

The King's Teaching On Singleness

Matthew 19:10-12

Introduction

The Disciples listened to Jesus' teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage (vv.1-9). Their stunned answer is verse 10; “. . .*If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry.*” If the Disciples thought that only sexual infidelity or adultery is the only way out of a bad marriage—they saw singleness as the only viable option! Jesus made it clear that Christians were not to divorce. If one partner or the other were involved in sexually immoral behavior, divorce was allowed; but not required or even preferred. Sometimes because of the severity of the sin, the depth of the wounds, the hardness of heart, divorce takes place. Divorce should never be the first option, but the final option after exhausting the alternatives. The Disciples were in effect saying; “if there is no way to get out of a bad marriage, maybe it's better to remain single.” What about the other choice? What about making marriage wholesome, satisfying, healthy, romantic, intimate, fun? Is that an option? For some, yes. For others, singleness is more than just an option, it is a calling by God. For others singleness is an unbearable burden, a crushing unwelcome consequence, a punishment, a prison of loneliness.

(v.11) “But He said to them, “All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given:”

Scholars argue whether the ‘saying’ or teaching is a reference to verse 12 concerning celibacy or whether this is a reference to the words of Jesus in verses 3-9 concerning marriage. Does Jesus elevate celibacy above marriage? I don't think so. Are some called to be celibate? I think so.

Do the disciples think that lonely singleness is preferable to risky marriage? Do you feel the same way? What if there is such a thing as a fulfilling marriage and what if there is such a thing as fulfilling singleness? Is it possible to be single, chaste and happy?

The popular culture intimates that marriage is an essential part of a fulfilled life. Some argue that Christians should voluntarily choose to remain single to better serve the Lord. The Lord's comments on this subject are in the context of God's plan and design for marriage.

“All cannot accept this saying” or teaching. Not everyone will accept the words of Jesus. Not all are given the gift of marriage. Not all are given the gift of singleness. To remain single when you are called to be married can be very frustrating.

We are given great freedom in Christ. We are free to marry and not forbidden to marry. We are free to choose to remain single. Those who desire to marry are not less spiritual and those who desire to remain single are not necessarily less fulfilled. For some there are legitimate restrictions. For some marriage marriage is not an option.

Jesus will give three examples of people who are single.

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Single Because of Birth (v.12a)

Matthew 19:12a; "For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb"

Sometimes people are born with physical handicaps that prevent them from having relations with the opposite sex. We might think of these as congenital birth problems that result in undeveloped or under-developed sexual capacities. Here Jesus speaks of a eunuch—a person unable or incapable of having sexual relations because of some physical problem or limitation. Some people are simply not "wired" to be married. They are not freaks or misfits—they are human beings whom Jesus loves. The fact that Jesus allows certain people to suffer from physical limitations does not mean that He does not have a plan or purpose for their lives.

Single Because of Men (v.12b)

Matthew 19:12b; ". . . and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men"

In our culture we do not practice castration to protect our women. In ancient cultures in the middle east and elsewhere, some men went through a program of either voluntary or involuntary castration. The male guards who had charge of the king's harem, were often surgically altered to insure no inappropriate sexual activity took place.

In some ancient religious practices, men would sometimes be castrated as a sign of their devotion to whatever pagan god they served. Historical records indicate that priests of Diana in Ephesus practiced self-mutilation. As horrible as it might sound some parents had their children castrated as an offering to pagan deities. A castrated person does not have the same sexual desires as a non-castrated person. **There are people who because of accident, injury, surgery, are not able to have the same level of sexual desire that others enjoy.**

Single Because of Choice—Single Again (v.12c)

Matthew 19:12c; ". . .and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it."

Some are eunuchs who make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The first two mentions of eunuchs are people who by reason of physical disability or surgical alteration or even physical accident have either a diminished or no capacity for sexual companionship. This third reference is to a person who voluntarily makes the choice to remain single for the kingdom of heaven's sake. **The idea of self-mutilation or mutilation of the flesh in order to please God is not a Biblical notion but a pagan notion.** One of the early Church Fathers Origen of Alexandria read this passage literally and went and got himself emasculated. How tragic. Later Origen realized he had misunderstood the passage. Hard lesson. Another Church Father wrote; "The true eunuch is not he who cannot, but he who will not indulge in fleshly pleasures" (see Barclay quoting Clement of Alexandria p. 207).

