

## Singleness and Family

Today, for our last message in this series about sex and intimacy, I'm going to be talking about singleness. Now, anytime we talk about issues relating to marriage or family, a certain percentage of the congregation is tempted to check out. When we talk about marriage, there's the danger that single people will say, "I don't need to know this." And so you pull out your phone and start perusing your dating app.

Today, there might be a temptation for you married people to check out because you think this doesn't apply to you. I just ask that you hang with me here and here's why.

The following is a message one woman wrote to her pastor. She had been married for a number of years, but through a series of tragic events beyond her control, now in her 40s, she was single again. This isn't someone in our congregation, but I'm certain there are those in our congregation who could write something very similar.

*[We I was single again], I found a great [small group] and I learned to be single from young and old. Here's something I found out: married people haven't a clue what it's like to be single. They say horrible things like, "When you stop looking, that's when it'll happen," "God's getting that special one ready for you." It wasn't what I was experiencing, but it was what I observed. I saw these things happening to people in their 30's who are facing the prospect that marriage may not happen and are trying to come to*

*terms with that realization. As a married person, I never said anything like that, but I realized that I was definitely guilty of not including singles. I had gone “tribal” and singles were not a part of the tribe. They had their own tribe, right? They were all taken care of. That is just so far from the truth and so far from what God intended community to be. That is to say the church can be a very lonely place. One friend said, “It’s so lonely sometimes, I sit here with a stomach ache through the whole service.”*

*But I remember loneliness like that when I was married. No one is exempt from loneliness. It’s the human condition. My version of singleness is not the norm. I’ve had the joy marriage and family. And though what I went through was awful, I’m now at the stage where I feel lucky to have the opportunity to experience singleness. But my single friends in the church—not all, but most—who have never been married, really feel cheated. They just don’t understand why God would hard-wire us this way and then not allow it to be realized. So, how do we help them see that this is not second best—that they didn’t lose and that nothing is wrong with them and that the church can be a real family for them?”*

THIS is why, even if you’re married, you need to pay attention. You see, the church is called to be family. And in fact, I believe that outside of the grace of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, community is the most compelling thing the church can offer. Have you seen what’s happening in our society today?

Let me mention one study. Nearly half of Americans report sometimes or always feeling alone or left out. One in four Americans rarely or never feel as though there are people who really understand them. Forty percent of Americans sometimes or always feel that their relationships are not meaningful and that they are isolated from others.

Those who live with others are less likely to be lonely, but this doesn't apply to single parents. Even though they live with children, they are more likely to be lonely. It's not just the U.S., it's all over. In fact, in January England appointed a loneliness minister.

Now, we can argue about the causes, but suffice it to say that there's something going on in *society* that's not working. And despite the fact that in the New Testament the church is called to be the family of God, I'm not sure we're doing much better.

As I was preparing for today, I wanted to get a sense of how many of you feel about being single. I asked whether you liked being single or whether it was really hard. I asked how badly you want to get married if at all. I asked what is the best and worst thing about being single. And I asked how well you felt the church cares for single people because I know churches have a reputation for catering to married people. The results of the survey were interesting and I appreciate your responses.

I have to be honest that I was kind of nervous about the responses, but in the end, I wasn't too surprised by them. Your answers almost across the board, the best part of being single was *freedom* and *independence*. You're not tied down by family obligations

or have to check with someone else about decisions. You can be more spontaneous. It's not selfish to like some independence. That was true pretty much across the board.

And the hardest part about being single was consistent as well. You said it was loneliness and a lack of companionship. But despite this, my goal today isn't to say, "all single people are lonely, so let's take care of them." It's not like single people sitting around thinking about how lonely they are all the time. In fact, most of you said you're OK with being single. "I'd like to get married sometime, but I'm OK for now." But I want to cast a vision for how God works through singleness and how the whole church can support and encourage those who are single, whether it's a season of life or permanent.

With that in mind, turn to Matthew, chapter 19. First, a little background. The Jewish world took the command God gave to Adam and Eve to "*be fruitful and multiply,*" very seriously. The Talmud required adult males to be married. We find this in the Mishnah, "No man may abstain from keeping the Law, 'be fruitful and multiply,' unless he already has children." Marriage was a command and celibacy was a sin.

