

***Alive and Well***  
***A Biblical and Practical Perspective on Singleness***

Today we continue our sermon series we've entitled "Alive and Well"; we're focusing on pursuing health and vitality in the core relationships in our lives. In a couple of weeks Brian will give the first of two sermons about marriage. But today we are going to discuss singleness.

Many times singles feel out of place in a church culture that values marriage and families. I will be the first to admit that the Church (including Faith E Free) has much to learn both biblically and practically about valuing and encouraging singles in the body of Christ. I trust that today's message is a good first step in that direction.

Biblically, a single person is someone who is not married and who is sexually abstinent. Of course not all single people are abstinent; but the Scriptures that speak about singles in the body of Christ presume that they are not sexually active.

The term "single" encompasses people in a wide variety of circumstances:

- A person who has never been married - whether 18-years-old or elderly
- A person who was formerly married but now divorced
- A person whose spouse has passed away
- A single parent raising children
- Some are very content being single and would just as soon never be married
- Others are single but would love to be married someday (to the right person)

Today's message will not address every situation. But hopefully it will be helpful in ways that can be applied to a wide variety of situations.

I hope you don't find it too strange that the first point in this sermon on singleness is about marriage. But I think this statement establishes the context for thinking about singleness.

***The household of God is permanent and eternal; marriage is a temporal relationship.*** (Malachi 2:14, Matthew 22:23-33, Hebrews 13:20, 1 Timothy 3:14-15)

In several different ways the New Testament makes clear that our spiritual relationships in the household of God will outlast our relationships in our earthly families. In other words, the Church (big C) will last throughout eternity; our families will not (at least not as we currently know them). If we do not understand and believe this, our thinking about marriage and singleness will be distorted.

In Matthew 22 we read how both the Pharisees and the Saducees (who were basically two different Jewish denominations) tried to entrap Jesus in some inconsistency or heretical teaching. The Saducees came to Jesus with an elaborate hypothetical situation about a woman whose husband dies before they had children. The law required the deceased man's next-of-kin brother to marry this widow to provide an heir. One after another, each of the man's six brothers married this woman, each one dying

without providing an heir. After laying out this scenario, they tried to entrap Jesus with this question:

28 “In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife of the seven will she be? For they all had married her.”

Not believing in the resurrection, they thought they had asked a question that would make the idea of a bodily resurrection seem silly. But Jesus didn’t accept the premise of their question.

29 But Jesus answered and said to them, “You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God. 30 “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

Jesus didn’t say that humans become angels in heaven. Rather, he said that believers are “like angels in heaven” in that they “neither marry nor are given in marriage.” Marriage in this life basically foreshadows our relationship with Jesus in the next life. Revelation 19 describes our reunion with Jesus as “the marriage feast of the Lamb.” The Church is there called “the bride of Christ” (Rev. 19:7; implied in Ephesians 5:22-33). Being the bride of Christ will gloriously overwhelm all human relationships, including marriage.

The new covenant in Christ’s blood is called an eternal covenant in Hebrews 13:20. By contrast, when two people get married, they typically exchange vows and commit themselves to each other “until they are parted by death.” Biblically, the new covenant in Christ blood is the first and primary covenant in the believer’s life; the marriage covenant is the second and therefore secondary covenant.

This reality doesn’t minimize the importance of family relationships, but it does change the way we think about our families. On one occasion Jesus’ mother and brothers showed up and wanted to talk with Him. Jesus’ response (Matthew 12:48-49) was:

48 But Jesus answered the one who was telling Him and said, “Who is My mother and who are My brothers?” 49 And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, “Behold My mother and My brothers! 50 “For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.”

Jesus saw His spiritual family as primary and His biological family as secondary. In 1 Timothy 3 Paul referred to the church as “the household of God.” Whether you are single or married, your relationships in the body of Christ will outlast those in your family.

One implication is that we need to value and include and encourage everybody in the body of Christ regardless of marital status, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc. Of course this means that married people should never make singles feel like second-class members of the body of Christ. We need to understand the advantages and disadvantages as well as the joys and sorrows of being single. As a church we have blindspots that need to be addressed.

So how should we think about singleness? First and foremost, we need to think biblically. Two points:

***Singleness (like marriage) is a gift. (1 Corinthians 7:7, Matthew 19:10-11)***

In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul is encouraging the Corinthians (among other things) to remain in the situations they were in when they were “called” (i.e., when they became followers of Christ) - whether your status in society, your Jewishness or the lack thereof, or your marital status. Part of his reasoning involved their effectiveness in influencing people for Christ. New believers have a unique role to play in the lives of others in their households and established relationships.

