

Sexual Celibacy

1. The curse of singleness

- We've been talking a lot about marriage during our series on Love, Sex and Marriage
- Which has been great and stimulating and challenging
- But what if you're single?
 - What if you'd love to marry someone but it just hasn't happened
 - What if you're someone who is SSA and therefore unable to marry
 - What if you're divorced or widowed?

- For many people ... to be single is to be cursed
 - Right from a young age there's this expectation that to be with someone is normal
 - Whether it's being married as an adult
 - Having a boyfriend or girlfriend as a teenager
 - There's this expectation in our culture that unless you are with someone ... you're not normal
 - Even kids in Kindy are talking about having a boyfriend / girlfriend!

- In traditional cultures, great importance is placed on a person to marry and have a family and heirs
 - You only have to watch *Pride and Prejudice* see how obsessed Mrs Bennett is about her daughters marrying!
 - Comical!
- This is generally not the case in more modern cultures, but that doesn't mean there's no pressure to marry!
 - Modern cultures tends to put our hopes in 'romance' – in finding fulfilment in the perfect soul mate
 - You see this in every second Disney / Pixar movies like *Shrek* > *Frozen* > *Tangled* where the narrative is all about finding one's 'true love'?
- Both traditional and western cultures make marriage the ultimate in life and singleness a curse
 - If you're single and you're not with someone ...
 - You're on the outer
 - There's something wrong with you

- Even the language we use reiterates that to be 'single' is deficient in some way

- So we often refer to those who are single as “unmarried” or “not yet married”
- Ridiculous! We don’t refer to married people as “unsingled” or “no longer single”
- But in doing so we define singles by what they are NOT ... which implies their singleness is insufficient

- Church
 - Sadly the church has contributed to this problem through the teaching and books of pastors and writers
 - The message the church often sends is
 - Singleness prevents you maturing as an adult and a Christian
 - Albert Mohler - *marks of manhood are marriage, leading a family, being a good husband and father, fulfil his sexual potential in marriage*
 - Debbie Maken - *singles miss out on this means that God has established to know him more deeply ... protracted singleness rarely glorifies God and cannot sanctify you*
 - Singleness is a sin
 - “singleness is unbiblical, and adults are under divine duty to marry” – Debbie Maken
 - Marshall Segall says
 - *Single life caters to and cultivates selfishness, leads to preoccupation and self-pity, breeds inherent sense of entitlement, enables apathy towards holiness, fosters a lack of commitment and irresponsibility*
 - Singles lack fulfilment
 - Debbie Maken - *the full expression of maleness and femaleness is in marriage*
 - Which means ... if you’re not married > then somehow you’re not fully male or female

- What this shows is that, our culture ... and to a large extent our churches ... have turned our spouse into our saviour and marriage into the ultimate goal in life
 - This is because we’ve bought the lie that our culture tells us that
 - sexual intimacy is necessary for our human fulfilment, identity and self-realisation
 - And therefore, if you’re single ... then you’re romantically and sexually unfulfilled

- All that is a load of clap trap
 - Not only is it offensive, and belittling ... it is unbiblical and totally contrary to what the Bible teaches
- When you read the Bible this is NOT Christianity's message for singles
- In fact, Christianity is unique in the way it upholds and affirms singleness as a viable way of life
 - Because God's word teaches us that
 - singleness is just as good as marriage ... and
 - singles have equal worth and dignity with the married person before God
- This morning I want to show how the Bible teaches the **blessing of singleness** and then look at the implications of that for living the **life of singleness**

2. The blessing of singleness

- As we saw at the beginning of our series on Love, Sex and Marriage when God created mankind he created them male and female
 - One of the purposes for creating us male and female was for procreation
 - We see this specifically in Genesis Ch 1 where God said to them to "*be fruitful, fill the earth and subdue it*"
- Therefore, right from the start it's clear, that part of God's blessing on humanity was to be married and bear children
- This idea is reiterated when God calls Abram in Gen 12
 - And says - "*Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.*"
- Note it was going to be through the provision of descendants / children that God was going to bless Abram and the rest of the world
- As Israel moved towards the Promised Land and received the 10 Commandments, God promised to the Israelites that if they kept the Law then they would be blessed above all peoples
- Part of that blessing included the promise that "*there shall not be male or female barren among you*"
 - Again, children through marriage was a fundamental marker of God's covenant blessing to the Israelite people

