



Series: Song of Solomon

Date: November 14, 2021

Speaker: Spence Shelton

Text: 1 Corinthians 7, Matthew 19:11-12

Title: God's Design for Singleness

Intro

So, we have come to the end of our Song of Solomon series. Last week was a wonderful, worshipful conclusion to our study of the book. I am SO encouraged by the many responses I've received from you about how God has used this as a pivotal season in your relationships. I don't know how else to describe this fall other than a season of spiritual renewal for mercy church.

A few weeks ago, I told you I felt like we needed to add, for lack of better word, a bonus track on to the Song of Solomon series. The book itself focuses on romantic love. And I'm so glad we took the time to focus on that as well. But in talking about love for two months, and a lot of that finding its application in marriage, I recognize that if you are not married you could have felt a little sidelined. I want to thank our singles for the way you received this series so graciously. I know you learned a lot about God's way of love, and I know you've heard and seen its application beyond marriage. That said, I set this week aside because I think this series, being about relationships, creates an opportunity for all of us to see God's design for singleness as well. So, if you are married, this is a wonderful opportunity for you to step into the shoes our single brothers and sisters have been wearing the past two months and learn how you can encourage them.

So today we are going to talk about the single life. And the second you start thinking through church history you realize real quickly how pivotal singles have been to the advancement of Christianity across the world.

We are going to take a good look at 1 Corinthians 7 today and Paul, the writer of the book we're looking at was single. We don't know *why* he was single—if he had been widowed; or divorced prior to his becoming a Christian; or maybe his wife might have left him because he became a Christian; or maybe he had always been single. We just don't know. Not only was the writer of 1 Cor, Paul, single, the Jesus who inspired the words also died as a single man. You realize that every time you pray you are praying to a 33-year-old single man.

- Most of the church fathers whose theology we still benefit from thousands of years later - Augustine, Athanasius – Single
- Mother Teresa who moved to India and served the poor in the name of Christ – single



- The story that sparked the modern missions movement – started by two single men – 36-year-old David Nitchsmann & 26-year-old Johann Dober sold themselves into slavery so they could go reach enslaved Africans with the gospel.
- 1/3 of all missionaries currently on the mission field are single. Our own Catherine Mitchell surrendered her life and legal profession here in the states to go share the gospel with high school aged girls in Kenya. Because she saw a need and took advantage of her freedom to go. And when I was there two weeks ago, I realized man the Lord has blessed her faithfulness so much!

And I bring that up because Single people often get kind of a rough deal in the church. It's often the case, as it is here, that pastors and church leaders are married. Listen I have like zero experience as a single adult, and I don't want to pretend like I do. I got married at 21 to the girl I started dating at 15. So, I know because of my unfamiliarity with BEING single, as a church leader I can unintentionally create a whole ministry that caters a little more to married people. I'm aware of this because Courtney and I have had the joy of living life in the church alongside of single people. Most of the community groups we've led together had more single people than married people. Many of our close friends were and are single. And God has taught us a lot about how a single person experiences church through those friendships.

I just want to acknowledge that and say we are always trying to listen and learn here. I want to do that because I love the church and want this to be a place you can grow as a follower of Jesus. And not only does history and present reality teach us the gospel advances in a uniquely powerful way through the ministry of single people, but I also recognize Charlotte is filled with single people. If we want to reach our city, we need to be a church where single people feel welcomed and equipped for ministry

- 34% of households with children in Charlotte are single parent households.¹ So when I bring up singles, I'm not just talking about the 25-year-old young professional. I'm talking about moms & dads too.
- More broadly - 52 % of men & 38% of women in Charlotte are single. If we want to reach our community, we have got to ensure our ministries here have in mind the realities that single people walk in every day.
- bringing it back home - 40% of mercy members are single. Praise God for that! It means we in fact do look like our community. I think this is because we keep the gospel at the center of our ministry and that is not specific to one group or another. But 40% to me is a stewardship & mobilization opportunity. There are a unique set of challenges single adults face in following Christ and God speaks to them and we have his word to help navigate them!

¹ State of the city report 2019 – For Charlotte.



So, it is good for us to learn together from God's word on how he intends for single adults to flourish in the moment he has placed them in. today we look at what the Bible says about the single life.

