

Relationships: Real & Restored Pt 2

The Single Life

Spence Shelton – September 4, 2016

Happy Labor Day Weekend! Just a reminder next week is Serve Charlotte! Be here at 9am, wear your work clothes. For those of you new with us...

Hey other thing we are doing that I won't be able to announce next Sunday. Tuesday September 13th technically marks our 1 year anniversary. On that night we are going to gather here at Levine for a night of prayer & worship to thank God for what he has done. I'm excited to tell you our Band will be releasing a short, 3-song record that night of songs they've written and we've sung over the past year. The amount of talent God has given us in our band is crazy and we are thankful. So, 7:30-9pm on Tuesday the 13th. Right here for worship & prayer. Details will be up on our website later this week.

We had a great kick-off last weekend to our fall series here at Mercy. After talking last weekend on friendship I heard from several folks that it sparked some good conversations with their friends. Multiple stories of people finally getting real about where they are right now in their faith.

The series we are in is called Real and Restored and is a series about how the gospel empowers and restores the major relationships in our lives. As I mentioned last weekend:

Normally when we preach we take a book of the bible and start at chapter 1 verse 1 and walk through it verse by verse. That's just how we roll. During this series however I'm going to show you another way to learn from God's word. See the bible is one consistent book and there is value sometimes in zooming out and looking at what the whole bible says about a particular subject. We'll basically grab a hold of a thread that starts at the beginning and follow it through the pages of scripture. Today we'll start in genesis, hit a couple OT spots, the gospels, and 1 Corinthians. So, a little bit different style for a few weeks but hopefully will help you see the great consistency of the bible and the big truths that run through it. Truths God is communicating to us about relationships.

Today we are going to look at singleness. The Single life is one of those arenas that honestly the church tends to fumble through a lot of times. What usually happens in a church is some pastor who has been married since he was 12 gets the idea that the church needs a space where it can corral all of its single people into one room so that they can "encourage one another" through this difficult stage of singleness. And they come up with awesome names & logos for these ministries like

1. **Singles Ministry** – where you all wear neutral tones & float in the clouds
2. **Dynamic Singles** – They really wanted to take that picture
3. My personal favorite...**SOLO**

And while they have good intentions there is usually an underlying assumption built into these that somehow to be single is to be incomplete. And while churches would never say it, they, usually unintentionally, cater the way they operate towards married couples and families.

Of course society as a whole isn't any better. Just a simple scroll through sites like the Huffington Post will lead you to a mountain of articles with titles like '21 reasons being single is actually the best.' Or 'Why being a spinster has never been more fabulous.' All written by people who feel they have to prove being single is not being defective.

Today we are going to flip that script. As we walk through the bible we are going to see a rich, empowering theology of singleness that grows out of a right understanding of the gospel. Then we will look at the implications that theology has on how we interact with one another in our relationships.

Now last week to open our series we talked about friendship. And like we said that was to set the stage for the rest of our series. The other helpful thing was friendship was for...everybody. Everybody falls into the category of

friend. But for the rest of the series you may encounter a weekend that you think at first...isn't for you. Like today for instance. You may think "well since I'm married, this must not apply to me." You'd be wrong. See the bible was written to & for the whole church. And if we are going to encourage one another, serve one another, care for one another in the gospel...If we are going to be a church family, we gotta know what God says about our lives. So if you don't think a certain week is for you in this series, stop being so self-centered and pay attention.

Our anchor spot for today is 1 Corinthians 7. This passage anchors our theology of singleness because it takes theology and says – this is what you do with it. If you wanted to go back and look at one passage later on this week, this would be the one. Our community groups will be studying this passage. This passage is one of the most counter-cultural passages of his time. Let's go ahead and look at what he says here. We'll pick up in verse 6...

[6] Now as a concession, not a command, I say this (that married people should have sex often except for prayer breaks...we'll come back to that in marriage sermon). **[7] I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.** **[8] To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am.** **[9] But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.**

Now I know because of the sex comment you may have missed his actual point. To Paul writing to these young Christians in Corinth, getting married is a concession to those who are unable to control themselves. But Paul seems to think it best that if you are single, you remain single. And he talks about both singleness and marriage as a gift from God. Nobody in his day talked like that about singleness. Then in verse 17 he doubles down on how our marital status, single or married, is something God has given to us. [17] Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. He says this several times in this passage. Just remain where God has . Marriage is good, and singleness is good. Stay put.

