

Singleness & the Glory of God

Good to see everybody this morning. If you have a bible, go with me to **Matthew 19**. Today, the plan, as many of you already know, is to talk a bit about *singleness*. One reason for that is that today is **Valentine's Day**—the holiday specifically invented to *exclude* single people. But the other, better reason for that is that our church is made up of **a lot of single people**. I don't know if you've noticed that or not. (*some of the single people are like "I have indeed noticed that—that's why I'm here. The pool is bigger."*) But as of our last count, about 56% of our LifeGroup members and approximately 60% of our Sunday Gathering attendance is made up of single people.

And we're grateful to have so many single folks in our church, in part because **by and large, the American Church does not do the best job welcoming and including single people**. **Nationwide, the average number of single folks in any given church is only 23%.**¹ Contrast that with the *national percentage*, where **single people make up at least 51% of the U.S. population (and that's just those aged 18-34)**. And that percentage has been climbing steadily each year since 1978. More and more people are remaining single, later and later in life, or permanently.²

So all that to say, **the fact that our church is reaching a percentage of single people so reflective of the general population is something that we are really thankful for and proud of at City Church**. And because of that, we feel a particular responsibility to equip you (and all of us) about how to think about singleness well, through the lenses of the Scriptures. So that's what we're aiming for today.

But as we get started this morning, let me briefly address what could be a bit of an **elephant in the room**. And that's that I, myself, the person *giving* this teaching, am not single. If you've been coming around our church for very long, you likely know that I'm married to an absolutely delightful human being named Ana, and we have two wonderful kids. And so maybe knowing that about me is a *barrier* for you to hear what I have to say this morning about singleness. *Maybe that feels to you a little bit like someone giving a TED Talk on the joys of being a vegetarian, while eating a cheeseburger*. And I understand the resistance—I really do.

So let me try to help out with **a few thoughts** on that. First, one of the things about being a follower of Jesus is that we understand **our authority as residing, not within ourselves or within our experiences, but rather in the Scriptures**. So anytime someone gets up here on Sundays and gives a teaching, they're not just giving their

¹ <https://www.barna.com/single-minded-church/>

² <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>

opinion about things—they're *unpacking* for all of us what the *Scriptures* have to say. That's our goal. And that means that *today*, this teaching is **not what "Kent, the married person, thinks about singleness."** **This is a teaching where I, Kent, am doing my best to show you what the *Scriptures* teach about singleness.** I'm not saying "take my word for it, because I know all about it first-hand." I'm saying, "take my word for it, because I'm simply relaying and explaining what much more reliable people said about it."

But all that said, here's **the ironic thing**: *coincidentally*, both of the passages we're going to read from today are actually *single people* talking about singleness. We're going to read from Jesus, who remained single his entire life, and Paul, who was either single his whole life, or was a widower and *currently* single when he wrote what we're going to read. So ironically, **even if your belief is that only single people can speak authoritatively on singleness—you still should hear all of this out, because what we're going to focus on all comes from *single people* in the bible.** Does that all make sense? So all that to say, I don't have any qualms about speaking on singleness, because it's never my authority or experience that I'm leaning on anyway.

Now, with all of that out of the way, let's **start here. Philosophically**, when it comes to singleness, I think there are two popular perspectives out there. The first one we might summarize like this: **singleness = freedom.** Total, complete, unfettered, freedom. This view comes mainly from culture at large. The belief here is that *marriage* is often an unnecessarily *restrictive* relationship: **restrictive of your sexual expression, restrictive of your schedule, maybe restrictive of your career goals, your time—restrictive in any number of different ways.** And if that's true, that means the best thing to do is to stay single for as long as you possibly can. So maybe you date here and there, have casual relationships here and there, but you have no real intention of ever settling down—at least not for the foreseeable future.