Our main passage today is 1 Corinthians 7. We'll get some help from Matthew 19. Corinth was a city with a lot of singles. Because it was a big city right on a coastal trade route, there were a lot of young, ambitious people. Immorality was rampant—free sex was literally the state religion. And now some of these folks have become believers. Paul's got himself a church made up of many single people—who previously had all been sexually active and now he's trying to help them understand and experience the wonderful blessing of living as they were created by God to live.

Big IDEA: God gives singleness as a good gift for the purpose of glorifying him

Pretty Simple outline: The Value of Singleness & The purpose of Singleness

The Value of Singleness

The first thing Paul is going to do is dispose of the myth that marriage is somehow the superior state to singleness. Many people both then and now have this habit of thinking that you are incomplete until you get married. Talked about that a lot in the series. A person doesn't complete you. Only Christ can meet that deep soul need. Paul instead says marriage and singleness are both gifts from God.

7 I wish that all people were as I am. But each has his own gift from God, one person has this gift, another has that.

What's he saying, "remain as he is?" He's talking about remaining single. Now some may be tempted to think then it's actually better to be single. Many groups in church history (especially church fathers like Tertullian) have taken this verse and applied it like that. Singleness is varsity and marriage is JV. I'm telling you I had times in college where we are talking about the mission of God and these verses, and I was feeling guilty about marrying Courtney. Because it felt like, according to these verses, real Christians didn't bother with superficial things like marriage. Is *that* what Paul is saying? I don't think so because Paul says each has his own *GIFT*. Gift. This is the same word he uses elsewhere talking about spiritual gifts. So...singleness is a gift from God. And so is marriage. These are gifts. And just like different believers have different gifts, we are not called to be envious or boastful about our gifts. We are called to embrace them as from God and use them to serve the building up of the body of Christ.

God gives singleness as a good gift



According to Genesis 2.18 – Marriage is good! A union reflecting the love of God for his people in an intimate & beautiful way. But 1 Corinthians 7 is going to say it is good for a man NOT to marry. SO, marriage is GOOD. And Singleness is GOOD. Singleness allows you a single mindedness in your devotion to the Lord, but marriage also teaches you about the Lord through intimacy with a spouse. Both are GOOD. Paul goes on:

Singleness is a gift. If you don't have it, there's no sense living like you do have it. It's like any other spiritual gift; you may think of all the advantages to you and the world if you had it, but if you don't, you're not doing yourself or anybody else in favors by acting like you do. Singleness is a gift God gives you so you can accomplish certain tasks. For some, it is a period of time; for others, it is a more permanent state. And likewise, Marriage is also a gift God gives to some!

So, the answer to singles who ask should I get married is...do you have the gift of marriage?
8 I say to the unmarried and to widows: It is good for them if they remain as I am. 9 But if they do not have self-control, they should marry, since it is better to marry than to burn with desire.

These are people who Paul is acknowledging are single but may not have the gift of singleness.

If you don't have self-control...if you are overwhelmed by sexual desire...you probably don't have the gift. BUT, let me say this – Paul is being a gracious shepherd to young immature Christians here. Who are like man I want to have sex. And if that's you...listen this is the bible saying that is OK! MARRIAGE is an outlet for sexual desires. BUT remember what we said in our sermon on sex? Sex is about serving your spouse not yourself. Your lack of self-control will not be fixed by getting married. That's a spiritual problem. So, before you go can really ask do I have the GIFT of singleness maybe you need to ask am I surrendered to God? Am I really walking by his spirit? Because his spirit brings self-control. But – God is saying here that there is a concession if you are burning with desire. And some of you couples who've been dating and trying to honor God physically but it's driving you crazy...this text is God saying get married. And I actually counsel this a decent bit.

Because we are so saturated by the modern sexual revolution, many Christians have assumed that if you burn with desire...then you should satisfy that desire. Who is in charge there? Desire. Desire becomes your God. And desires change. Constantly. And if you keep following them, you'll never be happy. You'll experience moments of pleasure and a lifetime of pain. But God says moments of restraining your desires in order to align them to his will – will bring you a lifetime of satisfaction. And at his right hand are eternal pleasures.



