

Singleness

Resources

- Sam Allberry, *7 Myths about Singleness*. Rev. Allberry is single, and his perspective valuable.
- Tim and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* – esp. chapter 7, “Singleness and Marriage.”

1. Both married and single people need to understand the Bible’s teaching on singleness:

- The body of Christ contains both married and single members, and we are commanded to “have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together,” (1 Cor. 12:25-26). Therefore even those who are not currently single need to understand the Bible’s teaching on this subject.
- Many who are currently married will one day again be single. Most married couples do not leave this world simultaneously! Therefore roughly half of all married people in the church will one day again be single.
- Churches that value families and covenantal theology can tend to ignore or undervalue the singles among us. This can show up even in the way we speak. We say that a single person is ‘unmarried,’ but we never say that a married person is ‘unsingle.’¹
- As we’ll see, the Bible’s teaching on singleness challenges both the married and the singles in our midst. In a world, the married are called to *open up*, and singles are called to *step up*.

2. As we begin to explore this topic, we should be guided by four basic principles:

- ***Both marriage and singleness are gifts from God.*** A Christian man or woman can follow Jesus and glorify God fully in either state. The same apostle who wrote Ephesians 5:22-33 also wrote 1 Corinthians 7:24-40, and acknowledged that “each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another,” (1 Cor. 7:7).
- ***Singles are not missing out on anything essential to being human.*** This is a very important point to underline, because modern society is sex-obsessed and therefore cannot conceive of life without sexual activity. Allberry writes, “[There is] a serious belief, one that is widespread in the Western world today: without sex you can’t really experience what it means to be truly human. According to this thinking, our sense of personhood is directly attached to our sex life.” Yet he goes on to remind us, Jesus “is the most complete and fully human person who ever lived. So his not being married is not incidental. It shows us that none of these things — marriage, romantic fulfillment, sexual experience — is intrinsic to being a full human being. The moment we say otherwise, the moment we claim a life of celibacy to be dehumanizing, we are implying that Jesus himself is only subhuman.”²
- ***We must never assume to know why a person is single.*** There are many reasons why a person may be single. Some of these are involuntary, while others are conscious choices. Some conscious reasons are legitimate, and others are not. Be careful not to make assumptions.
- ***Both the married and singles are tempted to compare their own disadvantages with the others’ advantages.*** We are always tempted to think the grass is greener on the other side. But the Scripture shows us that each state has distinct advantages as well as distinct challenges.

¹ Allberry, 36.

² Allberry, 18, 25.

3. In 1 Corinthians 7:24-38, Paul lists several advantages of singleness – with one caveat:³

- **In times of crisis, it can be wise to refrain from getting married.**
“I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. 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.” (26-28)
- **Marriage can be a source of idolatry from which singles are spared.**
“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, 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, 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.” (29-31)
Keller comments: “Paul’s meaning here is that because this present world will someday give way to God’s new heavens and new earth, we do not need to cling to worldly sources of security like money, family, and heirs. Many people are driven into marriage out of a deep need for security that should only be found in God. Because this world will pass away, we should not marry out of such desperation. Therefore, he hints, singleness can help you refrain from putting too much spiritual hope in the things of this world...”
- **Singles can devote more time to spreading the gospel and Christian ministry.**
“I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, 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. 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.” (32-35)
Allberry comments: “Paul reminds us of something of the character of marriage: both the husband and the wife are ‘anxious about worldly things.’ Paul does not mean that in a pejorative sense. He is not saying that their focus is on ungodly things. He is saying that for the husband or wife, much of their attention is on the things of this world. This is at it should be. The husband and wife have a duty to each other and to any children.”
- ***Singleness requires sustained sexual self-control – something not everybody has.***
“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. 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.” (36-37)

4. These advantages also imply several challenges of singleness:

- **Relational inexperience.** Married people must pay attention to pleasing their spouses. Singles are not (usually) as exposed to this daily need to attend to and compromise with others.
- **Self-centeredness.** “Paul is assuming we singles will be ‘anxious about the things of the Lord.’ This is a battle for many of us. It is easy to channel our flexibility and energies into merely pleasing ourselves rather than God... I can easily become anxious about “the things of me.”⁴
- **Celibacy.** This is a significant challenge, especially in a sex-obsessed culture.

³ Keller, 270-271; Allberry, 28-34.

⁴ Allberry, 33.

5. **Though singleness requires celibacy, it does not mean that singles are doomed to a life without emotional intimacy or the joys of family.** The biblical provides a threefold answer to these needs:

- **Eschatology.** According to Paul, the physical intimacy enjoyed in marriage is a picture of the spiritual intimacy that all believers will enjoy with Christ in the new heavens and the new earth: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church,” (Eph. 5:31-32)

Allberry reflects: “Marriage is a picture of Christ and the church. So when we enter into the fullness of our relationship with him, when the church is finally presented to him as his perfected bride, the institution of marriage will have served its purpose. We will have the reality; we will no longer need the picture... Singleness for us now is also a way of bearing witness to this reality. Like Jesus, we can live in a way that anticipates what is to come. Singleness now is a way of saying that this future reality is so certain and so good that we can embrace it now. It is a way of declaring to a world obsessed with sexual and romantic intimacy that these things are not ultimate and that in Christ we possess what is.”⁵

- **Friendship.** One of the most tragic casualties of a sex-obsessed culture is the suspicion it has cast upon genuine friendship. Previous ages understood that real emotional intimacy could be shared in non-sexual ways through close friendships. Think of historical figures like David and Jonathan, and of fictional characters like Frodo Baggins and Sam Gamgee. C.S. Lewis said it well: “Those who cannot conceive Friendship as a substantive love but only as a disguise or elaboration of Eros betray the fact that they have never had a Friend.”⁶
- **Hospitality.** The biblical concept of hospitality is not what we typically mean by it – an occasional invitation for somebody to come to your home for dinner. That is *entertaining*, not hospitality. Rather, biblical hospitality understands that our fellow Christians are just as much our family as our siblings and children (Mk. 3:33-34; Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 5:1-2), and acts accordingly. Allberry suggests numerous ways in which hospitality can bring singles and married folk together:⁷
 - Singles can *step up* and initiate a relationship with married families, offering to help them in the practical realities of life – even bringing ingredients to their home and cooking for them.
 - Married families can *open up* and offer singles a key to their home and make it clear that they are welcome to drop in anytime, just as they would treat an adult child.
 - Children will benefit tremendously from the input of other adult Christians besides their parents. Singles will benefit from participation in the rhythms of regular family life. Married people will be reminded that childcare, family life, and even the marriage relationship are not our ultimate identity.

6. **In sum: singleness is different from marriage, but not inferior to it:**

The Christian perspective on singleness is almost unique. Unlike traditional societies, Christianity sees singleness as good because the kingdom of God provides the most lasting possible legacy and heirs. Unlike sex-and-romance-saturated Western society, Christians see singleness as good because our union with Christ can fulfill our deepest longings. And yet, unlike our commitment-averse, postmodern society, Christianity does not fear or avoid marriage either.⁸

⁵ Allberry, 119-120.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (reprint, New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1991), 61.

⁷ Allberry, 69-80.

⁸ Keller, 201.