You have to understand how crazy it is that Paul is saying this. In a day where marriage was, especially for women, the ONLY way one could earn any social standing. And in a day where having children was the primary sign of blessing and prosperity in your life...Paul is saying singleness...is a gift. A GIFT from GOD! That alone should totally reorient how a lot of us tend to think about singleness. Church world sometimes thinks about it like a “stage of life” at best or a “Defect” at worst, but Paul says no no, to be single is a gift!

Now, I gotta hit the sermon pause button. I’ll probably do that often in this series. A problem arises as soon as I say the phrase “singleness is a gift.” Most of you who are single in here say...yeah...that seems like a terrible “gift.” It’s like if God is handing out gifts and he comes to you with the single

box and you look at him like “No sorry, wrong address.” There has been a mistake. A terrible, terrible mistake. This isn’t for me. Take it back please. I burn with passion...sooooo...please take this gift away from me. I get it! And listen it is OK and good to desire marriage. I want you to know I know that you feel that way about the “singleness is a gift line” churches can throw around. And I hope by the end of the day you can walk out of here with a renewed sense of joy & purpose for your single life while at the same time still holding high the great gift of marriage.

But listen if you are single, there is something big that God, through Paul, is celebrating and affirming and calling you up to.

I want to show you the big idea for today then walk you through how we get there:

The big idea today is that In the gospel God promises an incredible blessing to those of you who remain single in Christ, and he gives you an extraordinary calling for your life.

He promises Blessings that are better than the blessings of marriage and children. And a calling to display the gospel in a way that makes the character of Christ shine through into this world more clearly than marriage and family ever could.

We are going to go there. To the blessing and to the calling. To get there I want to show you what was underneath Paul’s bold statement here in 1 Cor 7. We are going to take

5 minutes and build a “biblical theology of singleness.”¹ If you are new, just hang in there. These notes I’m working from go online each week around Monday or Tuesday (Tuesday this week) so you can get them then. Are you ready?

A biblical theology of singleness

lets go to Genesis 1

[28] Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth...

This was God’s command to Adam & Eve. Remember like we said last week it wasn’t good that man was alone. God blessed Adam by giving him Eve and then, the blessing of their union was children.

Then, later in Genesis 15 God is hanging out with Abraham and gives him a really important promise. Its one of the highwater marks in the Old Testament. God tells crusty old 90 year old Abraham to look up at the stars and says

“[5] And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

¹ Barry Danylak, “[A Biblical-Theological Perspective on Singleness](#)” Version 2.5 (2006). [It seems this paper was the foundation of Danylak’s book *Redeeming Singleness* published in 2010. This paper provides one of the best guides through the scriptures on the biblical theology of singleness I’ve ever read.]

God promises Abraham...children. Abraham whose wife had been barren all her life was now, by the miraculous power of God, going to have a child. Offspring was the blessing God was providing for Abraham.

Here is the point to write down. If you are developing a biblical theology of singleness it starts by realizing:

In the Old Testament, God was building his kingdom through procreation.

Therefore, being married and having offspring was of chief importance for one’s name and one’s inheritance and for the preservation of God’s covenant people.²

And right now Single people are like...ummm...this is supposed to encourage me? I’m not done.

After generations of people going to great lengths to ensure their physical offspring continues, comes the book of Isaiah. And a really, really big shift happens in the biblical theology of singleness. Isaiah 56.4-5

[4] For thus says the LORD: “To the eunuchs [these are who cannot procreate but devote their lives to a unique service to the Lord] who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, [5] I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name

² John Piper. Sermon “[Single-in-Christ: a better name than sons and daughters](#)” Preached at Bethlehem Baptist church April 29, 2007.

better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

God promises to bless obedient eunuchs (single people with no children) with blessings that are better than sons and daughters. God promises those of you who remain single in Christ blessings that are better than the blessings of marriage and children. It's an incredible promise! How could this be? Sons & Daughters are the greatest blessing God can give...or so Israel thought. Where does this come from? Watch, a couple chapters earlier. We are starting to get to the gospel...