See there is a difference between singleness as a life station and singleness as a gift. BOTH are from the Lord. Everybody who is single is called to full obedience to God in their station in life. And to obey the Lord fully and with joy and thankfulness. To make the most of the moment the Lord has placed you in by serving him fully. That's true in EVERY station in life. But yes, there may be a season in your adult life where, for you, you are in *the station of singleness* while you wait on *the gift of marriage*. The Lord has appointed that, and it's good. And it would probably serve you well to see your singleness as a short-term gift from the Lord. Doesn't mean it will be for all of life, but we are wise to see any and everything from our heavenly father as a gift.

And the not knowing is one of the things so hard about really all of following Jesus. But definitely of singleness. Because if you desire marriage which is a good desire, singleness is one of those things you can't fully be in control of. So, you have to pray the Lord's prayer each day and as you wait on the Lord say, "give us today our daily bread." That's hard. But rewarding.

If your question is, should I remain single, I want to bring in Jesus' words in Matthew 19 to help us out. John Stott who was one of the greatest theologians of the last 100 years was single his whole life and these words of Christ he said helped him embrace a sense of calling to singleness for his life. He didn't write often about it because he didn't define himself by his marital status.

11 He responded, "Not everyone can accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given. 12 For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb, there are eunuchs who were made by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves that way because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who is able to accept it should accept it." -- Matthew 19:11-12 (CSB)

Stott looked at this passage and said OK, there are three reasons people remain single. And it's important to notice Jesus says "not everyone will be able to accept this. Only to those to whom it has been given."

1. Some are single because the condition they were born in will mean that to follow Jesus will require them to remain single their whole lives. A eunuch is one who will remain single and celibate their whole lives. This is Jesus accounting for how sin has broken the world. Perhaps that is a physical defect or perhaps it is a sexual attraction to the same gender.

Let's talk about that for a second. Some in the church family will choose singleness because as long as they've been aware of sexual attraction they have been attracted to people of the same gender as they are. This is important: I recognize this is a lightning rod in our culture. because God's call to **all** Christians is choose to submit **ALL** personal desires, sexual and otherwise, to the lordship of Jesus – it means that these believers likely will remain single their



whole lives. There are some who the Lord brings about a change of sexual desire over time and I think that is ok to pray for. But the answer to that prayer is entirely the Lord's prerogative. Therefore, just as being married does not mean you are more spiritually mature than being single...being opposite sex attracted does not mean you are more spiritually mature than being same sex attracted. Do we understand that?

Culture will tell you, very loudly, that if you experience same sex attraction, then you deserve to satisfy that desire. Sexual fulfillment is your right. This would be the same as life in Corinth in Paul's day. And in that belief is a belief that YOU are the highest authority in your life. But I will go ahead and tell you it is exhausting and extremely difficult to be your own god. You will eventually have an even greater identity crisis because you are not God.

If, however there is a higher authority as we Christians claim, then that authority has say over our lives. Some Christians have and will continue to bend their interpretation of scripture to agree with culture. But if scripture is God's word, we must not adjust it to fit our will but instead we must adjust to God's will. And that's true whether you are same sex or opposite sex attracted. We've shown several times in this series that scripture teaches sex is reserved for the marriage of one man and one woman. So regardless of your sexual desires, you are to submit to the Lord in all things.

So, what is the way forward? It is the way of Christ. Who surrendered his will to the Father's will. And who has been tempted in every way just as we are and yet is without sin. This is why we major on the gospel here. Because in Christ your sexual desires do not define you. In our world, they do.

But God speaks a better word over you. Son or daughter. So, if you experience same sex attraction and wonder is this a church for you...yes. There are members of our church who are same sex attracted and because they believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ, they have submitted their desires to the Lord and choose not to act on those desires just as any other single person would. And in so doing they are heroes of faithfulness to the Lord walking among us. And God in his grace may take their reality and, as they walk with him, establish in them the gift of singleness.

2. Ok let me bring us back to Jesus's words. He says some are born eunuchs. But Jesus also says some are made eunuchs by men. "This would include victims of the horrible ancient practice of forcible castration. But it would also include all those today who remain single under any compulsion or external circumstance. One thinks of a daughter who feels under obligation to forego marriage in order to care for her elderly parent. Single for a season.



3. "others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven." These people, who are under no pressure from within or without, voluntarily put marriage aside, either temporarily or permanently, in order to undertake some work for the kingdom which demands single-minded devotion."²

So for people in these three situations, I would encourage you to pray and ask the Lord for strength and joy to walk in your singleness. I encourage you not to get lost wondering if this is a permanent spiritual gift because the bible doesn't talk a lot about whether its permanent or temporary. That's us trying to get ahead of God. But instead, I would ask for humility to embrace your singleness as a gift from God today. And that discipline will yield so much fruit.