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Clearly Jesus is speaking about being single and celibate to serve the Lord. All the evidence in the New Testament indicates Jesus was single, celibate and did so in order to serve the Lord. Some people might think; "How could God do such a thing? Make a person choose between the physical love of a life-long partner and devotion to God?" But clearly God gives a gifting and an enabling for such a person. Someone has said, "he who travels the fastest travels alone." Sometimes God allows people to remain single in order to go places and do things unique to their gift and calling. Does a Christian have the right to voluntarily decline matrimony, remain pure and devote themselves to the work of the ministry? The answer is yes!

1 Corinthians 7:32-34; "But I want you to be without care. He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord—how he may please the Lord. But he who is married cares about the things of the world—how he may please his wife. There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world—how she may please her husband." One paraphrase says—

"I want you to live as free of complications as possible. When you are unmarried, you're free to concentrate on pleasing the Master." **Don't do something about your single condition—do something with your single condition.** If you are single—pause and ask yourself this question; "Am I doing something for Jesus—or am I complaining to Jesus?" Are you using this season in your life to be used by God to expand the Kingdom, or are you scrambling to find a romantic relationship with someone? Are you squandering your season of singleness? Did you ever think that God might be wanting to use you—in this season of singleness?

Paul tells the Christians in Corinth to consider their present circumstances (1 Cor.7:25-31). The Christians in Paul's day were living in a time of social upheaval and profound political changes. Christian persecution was on the rise—and many families would be torn apart—some would experience exile, torture and even death. In view of some of these problems—perhaps it would be best if some remained unmarried. **It is still good advice. Consider your circumstances.**

When Paul says "But I want you to be without care" (1 Corinthians 7:32) the word means "to be anxious or pulled in two different directions." Paul is saying I don't want you to be torn apart over this issue. Marriage requires maturity and responsibility and age is no guarantee of maturity or responsibility. Paul's emphasis is to live a single life-style for the Lord. Does that mean that the married person can't live for the Lord? No—but married people must consider their mate—their children—their obligations in the decision making process. Some scholars have pointed out that George Whitfield and John Wesley both would have been better off if they remained single! It is possible to please the Lord and your mate if both are living for the Lord and submitted to the Lord. Unmarried people should pray about whether marriage would hinder ministry. **Singleness presents unique opportunities to serve.**

At the end of verse 12 Jesus says; "*He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.*"

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Jesus seems to be saying, at least in the narrow—literal sense, for those who are called to be married—stay married. Those who are called to be single—and celibate—accept your marriage—accept your season of being single. Jesus may also be speaking more generally—broadly—in the sense—everything that Jesus has said about marriage—should be accepted—and everything that Jesus says about singleness and celibacy should be accepted. **The disciples were to reject false teachings about marriage and divorce and reject false teachings about what it means to be single. The disciples were to put away the false practices and false ideas that were accepted by the religious leaders or even the broader culture.**

Married people and single people are to model Christ. Christ did not give you the gift of marriage to be selfish or the gift of being single for a season to be selfish. The years God gives you in single service to Him are a gift! Some of you might be thinking—“This is not a gift I seek or a gift I want.” Why not give me a gift I can use! Unless you realize this season of singleness is a gift from God—you run the risk of not using the season wisely.

What about the person who is single for a season or single again?

Dear Ann Landers:

“Please come home early.” This was the most unreasonable request ever made by my wife of almost 40 years. She didn't make this request often. It came mostly on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays, but it seemed that I always had so many things to do that in spite of her gentle urging, I rarely came home early. I don't want to give the impression that I was never home. I was home a lot. We rarely did anything out of the ordinary. We enjoyed the kids and the grandchildren. We listened to music, read the paper and had meals together. Sometimes we would just talk about how the day had gone. Now I know why she asked me so often to “Please come home early.” She wasn't just lonely. She was lonely for me. When she passed away a short time ago, I learned first hand what loneliness is all about. I have a supportive family and many good friends. I'm free now to go places and do things, but I'm lonesome. Lonesome for her. Now that she's gone, I've found the time to “come home early,” but there is nobody to come home to. There is nobody to do those simple things with, such as watching the evening news, listening to music, and reading the paper. And nobody cares how my day went. If I should get a call from the good Lord to “Please come home early,” I won't fight it.”

Signed Lonesome in K.C.

