by the accumulation of things that one enters heaven. That we must always remember how temporary **even** these wonderful things are and how much we must **submit** these parts of our lives to those eternal obligations we owe to Christ. All your happiness – your marriage, your husband, your wife, your children, your home, your cars, your hobbies, your money, your job, your reputation – all of this will be only **so much guilt and regret** if you do not, as Jesus said in **Matthew 6:33**, **“Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.”**

The Apostle John wasn't kidding when he said, **1 John 2:15**, *“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”* Or, when Jesus promised that everyone who had left houses or brothers or sisters or fathers or mothers or children or fields for His sake would receive 100x as much in this world and would inherit eternal life. As much as you love your husband, or your wife, or your children, you who are married ... can you find in your life the evidence that **you also live as if you did not have** a wife, or a husband, or children? Can you honestly tell the Lord that those great and precious things are in their proper place in terms of your priorities as a follower of Christ?

Second, you know that you're living as faithful Christians if you have a loose grip on the griefs and the frustrations of this world. *"Those who mourn,"* says Paul, *"should live as though they were not;"* *"those who are unmarried as if they were; those who are widowed as if they had their husband at their side."*

These things are **not to be** the biggest issue of your life; they are **not to give** meaning to your existence; they are **not to serve** as the foundation of your happiness. They have their importance, to be sure, and Paul acknowledges that, but you cannot allow yourself to think that **your life is defined** by these things.

Your salvation, your soon entrance into the world of joy, the glory you can give to God in this world, the reward you can lay up for yourself in heaven – none of this is dependent at all on whether you are married, whether you are **single**, what kind of work you do, or any such thing. Very soon every one of us will step out of this world into the next. We will leave the circumstances of our lives here, short as they will have been, behind us forever. **That is Paul's point!** *Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness* and then let these secondary matters sort themselves out as God wills and permits. In a moment, a brief moment, it will all be over and you and I will be in another world. In all of your questioning, in all of your concern and worry, and, for that matter, in all of your happiness and fulfillment, **Do Not Forget This!** In a moment a new life will begin, a wholly different life in a world that lasts forever. We are the bride, Christ is the bridegroom, in the true and eternal marriage.

Be aware of the time! That's the first way. **Live undivided lives in the lord!** That's the second way Paul gives us ... to the place of **profound contentment**. The third thing we need to do is ...

v. 36-40: BE DEVOTED 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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God."

Now that's Paul's pastoral advice to the Corinthians. It's not a command. And so Paul very quickly adds – do you see this in the text? – *"If you do marry, you have not sinned. So I'm advising you to think twice before you marry, but if you do marry, that's fine. I'm not binding your conscience here."* So for Paul, **marriage** is a good thing; **singleness** is a good thing. That's his point of view. But there are some circumstances, as it turns out, **that may give pause** to some of those who are headed toward marriage. He wants them to think carefully before they get married. *"Think it through,"* he's saying, and I'm paraphrasing. *"And if you can remain as you are, be content in your present situation. Learn to practice godly contentment so that you're able to be satisfied whether you're married or not. Find your satisfaction not in your earthly lot but in God's saving grace, in Jesus. Find your identity and your contentment and your rest in this relationship above all others, before every other – in your relationship to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is enough."* That's the big idea. You can be **content** married or **single**. You can be **content** as you are ... when you see that Jesus Christ is enough for your heart.

But then I want you to notice that Paul carefully qualifies all of that for those at Corinth who, though still unmarried, were headed in that direction; they were betrothed, which means that they were engaged to be married. Look at **verse 36** for a moment. If a man feels he is behaving improperly, that is, if he feels like the situation is **unfair** toward his betrothed, and he wishes to marry and his sexual passions are strong and maybe even overwhelming so that marriage is wise for the sake of purity, well then, Paul says, so be it. It's not a sin; go ahead, get married. God will be honored. Paul doesn't want any of the young, engaged couples at Corinth explaining to frustrated future father-in-law's why they broke off their engagement by saying, "Well, you know, Paul says we're supposed to be **content as singles!**" "No," Paul says. "*If this is what you really want, and for the sake of purity so that you do not fall into temptation, then go ahead and get married. God will be honored in it.*" He's actually just repeating what he's already said back in **verse 9**, "*If a person cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.*" Marriage, Paul is not at all ashamed to say, marriage is one of God's great answers to sexual temptation.

So in **verse 36**, Paul is affirming that marriage is good and acceptable and pleasing to God and he wants us to be **content** in it. And then he balances that in **verse 37**. Now, this is among the most difficult verses to interpret in the New Testament. I consulted lots of commentators and every **single** one of them comes at it differently. So this is my best attempt. It is somewhat provisional but I think this might help us navigate our way to what Paul is getting at. Someone said to me that he thought Paul was saying, "*If you're engaged to be married and you can just stay engaged forever, then that's what you should do.*" And he said, "*That's crazy.*" And I agreed ... it is crazy. But I don't think that's what he means.