- In addition to that, marriage and offspring were necessary for retaining one's inheritance of allocated land within the family
- Also, having children were necessary for preserving you name
 - Without children you had no legacy ... you essentially vanished
- But when we get to the New Testament, we find no mention of the family type blessings of marriage and children or a fruitful and prosperous land that was so prominent as markers of God's blessing in the old covenant
- Instead, we see that the blessing spoken of in the OT is fulfilled in Christ
 - The promises to Abraham to bless the world were not fulfilled through the Israelite nation, but through THE Israelite, Jesus Christ
 - Jesus is THE offspring who will bring blessing to the world through this sacrificial death on the cross
- Blessing would come to all through Christ ... who through the cross has fully reconciled us to God and given us a share in the inheritance of his kingdom
 - Marriage and children are no longer fundamental markers of the blessing of God in the new covenant ... because all spiritual blessings come through Christ
 - Marriage and procreation are no longer necessary to maintain one's inheritance, for those in Christ have any imperishable inheritance in heaven
- Which is why Jesus says to Nicodemus in John 3, "*no-one can enter the kingdom you unless you are born again*"
 - For the way to be part of God's family is not by physical birth ... but a spiritual rebirth
 - Spiritual regeneration rather than procreation is the means by which God is building his people

Jesus on Marriage and Singleness

- We need to understand this background if we are going to make sense of Jesus teaching on marriage and singleness in the NT > particularly this passage we've read this morning in Matt 22:23-33
- In these verses the Sadducees come to Jesus to trick him
- Sadducees were a Jewish sect who didn't believe in the resurrection

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- So they come to Jesus with this hypothetical scenario to try and force him into a position where he would deny or back down on his teaching about the resurrection and the life to come
 - And scenario is of a woman whose husband dies leaving her childless
 - Now OT law said that if a woman's husband died leaving them without children, she was allowed to marry her husband's brother so that she might be able to have a child who could carry on the family name and inherit their land
 - So the Sadducees say ... what happens if she marries the next brother who also dies and leaves her childless and the pattern is repeated until all die including the woman
 - And then they ask "*who's wife will she be in the resurrection since she was married to all seven brothers?*"

 - But then Jesus makes this extraordinary statement in v30
 - *At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.*
 - Jesus point is that in the resurrection, men and women will be like the angles in that ... they'll never die
 - His logic is ... in the new creation, marriage will no longer be necessary because ... procreation will no longer be necessary when everyone is going to live forever

 - In addition, marriage will not be part of the age to come, because the depth of relationships we'll have with each other, will surpass even the most loving, caring and perfect marriage
 - And what's more, we'll have the greatest relationship of all with almighty God
 - And so rather surprisingly, Jesus is showing is that the trajectory towards the new creation is that marriage will be no more

 - **Application**
 - Now this has profound implications for us as we think about marriage and singleness
 - Many think that singleness is temporary state of life until we find our eternal marriage partner
 - But what Jesus teaches here is that in the scope of eternity, the opposite is actually the case ...
 - That marriage is temporary

- That marriage is only for a season until - as the traditional marriage vows read - "death do us part"
- Because it's as single individuals that we'll stand before God's throne and live forever

- Now I don't know how you feel about that?
 - Surprised? Shocked? Sad?
 - I remember one my lectures at college talking about this and lamenting that he'll no longer be married to his wife in heaven
 - But he was secretly hoping that when we're in sitting at the banquet table in heaven he'd still be able to hold hands with his wife under the table!

- Now hopefully you're starting to see how there's this movement from creation to new creation ... from Genesis to Revelation ... where
 - marriage and children become less critical in God's good pattern for relationships; and
 - that being single becomes more and more meaningful and relevant

- Understanding this trajectory then helps us make sense of two key passages in the NT that affirm the goodness of being single

- First is Matt 19:10-12
- Looked at this two weeks ago
- Jesus has just reiterated God's pattern for marriage is a permanent union between a man and woman that should not be separated
- The disciples respond
 - ¹⁰... *"If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."*
 - They realise that marriage hard ... and that if that's how it's meant to be, then maybe it's better to avoid the whole thing altogether

- Jesus response to them is significant
 - ¹¹... *"Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. ¹² For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."*

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- Eunuchs were people who could not or chose not to marry and have children
 - For some this was an involuntary decision because they were born that way or because of human intervention
 - For others it was voluntary – they chose to single and celibate
 - Why? Because they're living in the kingdom of heaven
 - They're living to serve the king and his kingdom

 - And surprisingly Jesus says there at the end ... *The one who can accept this should accept it.*
 - In other words ... being single for the sake of the kingdom is actually a good thing ... and those who can embrace it should

 - The other passage that is particularly helpful for us in 1 Corinthians 7
 - Here Paul is writing an extended response to the church in Corinth on love, sex and marriage
 - Don't have time to go into all the detail
 - But in it Paul reiterates Jesus' idea from the gospels that refraining from marriage and remaining single is a good thing
 - Example
 - 7:1 - *Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry*
 - Lit – it is good for a man not to touch a woman / sexual relations with a woman
 - 7:25-27 *Now about virgins: ... I think that **it is good** for you to remain as you are. Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife*

 - Like Jesus, Paul is not saying everyone should remain single
 - For in the very next verse he says
 - v28 – *But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned*
 - But he does think there is good reason to uphold and encourage singleness

 - Why?
 - *1 Corinthians 7:31-35 For this world in its present form is passing away. 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. 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.