Back in the day, you heard this in the people that would refer to their spouse as "the **ol' ball and chain.**" Anybody ever heard that expression? Yeah, it's a crazy insulting expression. We also hear this when people say things like "I don't think I could get married—I just enjoy my freedom too much." We hear this in how some people talk about **getting a divorce as if they're getting released from prison.** These are all different outworkings of the belief that **singleness = freedom.**

The **second popular perspective** out there, which sometimes comes more from inside the *Church* or maybe from your family, could be summed up like this: **singleness = purgatory.** This perspective **assumes that a romantic relationship (i.e. marriage) is actually the primary means of obtaining happiness in life.** And *if that's true*, that

means *singleness* is a version of hell on earth—or at least, some type of second-tier experience of adulthood—that serves as a miserable waiting period until you achieve that happiness that is marriage.

You'll **hear this communicated** from a dozen different sources, not least of which is your well-meaning aunt or grandma. Or another other family member who just “can't wait for you to meet somebody.” Maybe for you, it's your parents who ask you every time you're home for the holidays if there's “anybody special in your life lately.” You'll hear this in reality TV shows that build plotlines around finding the perfect soulmate that will make all your dreams come true (ahem, *Bachelor*)—nevermind the fact that 95% of those relationships *end* within the next few years after they ride off into the sunset on the show. We could go on, but that's the second perspective: *singleness = purgatory*.

So **those are really the two perspectives** that our modern world has on offer when it comes to singleness. And often, what ends up happening is that real, actual single people get caught in this weird **ideological tug-of-war** between the two. They have one voice in one ear telling them that they just need to meet someone, and until they do they will be miserable. And then they have a voice in the *other* ear assuring them that once they get married, they are *going to be* miserable for the rest of their married life. *Selah*. So single people are left in this awkward middle going “okay, so you're telling me there *are no* good options. I'm screwed either way. Or *not* screwed, which is precisely the thing I'm worried about.” Can anybody in the room identify with the awkward frustration of singleness in our modern society?

So what I want to do **today**, is offer you a **third, better perspective** on singleness starting in Matthew 19. But first, let me give you just a quick bit of **context** on the passage. In what we're about to read, Jesus has been talking about divorce, and has essentially set the bar really high for what justifies it. In Jesus' mind, there are very few biblical reasons for divorce. But that hard-line stance prompts a response from his disciples that eventually turns the discussion in the direction of singleness. So let's take a look at what happens—follow along with me in Matthew 19, starting in v. 10:

*[10] The disciples said to him, “If **this** is the situation between a husband and wife, it is **better not to marry**.”*

So **the disciples hear** Jesus' whole bit about how there are very few justifications for divorce, and they respond a lot like many people *today* would. They go, “Jesus, if that's how it works—if those are the only allowances for divorce—then *nobody* should ever get married.” Do you hear their logic? That's essentially just an ancient version of the *singleness = freedom* framework. They're saying that if getting married means you're

locked into this one person for life no matter what, then it's probably *better* to just not get married in the first place.

So let's take a look at **Jesus' response**, v. 11:

*[11] Jesus replied, "Not **everyone** can **accept** this word, but only those to whom it has been **given**."*

So Jesus essentially says **"yes, that may be"**—but not everyone can accept that." Not everyone can arrive at that conclusion. Rather, only those to whom it is "given." Put another way, Jesus is saying "yes, in some ways it *is* better not to marry, but not for the reasons you think it is." Then Jesus continues to explain what he means. Verse 12:

*[12] For there are **eunuchs who were born that way**, and there are **eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others**—and there are those who **choose to live like eunuchs** for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."*

Okay, so **a eunuch in Jesus' day** referred to a male, who *identified* as a male, but who did not have biologically male reproductive organs (side note: this is going to get a *bit* random for a second). That's what a eunuch was. Jesus says there are some people "born that way"—people who are born without clear biological indicators of whether they're male or female—what we today would call *intersex* persons. And then he says there are people who are "made that way by men." As cruel and bizarre as this is, if a man served in proximity to a woman of royalty, that man would often be *castrated* in order to ensure that he behaved properly towards that woman. So there are eunuchs who were born that way, and eunuchs who were "made that way by others."