Isaiah 53 holds one of the most well known OT passages about Jesus. Isaiah 53.10:

“when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;”

He shall see his offspring. Here is the big shift: When the Messiah dies as an “offering for guilt” and rises again to “prolong his days,” he will by that great saving act produce many children: He will “see his offspring.” In other words, the new people of God formed by the Messiah will not be formed by physical procreation but by the atoning death of Christ. This is your second development in a biblical theology of singleness.

In the New Testament you enter into the people of God no longer by procreation but through the atoning death of Christ.

The New Testament then takes this and runs with it. Best moment: Paul says in Galatians...look at this... Galatians 3.7 [7] **Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.**

You see what Paul just did? It is so big. He just took that promise God gave Abraham and genesis 15...and gave it a new meaning. He said it is not being a physical descendant of Abraham that makes you a part of God's people but instead faith in Christ!

Jesus, Paul, all the New Testament say we enter God's family not by marriage and procreation but by faith and regeneration. Which means God's greatest blessings are not found in marriage & family but in Christ & the church family.

Here's the last point in this little biblical survey: **The greatest blessings of God are found in the gospel not in your marital status.** I told you singleness has great blessings. And its not just for you. Singleness highlights the reality that each of us has superior blessings in Christ than we can have in marriage and family.

The Blessings of the single life:

- **In the gospel you have the greatest love.** – The love of Christ is the love you are made for. Marriage is but a signpost pointing to our true spouse who loves us like we never will be able to love another. Take heed here lest you minimize what I am saying and do not hear how radical it really is. I am not sentimentalizing singleness to make the unmarried feel good. I'm saying marriage is a temporary institution. *Matthew 22:30 - For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.*
- What it stands for is eternal. If you are not a Christian, we do not tell you "hey you should get married." No, we tell you "Hey you should get to know the love of Christ for you!" That love is waaaay better, way more fulfilling, way more reliable, than the love of a spouse will ever be. And this love...its that when you were at your most unloveable...when you were running from God...he loved you. You were cheating on him as you gave your life to pleasure, to building your name, to things that would never satisfy you. And still he loved you. And he's calling you to return to him. To the one and only who can satisfy your craving for love and acceptance. He is who you are trying to find. And he is waiting for you.
- **In the gospel you have the greatest family** –There is a moment in the gospels where Jesus is sitting around the table in a crowded room with his followers. His mom & brothers are outside and are

looking for him. Somebody says "Jesus, your family is looking for you." And he says "These are my mothers and my brothers." That's not just a bro moment. That's him re-ordering family lines around the gospel. It is a great blessing when biological family members are also family in Christ but so many of us know that isn't always the case. The family who will love, support, and call you up in your faith is the one you are adopted into by Christ. That is a phenomenal blessing.

Both singles and married couples must see the temporary & secondary nature of marriage. Marriage points us to the Real Marriage that our souls need and the Real Family our hearts were made for.

If single Christians don't develop a deeply fulfilling love relationship with Jesus, they will put too much pressure on their *dream* of marriage, and that will create all kinds of problems in their lives. However, if a single person learns to rest in and rejoice in their marriage to Christ, that means they will be able to handle single life without a devastating sense of being unfulfilled and unformed. So Demote marriage and family in your heart, put God first, and begin to enjoy the goodness of single life.³

Ok, come up for air and lets return now to the Apostle Paul over in 1 Cor 7 and you will see the incredible calling of the single life. We are going to pick up in verse 29. Remember,

³ From Keller, *Meaning of Marriage*

he keeps saying remain as you are. Don't worry about marriage so much. And then he says why:

[29] This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short

Paul looks at their present situation. And he considers eternity with Christ. And he just realizes that marital status is temporary & secondary. And by appointed time he's talking about the time when Jesus comes back. For those of you new to Christian teaching that's just the belief that heaven is real and one day Jesus is going to come back to earth to establish his kingdom here. And Paul doesn't know when that is going to be and he's like look don't get comfortable and bogged down. We are called by God to take the gospel to people and everything else is secondary. Your ability to serve Christ is primary to him. So if you are single, he wants you to see the great opportunity God has given you. Read on...

[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, and his interests are divided....

[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.

He's not belittling marriage nor is he saying the single life is the only way to go. That's why he says "not to lay any restraint upon you." Get married if you want, not a sin. He's saying the time is short and God has called every believer to leverage the space they are in for the glory of God in their time and place.