After discussing sexuality in marriage in verses 1 through 6, Paul makes an interesting comment in verse 7:

7 Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that.

He is referring to his own singleness when he speaks about being “even as I myself am.” Paul desired that all believers remained single as himself; as he’ll describe later, freedom from familial concerns had certain advantages related to the gospel. But he acknowledged that this was not God’s plan or will: “however, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that.” Paul speaks of singleness **and** marriage as gifts from God. When he refers to singleness as a gift, I don’t think he’s saying that some people have the God-given ability to remain single and celebrate while others don’t. I think he is saying that if you are single, you should see that as God’s gift to you. If you are married, you should see **that** as God’s gift to you.

Seeing one’s singleness as a good gift from God will correct all sorts of distorted thinking. There is great freedom in being able to say from the heart, “My singleness is a gift from God (at least for this season of my life).” Seeing singleness as a gift from God can drive away thoughts such as, “God has forgotten me,” or “I’m undesirable,” etc. To the contrary, Paul writes, one reason for viewing singleness as a gift is because:

***Singleness has the potential to provide undistracted devotion to the Lord. (1 Corinthians 7:32-25)***

Some of Paul’s comments in this chapter seem to be based upon some unique circumstances at that time; in verse 26 Paul writes, “I think then that this is good in view of **the present distress**, that it is good for a man to remain as he is.” We can’t be sure, but Paul may have been referring to the famine of AD 51/52. Whatever the case, some of his other comments are general observations and insights that are always relevant. In verse 32, for example, Paul writes:

32 But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; 33 but one who is

married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, 34 and his interests are divided. The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. 35 This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.

Paul obviously had a high view of marriage; after all he wrote Ephesians 5. But his main point here is a pragmatic one. A married person has family responsibilities that a single person often does not. When you get married your life becomes more complicated; when you have children, your life becomes much more complicated. If you don't have the responsibilities associated with being a husband/wife or mom/dad, there is the potential for "undistracted devotion to the Lord."

A young man pointed out to me this past week that when he was single (in his mid- to late-20s), he had much more discretionary time. Now that he's married he has less time to invest in the lives of friends and less capacity to volunteer in various ways. He also pointed out that there's "No way Paul would have done everything he did if he were married."

The challenge for singles is to receive singleness as a gift from God and to pursue God in ways that might not otherwise be possible. If you are not "seeking first His kingdom and His righteousness," all of this may sound rather lame attempt to make single people feel better about not being married. Certainly, there is sometimes (not always) great disappointment at not being married. But if your deepest passion is seeing the kingdom of God established here on earth, there is also great opportunity.

We've asked Susanne Renberg to come share her experience and insight related to singleness. Susanne, her husband Walter, and their daughter Janey are members of Faith. Susanne is also the Executive Director of Relate 360, "a local non-profit, empowering the next generation to live with intention, to love with integrity, and to experience wholesome relationships."

### **Singleness Testimony - by Susanne Renberg**

"As someone who did not get married until just before I turned 40, I have spent the majority of my life as a single adult. At 18 I discovered the scriptures in 1 Cor 7 which talk about the value of singleness in serving God. I took those scriptures to heart and told God that I was surrendering my relationship status to him. I wanted to be married someday, but only if I could fulfill his purposes for my life better married than I could single. That's kind of a crazy prayer, but not only did it fit my rather intense personality, it fit the genuine call of God on my life. As a result, I felt a tremendous sense of purpose in my years as a single person. This season - however long it lasted - was not God punishing me by withholding a mate, but was part of his design to bring glory to Himself through a surrendered life.

"I attended Bible College, spent a couple years on the mission field, was an associate pastor at a church for 4 years, and spent several years working for mission organizations.

"My best years as a single adult were within the missions context - both on the field and in mission organizations. Not only did I get to experience the frontlines of international kingdom work, but I was treated with respect as a valuable member of the team and was never made to feel that I was somehow lacking as a person because I was not married.

"On the other hand, by far the most challenging of those years as a single woman were the years I spent on staff at a church. For starters, the congregation viewed my singleness as something that was broken about me and needed to be fixed (with marriage, of course). My intellect, experience, skills, personality and heart for God were all secondary to the fact that I wasn't married. Part of the reason for their behavior was the misguided belief that the highest calling - especially for a woman — was to be married and have a family. Now before you all start throwing things at me, please know that I fully understand that the Bible clearly establishes the importance of marriage and families - I get it - but it also acknowledges the important role that single men and women play in God's overall plan. Example A, of course, is Jesus himself, not to mention the apostle Paul and numerous other single men and women in Scripture and throughout church history whom God used mightily - and continues to use - for his kingdom purposes.