But the Roman Empire wasn't much different. In Jesus' day, Caesar Augustus required all adult males to be married. The Roman Empire was hurting for people, so he wanted to make sure people were populating the Empire. Social engineering?

Well, this is the environment where we find Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19.

**"When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region**

of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. <sup>2</sup>Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. <sup>3</sup>Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

<sup>4</sup> “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ <sup>5</sup>and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’ <sup>6</sup>So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.”

<sup>7</sup>“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

<sup>8</sup>Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. <sup>9</sup>I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

<sup>10</sup>The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”

<sup>11</sup>Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. <sup>12</sup>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.”**

This is a passage that proves that Jesus was his own person. There are two issues discussed in this passage and on one of the issues—the question of marriage and divorce—Jesus is totally conservative; almost fundamentalist. But on the question of singleness, he’s quite progressive.

The question comes up when the Pharisees try to trap Jesus by bringing up a heated debate—what is grounds for divorce? Every rabbi accepted that divorce was permitted for some reasons. But there was a debate about how many reasons.

To answer the question, Jesus didn’t just go to the law about divorce, Deut 24:1-4, but he went back to the creation story in Genesis and affirms the purpose of marriage—a man and woman become “one flesh.” It’s a permanent bond. He even goes on and says the only reason Moses allowed any divorce is because people have hard hearts. Divorce should never be celebrated. Outside of adultery, the union can’t be broken.

So, in verse 10, the disciples realize just how restrictive Jesus’ teaching is, so they say, *“Well, if marriage is a lifelong covenant, then it’s a huge risk. It’s really restrictive. So, you may as well not get married at all! Nobody wants the old ball and chain!”* Now, I don’t think they were actually suggesting someone not get married. It would have been ridiculous to them. Jesus would never suggest such a thing!

And yet, with a straight face, Jesus says, “Yep. You’re right! Verse 11,<sup>11</sup>”**Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given.** <sup>12</sup>**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.”**

Now, first let’s get one thing out of the way. The word *eunuch* makes us really uncomfortable. When I was in my church in Iowa, we had a piano player come to play a concert for us whose name was Enoch. And I know this is terrible, but we would jokingly call him Eunuch. But as the time got closer, we stopped doing that because we were terrified that when we introduced him, we would let it slip. But I think we got it right.

Now, we don’t really have eunuchs today, but it was common in those days. A eunuch was someone who were incapable of having sex. Sometimes it was because of physical condition they were born with, or they were injured. Sometimes they were slaves who were castrated, but sometimes men would willingly become a eunuch to serve the king. A king would trust them to take care of his haram for obvious reasons. In fact, the origin of the Greek word for eunuch was literally “bed protector.”

But, while they were valued by the king and given a high position there, they were looked down on in society, because they were incapable of fulfilling their societal and

religious duty. This makes sense in the context of the Jewish world that elevated marriage and children to the pinnacle of society.

So, Jesus says something remarkable when he speaks about *eunuchs* as people to emulate. He doesn't say people should become eunuchs, but he elevates those who live like eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

So, we could replace the word eunuch with *celibate or single*. So, then he's saying in verse 12, There are some who are born to be celibate—who are incapable of having normal sexual relations and marriage; and there are some for whose circumstances dictate that marriage just isn't in the cards. But Jesus says something radical—that some people will *choose* to forego marriage and sex for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Now, notice that he doesn't just say that it's better in general not to be married. He doesn't say, "Listen guys, whatever you do, don't get married. It'll make you miserable. You can only have sex with one woman for the rest of your life. And don't even get me started about the mood swings."

He has a particular reason for it. The reason is because it *frees you up to serve the Kingdom of God*. The Apostle Paul repeats this same idea in 1 Corinthians 7. The first part of the chapter, Paul says that it's good not to be married, but if you can't control yourself, getting married isn't a sin. I've never used that passage in a wedding homily. "*You know what, guys? By standing up here today, you are not sinning.*"

Then he writes this, **“<sup>32</sup>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. <sup>33</sup>But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife— <sup>34</sup>and his interests are divided. 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. <sup>35</sup>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.”**

Now, if you’re sitting here thinking about how ridiculous that is and you think, “That’s just unrealistic in this day and age. Do you know how difficult this would be for people today?” Then you understand exactly what Jesus is saying. That’s why Jesus said not everyone can handle this. It’s a completely different way of looking at the world.