- Paul give three reasons that remaining single is a good thing – simplicity, service and sufficiency
- First is because it's **simpler**
 - Being single means there is just less to juggle
 - There are less things in life you have responsibility for ... like a husband or a wife or children
 - Those of you us who are married and have children know this only too well
 - It's just a practical, logical thing
 - Single life is much simpler
- Second reason being single is a good thing is because it enables you to **serve God** more
 - In v32, Paul wants the Corinthians to be free from the responsibilities of caring for a spouse and family ... so that they're free for the sake of serving the Lord
 - Just as Paul was single and able to devote his life in that way
- But there is a third reason ... and it's because it's **sufficient**
- In v31 where Paul says "*The world in its present form is passing away*"
 - What he's saying here is, something greater than the present age is coming, and has come, in the person of Jesus and the kingdom of God
 - When people choose to remain single for the sake of the kingdom of God because they recognise that their true sufficiency is found only in their relationship with Jesus and the coming of his kingdom ...
 - and they orient their lives around this conviction ... their singleness is a visible sign of the coming new age
 - They serve as signs because the world does not have a category for intentional singleness
- There's nothing more radical than being willing to live a life of singleness in devotion to God in a world that idolises relationships, marriage and bearing children
 - Singles who live with this conviction provide a powerful testimony ... both to those inside and outside the church ...
 - that Christ is sufficient
 - and that we don't need a sexual partner to be fulfilled

- Like Jesus, Paul doesn't say this is for everyone
- In fact in v7 he says that being single like himself is a gift from God
 - Not everyone has it
 - Not everyone should do it
 - But the one who's willing to remain single and refrain from sexual intimacy ... should do so
- This is not to suggest that those who do are not interested in marriage or children
 - But they have a freedom and contentment that allows them to serve God without the need to experience marriage and sexual intimacy and family
- Also important to note that the gift of singleness is not simply the situation or status of being unmarried
 - There are many who may live their entire life as a single person without the gift of singleness not ever finding a spouse to marry
 - As noted earlier, Jesus said some are eunuchs voluntarily, while for others its involuntarily
 - That is, many are single not because they choose to, but because
 - Haven't found a suitable spouse
 - SSA
 - Divorcee
 - Widow

Singles and Families

- Now whether you are single by choice or reluctantly ... Jesus shows us it is worth it
- In Matthew 19:29 Jesus says
 - *And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.*
- He says ... when you follow me, even if you're single, you still have a family
- Being single and following Jesus doesn't leave you without relationships, friendships and intimacy
- Because new birth in Christ brings a new family – a spiritual family of those who believe in him and are his disciples and share in the bond of fellowship

- It's this family that is the foretaste of the eternal kingdom and the relationships that will ultimately supersede our physical family relationships
- Believers in Jesus are therefore in two families
 - a physical one resident only in the present age and
 - a spiritual one present now AND in the age to come
- Therefore, a Christian has the assurance that whatever your physical family situation may be – good, bad or non-existent ... you're never alone ... but are always part of spiritual family who's bonds are eternal

- And as you read the NT, we see how Jesus and Paul show us what that this looks like
- They knew what a life of singleness was all about
- And even though they didn't have their own families ... they were never devoid of meaningful relationships
 - Jesus > disciples > 3 friends > John > one whom he loved
 - Paul > Titus, Timothy, Luke, Priscilla and Aquila, Lydia > churches he planted, loved and continued to write to and visit
- Christianity has much higher view of singleness than many of us think
- In fact, there many blessings that come with being single

3. The life of singleness

- There are a number of implications that flow out what the Bible's teaches here on marriage and singleness
- The first is ... marriage AND singleness are both good and to be commended
 - It's **not** better to be married and being single is **not** a curse

- In fact, because entry into God's family and sharing in his blessing is by new birth ... the focus of God's people is not physical procreation, but spiritual regeneration through the proclamation of the gospel
 - Which is why both Paul and Jesus can say remaining single is good because it allows a person to invest more time and energy into serving Jesus and his kingdom by sharing the gospel