Loneliness is a great problem among singles and people who are single again. A study by the American Council of Life Insurance reported that the most lonely group in America are College students. That's surprising! Next on the list were those divorced; welfare recipients, single mothers, rural students, housewives and the elderly. How lonely can a person be? Charles Swindoll mentioned an ad in a Kansas newspaper. It read: “I will listen to you talk for 30 minutes without comment for \$5.00”. Swindoll said, “Sounds like a hoax, doesn't it? But the person was serious. Did anybody call? You bet. It wasn't long before this individual was

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receiving 10-20 calls a day. The pain of loneliness was so sharp that some were willing to try anything for a half hour of companionship.” Is it wrong to want close companionship? No! But intimacy at least physical intimacy with the opposite sex is the reward of commitment in a Biblical marriage.

Perhaps this is one of the great clues of whether you are called to be single. You are alone. But you are not lonely. You are alone, but you are fulfilled, content, satisfied in your relationship with the Lord. Our culture and sometimes even the Church views the single person as not quite right. How tragic.

According to a recent Barna poll:

More than four out of every ten adults in the United States is not married, producing a singles population that is larger than the total national population of all but eleven of the world's 192 nations.

Barna indicated that those who have never been married make up the lion's share of America's 82 million single adults, representing nearly six out of every ten singles. Adults who are currently divorced are one-quarter of the singles population, while widowed adults form the remaining one-sixth. Whereas men slightly outnumber women among those who have never been married and divorced women slightly outnumber divorced men, widowed women largely outnumber widowed men by a 4.3-to-1 ratio.

Solitary Refinement

There are no quick and easy answers for the problem of loneliness.

The poet John Milton wrote; “Loneliness is the first thing which God’s eye named not good.” H.G. Wells on his 65th birthday wrote; “I am sixty-five, and I’m lonely and have never found peace.”

Real peace can be had in the Lord Jesus Christ. Real friendship can also ease the pain and help fill the void. Friendship can come with pain and frustration as well! **Do you hate being alone with yourself? Then maybe its time to remember what a fun person you can be. Do you enjoy being alone with the Lord? I do! Jesus can do a great job of filling the loneliness void.** The person who usually complains of loneliness does not lack contact with people, but has somehow failed to make meaningful contact with the Lord Jesus Christ. Most marriages and friendships include two people who enjoy each other and enjoy life. I think many people have a distorted or perverted view of what constitutes “togetherness”. Some people think that “togetherness” is experiencing everything together! **But part of what you bring to a relationship is what you have experienced alone. As a Pastor I must spend a great deal of time—alone—yet not alone. Often what God shows me or teaches me I have the great**

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privilege of sharing with you. The Lord also allows you to give me—the most wonderful insight into His love and His grace and His goodness by the things you say and do!

In contrast to the popular culture and some segments of the Church singleness is a gift from God. Jesus says so. Paul says so.

Singleness has its advantages. Paul points out the advantage of being spared some of the difficulties, restrictions and prohibitions that come with marriage and the opportunity to more fully devote oneself to the things of God.

Clearly singleness is hard for many people. There is an ongoing battle with loneliness for some. The Bible says that **it is not good for a man to be alone. Marriage was designed for unity—companionship, relationship.**

Though many people remain single their entire lives—most are only single for a season. Everyone who knows and loves the Lord Jesus Christ are a part of the Body of Christ. The New Testament uses the metaphor of a Bride and Jesus as our Groom. Even Jesus was single for a season. The Bible speaks of a great marriage that will take place in Heaven when the Bride is reunited with her Groom.

Conclusion

Vaughn Roberts a Rector at Oxford writes;

- Thank God for the gift of singleness. Whatever your experience of singleness, recognize it as a gift from God and make the most of it for as long as you have it.
- Do all you can to be godly. It's easy for those who are single to lapse into a selfish, self-centred lifestyle and into sexual sin, whether in thought or deed. Be self-disciplined and accountable to others.
- Keep your eyes fixed on heaven. It is our eternal relationship with Christ that ultimately matters.

A final word to those who are married:

- Don't think of singleness as second best. Christian preacher and author John Chapman spoke of friends taking him for long walks and telling him he should be married. He commented: "It would have been a great help if they had read the Bible, wouldn't it?"
- Remember that your family is the whole church. There should be no lonely people in our church. We need to be opening up our homes to one another and relating to one another not just in the nuclear family, but in the church family.
- Keep your eyes fixed on heaven. Human marriage matters, but it will not last forever (Mark 12:25). Our relationship with Christ must come first.