If you think this is harder today than it would have been in Jesus’ day, you don’t really understand that society. Today sex and romance are EVERYTHING. If you’re not having sex, you can’t possibly be fulfilled. And eventually you need to make a family. In Jesus’ day, family was EVERYTHING. So, what Jesus is doing is redefining family—moving it from the *physical* and biological to the *spiritual*.

It works like this; in the Old Testament, the command to Adam and Eve was “*go make babies!*” In the New Testament, it’s “*go make disciples!*” When people come to

Christ, Jesus says they're "*born again*" into a new family called the Church. And while marriage and family are still important, they are not *ultimate* in the Kingdom of God.

So, when Jesus changes the definition of family, he elevates singleness to be equal with marriage. Marriage is still good, but it's not the ultimate status symbol for the believer. What is ultimate? It's your place within the Kingdom of God.

You see, eunuchs—the ones who chose that life—did so for a specific purpose, and it cost them social status. They were seen as weird—something wrong with them. And in a day when your safety net when you got older was your children, they deliberately chose not to have children and forego that safety net. But they didn't do it so they could travel the world and go clubbing. They did it to be freed up to work for the king. Do you see where this is going?

Both singleness and marriage can be useful in the Kingdom of God. They can both be great tools for the Kingdom, but they can both be huge distractions. I've counselled with singles who wanted more than anything in life to be marriage and were torn apart as to why they aren't. But I've also counseled with married people who felt trapped and more than anything in life wanted to get out. Neither status by itself will make you content, because there are always trade-offs.

You see, the danger in each of these situations—whether it's singleness, married with no kids, or married with kids—is we get so turned in on our situation and so

preoccupied with changing our status that we don't consider what it means to serve God right where we are.

I know single people who get depressed because they are so desperate to get married and have children. And I understand that. That impulse is just as strong today as it was in Jesus' day, so I don't mean to make light of it. But I've also seen the beauty of people who have committed their singleness to Christ. They've rejected our societies idols of sex and romance, embraced intimacy with God, and used their freedom to serve. This is like Jesus who never married, but gave his life (literally) for the Kingdom of God. So rather than asking why someone isn't married, we should recognize that this is a beautiful life, we should celebrate.

But I also see this happen. I've known many people who get married and turn in on themselves and focus on their marriage. And I've seen couples who used to actively serve together in ministry, who then have children and suddenly, it's like they've accomplished what they wanted in life. So, they put their head down to build a successful career and family becomes the excuse for why they don't serve outside their family.

Now, I understand there's a time of adjustment to kids, and you won't have the freedom to serve the way you could if you were single. But as a follower of Christ, the purpose of your marriage or your family is not just your marriage or your family.

Whatever your situation, you have to ask how you can leverage your situation to serve the Kingdom. If you have a stable family and a good house, don't turn inward, but use that gift to serve people who don't have that. Take someone into your home. Offer hospitality to single people and invite them to be a part of your family, because if they're Christians, they are. Don't use your children as an excuse to avoid ministry—bring them along. No doubt, you'll be more limited in what you can do, but there's no better way to instill a heart of service in your kids than to make it your lifestyle.

Finally, let's end with this. The church is called to be the family of God. Extended family, I suppose. In a family, there are different generations, different statuses and interests, but it's family. But sometimes in the church—like everywhere in society, we have a tendency sort ourselves into “tribes,” like the woman's message at the beginning described. We get with our tribe and ignore the others. But I want to encourage each of us to look beyond our tribe.

If you're married, if you have kids, I know it's tempting to hang out with other married couples, that's pretty natural. But don't overlook single people in the congregation. You see, while they might have more control over their time, they also don't have the built-in intimacy of family. What happens for you, just by virtue of going home at night—single people have to work to facilitate. Don't think, “Well, they know my door is always open!” Make the invitation.

Don't go tribal. Case in point, today is Father's Day. Some are fathers, some are not. Some have fathers nearby that they'll probably celebrate with and others don't. After church, look around—invite someone to be a part of your celebration. I said it at the beginning and truly believe that this kind of family is the most compelling gift the church has to offer to people today. Let's work to do this well.