But then he says that **just like both of those** situations exist, there are also people who "*chose to live as eunuchs* for the sake of the kingdom of God." And this is his main point. What he *means* is that there are people who remain single and abstain from sex and marriage—and do all of that *for the purpose of the kingdom*. So in simpler terms, he's talking about *celibate, single* people. Single people who choose of their own volition to live *celibate* lives *for* the kingdom of God. Whether that is for a season, or for the entirety of their life, they see that as the *purpose* of their singleness. And Jesus sets that forward as a viable, *beautiful* way of life.

So you **might be asking okay, why doesn't he just say "single people"**? Why does he go on this whole tangent about eunuchs—which seems like *quite* the tangent, to say the least—just to say "some people choose to live single and celibate"? **Well in part, because**

“single and celibate” **wasn't much of a category** back in his day. In the Greco-Roman world, you had people who were married (which was the vast majority of people), and then you had *unmarried* people, but most of those unmarried people were unmarried for specific reasons—not because they preferred it—and tended to live promiscuous lives in their singleness.

There was **hardly a category in people's minds** for people who *choose to remain* single, and also willingly abstain from sexual intimacy with people they're not married to. **Not dissimilar to how if you say that's what you're doing today, people may also look at you a little weird.** Culturally speaking, it was even more that way in Jesus' day. So Jesus, in a way, has to “invent” a category in people's minds for God-glorifying, deliberate, purposeful singleness. He has to reference a slightly different framework—a eunuch—in order to help people grasp this very different approach to life and sexuality. Does that make sense?

So **don't miss this.** This all **means that** Jesus, living in a society that was way more inclined towards the **singleness = purgatory** mindset than even we are, goes out of his way to introduce and hold up singleness as a viable, beautiful, God-glorifying, kingdom-building way of life. To bestow a specific *honor* and *dignity* on those who live that way. **Jesus says these people aren't living a sub-optimal, second tier existence in the world. They are making an incredible, God-glorifying choice that is to be celebrated and honored.** Now that's different than either of the narratives our society gives us about singleness, isn't it?

So **two practical questions that leaves us.** First, how do you know if *you* are called to that kind of singleness? How do you know if you are being called to live single and celibate for the kingdom of God? **As a fair warning, you will get a whole spectrum of answers to this within evangelicalism, that range from anywhere from normal to really goofy.** But can I just suggest a very simple way to answer that question? You ready? **If you are currently single and you are a follower of Jesus, congratulations: you have the gift of singleness.** Maybe just right now, maybe for good. But either way, you have the gift right now. If you are not currently married or engaged to be married, God has given you—at least at this moment—the gift of singleness. He is calling you to live single and celibate for the sake of the kingdom of God. Which means Jesus' instruction and other instructions that we're about to read apply to you.

And all that raises the **second question: what does Jesus mean** by “...for the kingdom of God”? In what way is living single and celibate a way to build up and further the kingdom? For *that*, we need to head over to **1 Corinthians 7.** Many scholars suggest that in this chapter of the book, Paul is essentially *elaborating* on Jesus' teachings about

singleness. And I think what he gives us in these verses helps us fill in the gaps as to what Jesus *meant* by singleness being “for the kingdom of God.” Let’s take a look, starting in v. 32:

[32] I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs—how he can please the Lord. [33] But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—[34] and his interests are divided. Interesting. Keep reading— *An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord’s affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. [35] I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.*

Okay, let’s try to dissect all of that a little. Big picture, Paul here is **starting from the premise** that **the purpose of each and every one of our lives is to serve and build up the kingdom of God.** Every single one of us, if we are followers of Jesus, whether we are single or married, we are called to do that. But his point here in 1 Corinthians 7 is that **there are stations of life that make it easier to do that, and stations of life that make it harder, or more complicated, to do that.**