And it will help you discern over time if this is a gift. Stott himself said it was in his 40s, after he thought he was going to be married a couple of times in his 20s & 30s, that he finally began to consider that God had maybe given him this gift. And the point in all of this is – you are more than your marital status anyway! Marital status is a gift to use to glorify God. Which leads right to the second part of our sermon.

What is the purpose of singleness?

The purpose of your singleness is to bring glory to God

26 Because of the present distress, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. 27 Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. 28 However, if you do get married, you have not sinned, and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But such people will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you.

In short Paul is saying: **Don't waste your singleness**

When Paul was writing this, man life was tough for Christians. They were getting arrested, butchered in arenas, in AD 51 when Paul wrote this there was a massive famine. So yeah, it was tough. And I imagine since we aren't under that same distress, he might look more favorably on marriage. BUT what this does mean is that there can be times in your life where it is more advantageous to you to wait on marriage. Because marriage will bring a divided life with it.

So maybe it's a global missions assignment, maybe its education, maybe it's a local mission that will take a really immersed focus to accomplish. If the Lord has given you this moment, don't squander it by unnecessarily adding concerns to your life.

² Al Hsu, "John Stott on Singleness." Accessed [here](#) on 11.12.21.



32 I want you to be without concerns. The unmarried man is concerned about the things of the Lord — how he may please the Lord. 33 But the married man is concerned about the things of the world — how he may please his wife — 34 and his interests are divided. The unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But the married woman is concerned about the things of the world — how she may please her husband. 35 I am saying this for your own benefit, not to put a restraint on you, but to promote what is proper and so that you may be devoted to the Lord without distraction.

Listen, marriage is great. But it has slowed me way down in my effectiveness for the mission. The number of times I have to say “no” to meetings is brutal. Sometimes it just can’t go on the schedule. Sometimes it’s on there and I have to cancel because something happens at home. And that’s my first priority. And then things like short term mission trips – it took an act of congress to plan a short-term trip for Courtney in 2020 and then Covid just killed it. I want to get a PhD to grow as a theologian and be a better preacher. Every year for the past 12 years Courtney and I have had a discussion. Is this the year? And for 12 years NOPE. Why? Because our distractions come first! As married people we are both distracted. Doesn’t mean we are bitter, just means the bible is right. We want to follow the Lord and we go slower in that than we did when we were single.

So, to my single brothers and sisters let me Sum up the apostle Paul’s teaching to you in a familiar phrase: DON’T WASTE YOUR SINGLENES! You know most of the great movements of revival in church history have had single people at the tip of the spear? Because God has afforded you a unique opportunity to focus on both HIM and the mission field around you. During our launch phase of Mercy, I was really, really struggling with where our family would live. I wanted us to live right in like the highest density of people would be. Maybe live in an apartment in south end? And a young woman on our launch team just said...and it was totally God speaking through her...Pastor spence, you need to go live where families are because you can reach them. You need to let us single people live among singles and reach them. Also, You and Courtney will kill each other with 4 small kids in a 2-bedroom apartment. That will be bad for our mission. Man, it was a gracious early tone setter for mercy. I’m your pastor yes, but also a husband and dad. And God has positioned some of you for far greater ministry impact. And I want to equip you and encourage you – don’t waste it.

Don’t wait on somebody to tell you how to reach your single neighbors! Instead, pray & fast with some close friends and then come share where God is leading you! We are a congregational church. It means we believe and bank on the Holy Spirit leading each of our members and then we collectively as a church figure out how to get mobilized towards that mission! I’m not saying we segment our church by marital status. No sorting hat. Ha. It’s



actually best when marrieds and singles are growing in their faith in community together. I'm saying when it comes to your station in life man there are just things you are seeing that married people don't see. And the question to put before the Lord is how can you glorify God where he has you?

I'm not saying married people sit back & leave theology & missions to single people. No. Currently 1/3 of all missionaries overseas are single. Married people gotta continue to step up and deny selves too. As the Lord calls. Paul is simply saying there is a unique perspective and lack of burden you can have in serving the Lord while single. So don't waste it!