"As a result of their belief that my singleness needed to be fixed, I was subjected to this church's constant, uninvited matchmaking. There seemed to be a steady pressure to meet someone's brother/cousin/friend. This was accompanied with the total lack of discernment as to whether or not this guy and I had anything in common other than the fact that we were both single. A common opportunity presented to me was the matchmaker's belief that if I could just meet this brother/cousin/friend, he would certainly become a Christian and start attending church again. My favorite example of this is the family who had an uncle who would soon be "re-entering normal society" and they felt having a good woman by his side with a strong moral compass would be very beneficial. That's a whole new level of missionary dating...

"Overall, as you can understand, a church that self-appointed to the role of matchmaker created some very uncomfortable situations for me that became truly tiresome.

"Another thing that proved to be a tremendous burden during my single years was, sadly, sexual harassment. The co-workers who made passes at me were married, and their inconsistent behavior around me when their wives were absent seemed to indicate that, in their minds, as a single woman I was fair game. Their actions exposed the hypocrisy of their faith at every level. It also showed their total disrespect for me as a woman and a fellow-worker - a phrase the Apostle Paul used to describe Priscilla, Phoebe and Junia among others who worked beside him in the building of the New Testament Church. Obviously this made these working environments completely unsafe and eventually resulted in me leaving that denomination altogether.

“Those are just a few examples of the challenges that, at times, brought me to the point of despair and caused me to seriously question God’s goodness in my singleness. There was more than one moment when I felt that getting married would solve a lot of problems. Through it all, one of the most important things that happened in those years, however, was that my faith became solidly built on my faithful God, not on the faithfulness or lack thereof of the other fallible humans around me. God wanted me to understand his crazy love for me firsthand - not vicariously through others experience or practice of faith. Those years as a single person were vital in building a deeply personal relationship with Jesus that, while certainly affected by others choices, was ultimately not dependent on them.

“BTW - My husband, Walter, was also close to 40 when we got married in 2005, and he had a similar attitude about singleness as a gift. However, in the 9 years he spent here as a single at Faith E Free, he recalls a much more positive experience. To those who welcomed him, thank you.

“Obviously, the importance we place on marriage and family is valid in the body of Christ, but in our rush to the altar, often in an anxiety-ridden race against sexual sin - which is understandable - we run right over a season of time that God very clearly states is a special opportunity - a gift - to serve without distraction and deepen our relationship with Him.

“Singles need our support more than ever before. Not only are they marrying later than ever, but our cultural norms of living together before marriage and unfettered access to harmful and addictive pornography make being single today a wide path toward Godlessness. The Godly standards for purity in singleness are the same for all singles. Not only do heterosexual singles need tremendous support in pursuing a Godly lifestyle, but our brothers and sisters who are same-sex attracted especially need our support. Our secular culture offers unlimited options to those who identify as gay. But as believers, God’s Word is clear that singles are to remain sexually pure outside of marriage, and the only kind of marriage that scripture talks about is between a man and a woman. This means that for those in the body of Christ who experience same-sex attraction, they may very well never marry. For these singles who believe that life-long celibacy is what God asks of them, they in particular will need a safe community that is committed to standing alongside them in the unrelenting pursuit of Jesus. If we cannot offer that, then we are failing them.

“As a now married woman, I can affirm Paul’s words in 1 Cor 7, that marriage does indeed divide your time and attention. Understanding that makes me even more grateful for my years of singleness. It seems apparent that those who pursue God as singles continue pursuing and serving him in marriage, nurturing the seeds of faith that were sown in those fully dedicated years. As any married person will tell you - marriage is a gift, but it will also test you like nothing else can, and a solid pre-marriage faith is an invaluable boost in any relationship, especially a healthy marriage.

“My encouragement to us as the body of Christ in Manhattan is to pursue loving our single brothers and sisters in Christ with a clear vision to the challenges they face, as well as the unique freedom and opportunities that singleness provides in the pursuit of God. We must lead with an intention that supports them in fully-embracing the work God is doing in them and through them in this season, whether it is short or forever. Our single brothers and sisters must know that they are loved and valued members in the body of Christ with important roles to fill and that they will always belong here.”