The Greek phrase translated in **verse 37**, "*has determined in his heart to keep her as his betrothed,*" well, there are some classical sources from around this same time that actually use that phrase to mean, "*to maintain your own virginity; to stay **single** and chaste and pure.*" And I think that's the best way to understand this verse. And if that's the right reading, then you see what Paul's really saying here. **In verse 36**, he's saying if you're engaged to be married and sexual temptation is overwhelming, for the sake of purity and holiness, then get married. God will be honored in your marriage. But then he's saying **in verse 37** if you're **single** and you can fight the good fight of sexual purity, then retain your virginity stay **single**, and in your **singleness** be **content** and godly and pure. That, I think, is Paul's argument. He wants **purity in singleness, fidelity** in marriage, and **contentment** in both. **Be content** as a married person, **be content** as a **single** person, because you're not looking to these relationships, but to the Lord Jesus Christ as the source and anchor of the **contentment** of your heart.

He actually has similar advice for widows in **verses 39-40**. You see that? "*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.*"⁴⁰ *Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.*" The marriage bond is unbreakable, Paul says, but if a spouse dies, the widow or widower is free to marry ... **but only in the Lord**. Now just press the "pause" button there for a minute. Once again, this used to be ... this didn't used to require an explanation among Christians ... but I think now it's worth repeating. The Bible teaches that **Christians are not to marry non-Christians**. Period. End-of-sentence. The widow may marry, Paul says, **but only in the Lord**. **Loneliness** is a terrible partner, isn't it? **Loneliness** is a terrible partner, and sometimes **loneliness** makes us settle for someone, settle for anyone, and

soon we begin to compromise Biblical standards and we rationalize our behavior and we make excuses and then we fall in love and we marry someone who doesn't love Jesus.

Just this week, I was counseling with an older, **single** woman who likes a guy, he says he's a Christian, but there's virtually no evidence to back up that claim, and he wants her to move in with him. And I had to counsel her... 'no.' I had to counsel her that she wasn't going to find her **contentment** in taking care of another guy who won't be taking care of her. Because, the majority of the time, instead of persuading him or persuading her to follow Jesus with you, more often than not, you will find yourself pulled away into a spiritual wasteland wandering far from the Lord. I've seen it happen **over** and **over** and **over** again in pastoral ministry, and I want to warn you, and the Apostle Paul warns you, don't shipwreck your Christian life **by flagrantly disobeying the commands of Scripture**. We're to marry "*in the Lord*," Paul says. So the Christian widow is free to marry "*in the Lord*." And then he says, just as he's been saying all along, if she can stay **single**, in his judgment she will be happier. If she's able to be **content** as she is, she should be **content single**.

Now, all that is well and good, but why, then, does Paul say, in **verse 38**, which I skipped over, *he who refrains from marriage will do even **better**?*

APPLICATION: Why is being single better?

I've almost made it! I've waded through the swampy water of chapter 7 and the dry bank is before me. Just one more slippery step to take, one more dangerous issue. Which is better: to be **single** or to be married? And as all married men know, **I must choose my words very carefully!** Now what are we to make of this passage? I hope you're not missing the irony this text gives. In our society, particularly the Christian community, **singles** are often made to feel second-class. Remember the Babylon Bee article from two weeks ago. If you don't, go back and look it up, it's pretty funny. Marriage, we teach, is a sacred union. And really, what's wrong with folks who can't find a marriage partner?

But here, married people are put **on the defensive**. Paul clearly states that he believes one is doing **better** to remain **single**, that one can more easily **serve** the Lord, and be **devoted** to the Lord, indeed, that one will be **happier**. He does concede that getting married is not sin, but he comes across as kind-of pitying those who must marry. I've done two weddings in the past month. And I enjoy them. But I think I can say that you wouldn't want Paul presiding over your wedding ceremony. He stands before the couple at the altar and sighs, "*Dearly beloved, we feel for this couple who couldn't withstand temptation and now must resort to marriage. It's the best they could do.*" Actually, we know that Paul had a high view of marriage. It is he who speaks of marriage as the symbol of Christ's relationship with the church in **Ephesians 5**. It's because he had a high regard for marriage that he gives the advice that he does here.

Paul gets straight to the point. **Single** people are free to devote their attention to pleasing the Lord. Unlike married persons, they do not have to add the needs and wishes of their spouses to the equation. There's an intense practicality to this passage. Lydia Brownback has written two wonderful books, both steeped in the Scriptures, **Finding God in my Loneliness** and **Fine China is for Single Women Too**. From the perspective of a **single** woman, she writes, "Being set apart for God also enables us to serve God unhindered in a greater diversity of ways than married women can. A wife and mother's primary means of serving is the care and nurture of her husband and children, and when this is done thoroughly and well, there is little time left for other types of service. As a **single** woman I have time to write books, lead one or two women's

Bible studies, make meals for families in my church, and work full time. Paul was clear: marriage forces women to focus on the affairs of this life. To do otherwise in marriage means that we are not fulfilling our marriage vows. Focusing elsewhere – even on ministry activities – can interfere with the married woman’s primary calling as wife and mother. It is an act of obedience for a married woman to serve God and her family; obedience for the **single** woman lies solely in serving God.”