- Because of this, we need to get a right perspective on marriage
- One of the problems of our culture is the idolatry of marriage
 - Either for honour, children and family
 - Or for the fulfilment of romance and sexual intimacy
- And therefore marriage is so often seen as the ultimate goal in life
- Illustration – Women talking about adult children

- "Jane's married, she's sorted"
- Implication ... mum can relax now her daughter is married, she's achieved her goal of her getting married

- How many times have you heard people with adult kids say
 - "I wish he'd hurry up and get married and give me some grandkids"
- Christians buy into this just as much as anyone
 - What's one of the most common things a parent prays for their kid?
 - God will raise up a godly husband or wife for them to marry
- Praying for a future spouse is a good thing to pray for
 - But God might have other plans
 - As we've seen this morning, sometimes the better thing might be for your children not to get married
- Now if that shocks you or you're saddened at the prospect of not seeing your kids get married or give you grandkids ... then you're not seeing the goodness of singleness and ... it's quite possible / even probable that marriage is an idol

- Because the ultimate goal in life is not to get married, buy a house, have 2.4 kids
- The ultimate goal is to glorify God by being and making disciples of Jesus

- What we all need to remember and what we need to teach our kids ... is that Christ is sufficient for us
- This is because the ultimate marriage is not here on earth with Mr or Mrs Right ... but in heaven between Christ and the church
 - Our happiness and fulfilment is never going to be found in a marriage partner
 - If that's the expectation you have ... then it will crush your spouse under the weight of expectation ... because they'll never be able to live up to that
- Our happiness and fulfilment can only ever be found in the perfect spouse which is Jesus

- One of the things that will help with this is to refrain from saying things to those who are single that are insensitive or just plain dumb
 - "When are you going to get married and start having babies ... the clock is ticking you know?"
 - "You're a catch, how come no-one has snapped you up yet?"

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- Being told in your mid-30's "I know what it's like to be single" by someone who was married at 26
 - "As soon as you're satisfied with God alone, he'll bring someone special into your life" – as if God's blessings are ever earned by our contentment
 - "You're too picky"
 - "Before you can marry someone wonderful, the Lord has to make you someone wonderful"
 - These are dumb and insensitive and we just need to be careful about what we say

 - Of course there will inevitably be a level of anguish and sadness and pain for the single person who wishes to marry but can't
 - And while we acknowledge the pain, the Bible reminds us it's not devastating
 - Because there are many blessings that come with being single ...
 - One of which is the spiritual family we share in and a born in to
 - The bond of fellowship that exists between brothers and sisters in Christ is utterly unique
 - They're bonds that extend beyond natural human connections
 - And so there **is** friendship, and love and warmth and caring and intimacy that can be experienced that is not sexual ... but is none the less real and wonderful

 - However, this can only happen when we ... the church ... **be the church**
 - It can only happen when those who aren't single live out and act like the spiritual family Jesus has made us into
 - One of the idols of our culture, and this is true for many Christians too ... is the idolisation of family and the glorification of our kids
 - And because of that we can become
 - Very insular
 - Very inward looking
 - Very blinkered in how we spend our time and who we include in the life of our earthly family
 - Life is all about the family
 - And the result is ... those who are single and don't have an earthly family are excluded, left out and isolated relationally
 - They're alone
 - And so as a church family ... we need to live like a family and care for, include and love those who don't have family
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- How do you do that when you're life is already busy with work, family and kids?
 - Include singles in your family activities
 - Dinner > Katie has widowed neighbour over for dinner every Sunday
 - When you go to the park, beach, music recital, movies, dinner, bowling, skating ...
 - Invite others to join you
 - Another way is to celebrate special occasions with them in ways that we might otherwise celebrate with our family
 - E.g. - birthdays, graduations, milestones, promotions, etc
 - Do life together
 - Be real, share, be honest, pray for each other
 - For this is a foretaste of our relationships for eternity

4. Conclusion

- The Bible upholds marriage and singleness as a blessing
 - We're not to think of singleness as a curse
 - For one day all marriages will end and the only marriage that will remain is the ultimate marriage between Christ and the church
 - The one true marriage where the groom lays down his life for his bride and guarantees an eternal inheritance that isn't dependent on having children ... but rather comes through faith in Christ
- This hope for believers is what makes it possible for the single person to live a fulfilled, joyful and purposeful life without a spouse or children
- As we wait ... God has given us all our truest family – the church – so that whatever our family situation ... we will never lack for brothers or sisters fathers or mothers in Christ

PRAY

Next week

Marriage > what makes a good marriage and what undermines it