Singleness, or being “unmarried,” makes it **far easier to serve** and build up the kingdom of God. He says that when you’re *unmarried*, your focus and concern can be *solely and completely* on the things of God. **Loving and pursuing a relationship with him. Growing in an understanding of who he is. Loving and serving and pouring yourself out for other people. Going and making disciples everywhere you go and in every relationship he affords you. Pursuing justice in a way that points people to who God is.** **When you’re single, the kingdom of God can be your one and only focus, and it is much easier to leverage everything you have to that end.**

But **on the other hand, when you are married**, it’s a little different. Now *theologically*, even if you’re married, your *purpose* is the same as if you’re single: *glorifying God and building the kingdom of God.* But **practically speaking, you often have more of an uphill trek to get there.** **You have a spouse you are called to love and shepherd and look out for. You may also have kids—a family that needs caring for. And because you have those things, you and/or your spouse likely have a job of some sort to help provide for each other and the family.** And hear me: *all* of those are beautiful God-given responsibilities, but they are also things that you can’t just *brush aside* to do whatever it is God is calling you to do in building his kingdom. You have to figure out how to fulfill those responsibilities, *while also* building the kingdom of God. That’s more complicated.

So let's say you start feeling God prompting you to **move to somewhere in South America**, dig wells for people that don't have clean water with an orphaned child strapped to your back, and tell people about Jesus. Let's say that's something you feel like God is prompting you to pursue. **If you're single**, that means the primary things you need to do is just talk to other followers of Jesus to have them speak into that desire to affirm that God really is calling you to that, you sell your stuff, and move to South America. That's about it.

But if you're married and feel prompted in that same way, it's a little more complicated. You still need to have other people speak into that and affirm it. You still need to sell your stuff. But you also need to spend some time asking lots of other questions. Things like, "okay, how is this going to affect my marriage? Does my spouse feel called to the same thing I do? If not, how do we navigate one of us feeling called to it and one of us not? Who yields to who in this scenario, and by how much? Because it's not like I can just peace out on my family in "obedience" to God. That would be *disobedience* because God has commanded me to love and care and provide for my family.

Additionally, if you have kids, you also have to ask things like "how is this going to affect my *kids*? This place that we're moving—is it a place that they can *thrive*? Bare minimum, is it a place where they can *survive*? Are there schools of some sort there, where my kids can grow and learn and mature as human beings? If there *aren't*, will we as their parents have the ability and time and bandwidth to homeschool them? If one or both of us are doing *that*, will we still have the time and the energy to dig the wells or whatever it is that we are going there to do? And as we're doing all of that, how are we going to make sure that there is food on the table for all of us? And I could go on. But when you are married and/or have a family, there are just far more questions that have to be considered. **Because there are more people that your decisions immediately impact.** And those things can become *obstacles* to building the kingdom in certain ways.

But these **aren't just obstacles** in those types of **extreme examples**. They're often obstacles in what we think of as normal, everyday life too. **For instance**, in my experience the past eight years as a pastor, the most common excuses I hear given for why people can't do kingdom things are marriage and family related. "Well I don't really have time for community right now because we have kids and they have basketball games and soccer games and extracurriculars." "Well I can't really make disciples right now because my spouse is really more of a homebody than I am, and they like to stay in more than I do, so I need to love *them* well by staying in most of the time." This is the type of stuff Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians: when you are married, when you have

kids, your interests are often *divided*. You have more *concerns*, more *obstacles*, than you would otherwise.

Now, let me say as clearly as I can: that's **not him saying** that those are **excuses**. **Marriage and family are not justified reasons for not building up the kingdom of God.** But they *are obstacles* that have to be waded through. *They are wonderful, beautiful, gifts from God...that can also be obstacles.* They *do* make building up the kingdom more *complex* than it would be otherwise. I can speak from experience—I love my wife, I love my kids, I wouldn't trade them for the world. But I can verifiably say that making disciples and participating in tangibly building up the kingdom of God is more *complicated* now than it was when I was single. It takes intentionality. It takes planning. It takes not just shutting ourselves in our house every night and cutting ourselves off from the outside world. That's reality.