Those of us who are married understand what she’s talking about. We can easily make a list of ways in which marriage **makes choices more complex**. Providing a home is one. The **single** man only has to consider his convenience. The married man must give thought to the interests and desires of his wife. What does she want? What makes her comfortable? Consider where one lives. The **single** woman need only consider where she wants to live. The married woman usually follows where either her or her husband finds work. Consider work. Should a **single** person come to me for counsel because of being restless at work, I have no qualms concurring if he or she wants to leave the job and go elsewhere. Be careful of the risks, certainly, but being **single** gives a person freedom to take risks. If a married man comes to me with the same issue, I may concur that it would be good to change jobs, but will usually counsel him not to leave his present job until he has another one. He doesn’t have the freedom to put his wife and children in financial jeopardy just because he doesn’t like his boss.

The list could go on, but you see the point. It is about freedom to make choices. The **single** person may think, How may I serve God? The married person must think, How may I serve God **and** meet my responsibilities as a husband or wife, father or mother?

Now, overshadowing everything that Paul taught on **singleness**, marriage, and remarriage, in the case of the widow and widower, is being devoted to the Lord. One can remain **single** only if called by the Lord to **singleness** and as a means to greater service. One should marry as a gift from the Lord, keeping in mind to guard his or her priorities so that **Christ has preeminence**. Those with deceased spouses can remarry as they desire, but only to another believer. At the center of it all is **devotion** to Jesus Christ.

Now step back and put all of that together; I wonder if you can see the big point that Paul is driving home. He wants the Corinthians to **be content** with their life, doesn’t he? He doesn’t want them thinking the only way they can be happy or fulfilled or satisfied is to have Mr. Right, or Miss Right, or “the one,” or find my “soulmate,” or to be always have to be in a relationship. That, I think, is still a real temptation for some of us. We have to be in a relationship. Our whole **identity** is bound up with it. We could never be happy unless we’re with someone. Paul, I think, here is seeking to deliver us from that **idolatry** if he can. He’s calling us to be **content** with our lot and our calling in life. If we’re **gifted for celibacy**, by God’s grace, if God has **called us to singleness**, we’re not to be bullied into thinking ourselves somehow defective because of peer pressure.

If you’re **single** let me say to you very clearly – I’ve said this before; I’ll say it again – you are **not failing**. You are **not odd**. You are **not deficient**. In fact, Paul is teaching that your **singleness** has many benefits that bring glory to God and are good for others. “No,” Paul says, “I want you to learn **contentment** as you are. And if you’re married, well then, praise God and be satisfied! That’s the call of God in your life for His glory and for your good. And find your **contentment** in the context of your marriage, but don’t find your **contentment** from your

marriage. Find your **contentment**, rather, from Jesus Christ.” So Paul calls us, all of us, married and **singles**, to a **profound contentment**.

Think about that ... You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

*Our Lord and our God, thank You that You have spoken to us by Your Son. Open our eyes that we might see our sin and then see our Savior. God our Father, we bow before You and we confess to You that we often love ourselves in a way that ignores how you've called us and how you've gifted us. Our Father in heaven, these are solemn issues that we've dealt with in these past few weeks. You know our hearts; you know our marriages. You know the ones that are broken; you know the ones that are in trouble. You know the hearts of those who are called to be single at this time. You know who you've gifted with celibacy and who you haven't. We've made an idol out of our relationships and sought to find our **contentment** and identity there. But Lord, before You now we cry to You for mercy. Show us how infinitely precious Jesus really is and help us to find our true **contentment** in Him. And as we see His grace and glory, help us to see how that will shape every decision we make. "How can I make much of Christ?" will be the great question that determines what we do with our days and our lives. And as we understand again that the time is short, would You help us to resolve with new determination to live **single-mindedly** for His glory? So look for us as a church, we pray, in mercy. Forgive us and work in these weeks and months ahead of us through **1st Corinthians** — teach us who we really are in Jesus and to strengthen us as we seek to live it out for your glory. And as we begin to be changed by the Gospel, grant that we may live like people **called** to be saints, **united** in fellowship, **discerning** spiritual truths, **building** on Christ, **pursuing** holiness, looking for **cleansing**, knowing that **we belong to You, living lives of profound contentment** ... and so we ask all these things, in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.*

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Philippians 4:11-13, 19-20 #CrossWords

*“Not that I am speaking of being in need, for **I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content**. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. ... And my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.”*