And there is an opportunity for a single person to do that in a way a married person cannot. For example: do you know when I first moved to Charlotte a year ago we tried to find an apartment near uptown? But were turned away by every single one when they heard "4 kids." Ummm...no. And one of our members Megan Wright told me...Why are you trying to do that? You need to live out near families, let us who are single and mobile reach these people like us here in the apartment communities. She was totally right! How are you leveraging your singleness? That's what Paul is getting at!

Here is the great calling of the single life: To leverage your life towards an undivided devotion to Christ that displays the glory of God in all you do. If you give yourself to this, you will display truths about God in a way married people will never be able to. I've seen it time and again. I've seen single people lead the church in radical obedience to God's commands. I've seen single people lead the church onto God's mission by going first. To their neighbor, or to the nations. Ya'll for the life of me I do not want a church full of only families because they will get too complacent. I've seen it too often. I want to be a sending church and I know that

I'm going to have to work 4 times as hard to get some of these families to get onboard with God's mission as I am with single people. OUR CHURCH was planted by like 4 families, a handful of newly weds & empty nesters, and an army of single people! Leverage your life like Paul is calling you to and be patient as you bring the rest of the church along!

I've just unloaded a lot of bible on you. Let me switch gears and talk about what this theology means for you where you are right now:

First let me talk to Single People:

Let me give you a couple of things to walk out of here with today

- **Thank God for your singleness**

Singleness isn't a defective or incomplete season you endure. Single or married, You are exactly where God has called you to be.

- Paige Benton Brown – Article: Singled Out by God for Good - "I am not single because I am too spiritually unstable to possibly deserve a husband, nor am I too spiritually mature to possibly need one. I am single because God is so abundantly good to me, because this is his best for me."

Remember the garden of Eden? Satan tricks Eve into eating the forbidden fruit. It is no coincidence that Satan focused on the one thing that the Lord had instructed Adam and Eve not to do. Instead of being

thankful for all of the blessings he had extended, they focused on the lie that God was holding out on them. I'm not saying here that marriage is forbidden for you. I'm saying God has lavished major blessings on you. Focus on those!

Elisabeth Elliot, after her husband Jim had been killed on the mission field, reflected on being single in the middle age of her life. "It is within the sphere of the circumstances He chooses for us—single, married, widowed—that we receive Him. It is there and nowhere else that He makes Himself known to us. It is there that we are allowed to serve Him.... Single life may be only a stage of a life's journey, but even a stage is a gift. God may replace it with another gift, but the receiver accepts His gifts with thanksgiving. This gift for this day." So thank God for your singleness.

- **Rest in your identity as a Son or Daughter of God**

Women I know you often get hit harder with this in the church so let me say this: Part of being a woman is that you *may* have the privilege of being a wife and mother. And that will be great but it will be temporary not eternal. Your Primary identity, however, is daughter of God. BIBLICAL WOMANHOOD IS NOT DEFINED BY BEING WIFE AND MOTHER! Same is true for Men. Biblical Manhood is defined by your identity as an adopted son of God. Do you rest there?

You will be tempted by Satan to believe some lies. Like God is holding out on you. Or ladies that maybe No one wants to pursue you. Or Something is wrong with you. Listen this is why you have to dive into the gospel. because those lies need to be combated with truth. The truth we've spent this morning looking at.

- **Build some friendships in the church.** Ok so sometimes I preach and you guys get real creative in applying. Like when I say "you can't take your money with you when you die." And you interpret that as "Time to go Shopping!!" Ok the WRONG way to interpret today would be to leave here thinking it is totally acceptable to do life as a lone wolf. NO! What you should leave with is a heightened awareness that there is a family God calls you to be close to. That God says you need. It's the church family. The people of God. That was my big takeaway this week in preparing. We all need community. These relationships as brothers and sisters...those are the only thing that lasts forever. So you gotta take a step and get real with a few people. Don't know how to take that step to "get real?" Come talk to us, we'd be glad to help you.
- **Don't waste your singleness.** Your calling to singleness is not a calling to extend irresponsible adolescence into your 20s & 30s. There are plenty of these idiots in the world already. Plenty married

versions as well. No you have a calling to do what only single men and single women in Christ can do. Namely to display the glories of Christ that shine more clearly through singleness than marriage. That faithfulness to Christ defines the value of life & all other relationships are secondary to it. No family relationship is ultimate, relationship to Christ is. Especially if you are young and just starting out, maybe you should consider going overseas to an unreached people group for a couple of years. Leveraging your life for the gospel. Yes, a married couple should do that too. But they both gotta figure that out together. You can make that decision a lot faster!