And that's **what Paul is trying to say**. **When you are married, you have a more complicated path towards active participation in the kingdom of God.** You have *additional* obstacles. *Additional* concerns. *Additional* hurdles. So, *his* take on it all is that **if you're a follower of Jesus**, and you're **currently unmarried**, shouldn't you at least take that into *consideration* in deciding whether or not to get married one day? Shouldn't you at least *consider* that getting married could become an additional obstacle to fully participating in the life of the kingdom? **Being married vs. being single doesn't change what we are called to do for the kingdom, but it does change the ease with which we can fulfill those callings.** And that's worth consideration. Does that make sense?

Now, at this point, **if you are married**, you may be a bit confused. Maybe you're thinking, "here I was thinking that the bible thinks really *highly* of marriage and here it kinda sounds like the bible is *down* on marriage." So is Paul saying here that none of us should get married, because it's a barrier to the kingdom?

The answer to that is **no**. Because he also says in 1 Corinthians 7, "but each person has their own gift (meaning, some people are meant to be married, and some people are meant to be single)." So Paul's take is "yes—in general, my view is that it is better to be single because then there are less obstacles in your way to pursuing and building up the kingdom of God. But that doesn't mean that every human being on earth should be single." *Because some people have one gift, and some have another.*

But all that said, at the very least, Jesus and Paul are charting a way forward that rejects either simplistic narrative about singleness. Singleness is not freedom in the sense that we are free to live selfishly and wastefully and driven by every desire and

whim. *And* singleness is not *purgatory*, in that it is a holding period until we become fully human by getting married. Rather, **singleness is a beautiful, viable, God-glorifying, kingdom building way of life.**

And another reason for all of that, is that **singleness most resembles what eternity will be like.** Look with me at **Matthew 22** on the screen. Jesus here is once again speaking on marriage and divorce. And in doing so, offers this in v. 30:

At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.

Now, this is fascinating. Jesus is talking about **“the resurrection.”** So by that, he means in the new heavens and new earth, when God makes all things new—what many of us probably refer to as “heaven.” In that future reality, Jesus says, people *will not be married*. They will be like the angels in heaven. Jesus is saying that **ultimately, all of us will be single for eternity. It’s just that some of us (right now) are temporarily married.**

Now some of us who are married probably **hear that and get a little bit sad,** right? Like, *I like Ana, I like being married to her—I want us to still be married in heaven. But this passage seems to be saying I won’t be. So how is that good news?* Here’s why: we have to remember that in the Scriptures, *marriage* is always described as a *picture*—a metaphor—of a far more important relationship: the relationship between Jesus and his Church. Paul unpacks that in Ephesians 5. Earthly marriages are meant to be simple *microcosms* of the grand *marriage* between Jesus and his people. Every good thing that you experience and love about your marriage is good because it is a *reflection* of the relationship it represents.

So **Jesus’ point is** simply that when the new heavens and the new earth is our reality—when Jesus returns and makes all things new—**we will not need the picture anymore, because we will have the reality.** **It makes no more sense to cling to a marriage in heaven than it does to insist on looking at a picture of your spouse instead of interacting with them when they’re sitting right beside you. In the new heavens and the new earth, we will not need earthly marriages and earthly families because we will all be caught up in the eternal realities of being in the family of God.**

And **so the call to all of us,** single and married, is to *practice* living in that eternal reality now. To see ourselves more as members of *God’s* family than we do of our earthly family. To see ourselves more as a part of the Bride of Christ than we do as a husband or a wife (or a *potential* husband or a *potential* wife). To see ourselves as more subsets

of God's big family than we do as isolated, insular family units. And to see ourselves more as members of God's family than we do as isolated individuals.

So on that note, I'd love to just just **speaking briefly and practically to each group** of people in the room. First, for married folks in the room, I want to propose that **we do everything in our power to come alongside our single friends in their singleness, and not to make them more discontent in their singleness.** At **bare minimum**, that means not making every conversation with them somehow about who they're dating or if they're dating. It means not getting more excited about them dating someone than we get about everything else in their life. It means that we hang out with them as much as we hang out with our *married* friends. It means us being honest about sharing the *joys* of marriage and also the difficulties and frustrations of marriage with them. It means giving them a realistic view of marriage and not an airbrushed, sugar-coated one. And at the same time, it looks like seeing to it that not every topic of conversation with them circles back to us and our marriage, because that is likely going to make them feel like a stranger in conversations with us.

Additionally, what if we were to **look for ways to celebrate** the beautiful, God-glorifying singleness of our single friends? I don't know if you've ever realized this, but nearly every celebration or milestone we have in our society is for married people and married people with kids. Weddings, wedding showers, anniversaries, gender reveals, baby showers, kids' birthday parties. If you're single, you get *your birthday*. That's it. So what if we looked for ways to celebrate the accomplishments and milestones in our single friends' lives? When one of them gets a job or a promotion because they've been working their tail off, what if we put together an epic dinner party to celebrate and footed the bill for it? When they signed the lease on an apartment or closed on the purchase of a house, what if we threw them that house-warming party, instead of making them throw it *themselves*, and saw to it that people gave them everything they need to make it into a home? When they decided to go overseas to tell people about Jesus, what if we threw them the most epic send-off the world has ever seen, and flooded them with tangible reminders of how we're praying for them while they're there? What if we sought out ways to celebrate singleness?

And lastly, what if we simply **treated them as a peer** in our life? Sometimes, a friendship between a married person and a single person can almost feel like it has an undertone of *pity* in it—anybody ever felt that? It's almost like it's assumed (sometimes by both people) that the married person is the more mature, the more wise, the more sanctified person in the friendship. Can we just toss that weird dynamic out the window? Married people: what if one of the *first people* we called when we needed life advice was our single friends? What if one of the first people we ask to call us out on things were single

people? What if we looked for every way we could to treat them, not as a second-class citizen, but as a *peer*? Because here's the thing: according to Paul, there's a chance they may see the kingdom more clearly than we do. They have less obstacles, less distractions in their way—so we'd probably be better off from asking what they think.

Married people: let's do everything we possibly can to celebrate and honor and encourage God-glorifying singleness.

And *finally*, for the *single people* here: I want to once again **acknowledge that at times** this world can be a crappy place to navigate the realities of singleness. I want to acknowledge and apologize for the fact that sometimes, the *Church* is a crappy place to be single. And I want you to know, as one of your pastors, I am committed to fighting against that being the case here in every way I can. We're not going to do it perfectly all the time, but **we want to be a church that consistently recognizes your valid, deserved, God-glorifying vital place at the table. And to be a Church that equips you to do everything God has made you to do.**

Because here's what I know: **our world is a broken place.** It always has been, but when you look around right now, it just feels especially obvious. There are people hurting. There are tensions rising. There is hopelessness clouding people's eyes at nearly every turn. There are needs in our world right now that God wants met. And **if what we covered today is true, many of the people who make the biggest dents in pushing back all that darkness are going to be *single people*.** He is calling you to go to the ends of the earth and make disciples of all nations. To meet the needs he has put around you. To hold your hand against the wounds of a bleeding world and tell them about the hope that is found in Jesus. And anyone—*anyone*—who tries to tell you that is not a worthwhile way to spend your life doesn't understand what life is about.

So if you're single, **here's what I'm asking:** would you lead the charge, and would you continue to give the rest of us the clarity we need to join you in doing all of that? Would you demonstrate what a life looks like that is fully leveraged for the kingdom of God, and help show us the beauty that arises from each and every one of us doing the same? If you do, I believe we'll all be better off for it.

And let me just acknowledge that **I realize it can be lonely.** It can be lonely because our world will try to tell you that life is about cheap freedom, shallow happiness, and sexual fulfillment. And can I just tell you...it's a lie. Sex is great, but you can have every sexual experience there is and it is absolutely nothing compared to the satisfaction and the sufficiency that is found in giving your life away for Jesus. Because listen, that's what all of this was meant to point us to anyway. And that's what all of us will be doing for eternity. So here's to starting that now. Let's pray.