And let me say this here. Some of you will never get married. And that is ok and good. Christ says in Matthew 19 that some will set themselves apart and be single for the sake of serving the kingdom of God. And because you are a son or daughter of God, you can do that with joy and completeness.

- **A spouse is a good gift, but a terrible savior.** I want to say this lovingly. I've just interacted with too many people who believe the answer to their problems is to get married. Listen, lonely insecure single people become lonely insecure married people. Single people with porn addictions become married people with porn addictions. I've heard many guys say "you know, I thought once I got

married that would fix my lust problem. Because I'd have an outlet for it." First off that is such a disturbingly selfish view of your spouse that it reveals you aren't ready for marriage. You get married to serve someone not to be served by them. Secondly this sex-on-demand lifestyle you created is only going to ruin your sex life in marriage. Marriage doesn't fix problems!!

But listen, it is still right and good to want to get married ok? Marriage is a good gift, and you should pray for it everyday if that is something you are seeking. But seek first the kingdom of God. for only he can satisfy those cravings of your soul.

- **It's ok to mourn the absence of or loss of marriage.** For the one who has the desire to be married, singleness can bring with it a grieving process because it is death of a dream. Grieving can be like getting hit by a wave. There are still, calm, moments, but there are moments where one can feel knocked down. For each wedding, it can act as a trigger of what he or she does not have. For each baby shower, there is a reminder of a hope that is not fulfilled. Sometimes it can be good to just sit in those moments and grieve—acknowledging it to God. I always go to Hebrews 3 here. You have a great high priest who knows what you are going through. Who never married. Who can handle your grieving. If you've lost a spouse through death or divorce, Christ knows how you are feeling and can bring healing to

you. He can be enough for you. And you just need to know its ok grieve.

Now a few words to married people

- I'm just going to hit you with a few "don't say that ever" things. Naturally I contacted several of my single friends here at Mercy in prep for this sermon. Got some good ones for you. All of these are things real people have said to them. Not kidding. And most of these were to women and I'm really sorry ladies. It isn't fair how much you get this more than the guys. We get it but not like you. Not cool I know.
 - **"You're next."** – Happens all the time at weddings. Just because you are too socially awkward to figure out what else to say doesn't mean your single friend should have to hear this from you. First of all, you don't know. Secondly, it's not like a theme park line you are waiting in line for. People go out of turn all the time. This is why the bouquet toss & garter throw should be banned at weddings. Don't get me started.
 - **"You're so pretty, I can't believe you're not married!"** (quoted to a friend) – What's the...I cant even. As if there is a hot or not quotient for marriage? Well if you were a 3 then I'd understand but you're an 8. That is so far from ALL THINGS the bible teaches about getting married.

- **“Don’t worry, honey, you’ll be married one day.”** (I had visited a church and listed my marital status as single. This statement happened in the follow-up phone call.) –
- **“Just be content in your singleness, and then the Lord will bring along your spouse.”** – Oh this is great. Women get told this all the time. You know what this does? It creates a bunch of women who pretend to be content....so that God will bring them a man.
- Bottom line y’all: Being single is not an affliction. There is no need for pity. As one of our single women told me: Jesus is better than any earthly man. And Jesus says in Matthew 22 We will not be married in heaven anyways. And I was like preach!
- **Invite single people into your life.** Courtney and I have been leading community groups for years and it has always been a good mix of married and single people. We love it man. Because sometimes we can get focused on ourselves like Paul was talking about. We are all about our marriage & our kids and we need the wake up call of those who just aren’t in that scene. It means I say no to last minute trivia night invites sometimes. Cause I’ve got kids. But the friendships are worth it. We have single people over for dinner, I think every birthday party we’ve had since our first kid was born 8 years ago there have been at least a handful of single friends invited if not there. They are our people! Of course they are on the

guest list. This is why you won’t find married couples groups or single people groups here at Mercy. We are a family. There is so much we can learn from each other.

Close with this – the gospel is where the blessing and calling of the single life lives. Make your home there. And begin to enjoy the good life God has given you.