

Title: Two Gifts

Text: 1 Corinthians 7.1-9

Theme: Marriage and Singleness

Series: 1 Corinthians #26

Prop Stmt. The gift of marriage and the gift of singleness are both from God and should be viewed and lived like it.

The great “theologian¹” Sonny Elliot once said, “Marriage is like a walled city under siege. Everyone on the outside wants in, and everyone on the inside wants out.” In spite of the overstatement, the truth is that we know firsthand the challenges and problems of our own situation, we live with our weaknesses and failures and with those in our immediate family and we tend to look with envy at others thinking that their situation has to be better than our own. Have you ever wondered why we often treat people who are not in our family better than we treat the people in our own family? There is nothing like life in the family to bring out into the open, the real desires and priorities of our lives. You can often fake happiness around a co-worker, or someone else at church. But, at home, the real you is seen in all of your glory, or ugliness.

How can we make our marriages work? How can we fix our relationships? What about being single? How many talk shows are dedicated to these and related topics? How many magazine articles have been written, promising you with the secrets of finding the perfect guy or the perfect girl? How to change your wife or your husband, how to get a wife or a husband, how to get a new wife or a new husband - the articles are endless.

Relational problems are not new. We can trace them back to Genesis 3. But here in the church at Corinth, there were some serious problems that the people were facing in their relationships and they had questions that they directed to the Apostle Paul for clarification. This chapter begins Paul’s answering of the questions that the believers in Corinth had sent to him. The tone of this chapter is very different from what we have just studied. In chapters 5 and 6 Paul is getting in their face about clear-cut issues. He is confronting them on things that they had not asked him about, but things that nonetheless had to be addressed, particularly in relationship to purity. But chapter 7 is different. In this chapter Paul does not say, “Hey, don’t you guys know this?” What is wrong with you? No, this chapter is not getting in their face, it really has more of the setting of coming alongside of them, and with sensitivity and pastoral care, helping them in their specific situations. As a result, this chapter is both practical and personal. It’s tone is less dogmatic, but there are still very clear principles that God has given us here to govern our hearts and actions in our relationships.

Remember: The act of creation was God, going public with His glory. His glory is seen in the perfect, harmonious and unified relationship that He enjoys as Trinity. God made us to enjoy a perfect, harmonious and unified relationship with Him. God also made you to enjoy a perfect, harmonious and unified relationship with your spouse. God also made you to enjoy a perfect, harmonious and unified relationship with the believers in your church community. I am referring to that relationship by using the word “oneness.”

¹ Sonny is actually a local weatherman in Detroit for WWJ radio station AM 950.

Everything in life for the believer is to be done in the pursuit of oneness with God. Everything that is done in the life of a believer who is married is to be done in the pursuit of oneness with your spouse. Everything that is done in the life of every believer is to be done in the pursuit of oneness with your church community. Oneness in your marriage and oneness in your church is a significant component of how you express and live out your oneness with God. That concept was not understood very well by the Corinthian believers, some of whom were thinking and promoting the idea that marriage was not the best idea for believers and that those who were controlled by their glandular appetites and not by true, lofty, spiritual desires were the ones who had to resort to marriage. Others had the idea that you could have a platonic relationship even within marriage. Both of those ideas are rooted in the flawed thinking that physical intimacy is base, earthy, vulgar and certainly not lofty and spiritual. This text blows up that misguided theory that has plagued people and some strands of Christianity for almost 2000 years.

Some have accused Paul of teaching that it is better, loftier and more ideal for people to remain single, but since many people cannot control themselves, then marriage becomes an alternative to immorality, a necessary evil due to the weakness of the flesh, a venereal safety valve, that while it is better than immorality, it certainly isn't the ideal. Those who hold to this position think that Paul is saying here that it is good to completely avoid intimate relations and in fact, the real spiritual people, like himself do that. But since society is so full of immorality and so many temptations, there are some people who do not seem to be able to handle this, so for them, they probably ought to resort to marriage, because at least in marriage, you can unbridle your passions without hurting anyone else. But for the real spiritual ones, we live above these desires and we do not need to lower ourselves.

Therefore, if someone is going to be chosen as a spiritual leader of a group, what would the expectation be? If he is really spiritual, he ought to be celibate. The early church father John Chrysostom was a wonderful preacher and godly man, but he was dead wrong on this point. Augustine, was used by God to keep the gospel pure, but he too was wrong on this point. Both of these men along with some other early leaders in church history like Jerome made physical intimacy in marriage to be at the least a distraction for the true Christian. This view does not enjoy the support that it used to, except for the unbiblical standards that are placed upon priests and nuns in the Roman church. The consequences of that are more than obvious.

So, what is the text saying? The text begins with a quotation. I am a little surprised that the translators of the NIV did not put quotation marks here in v.1 as they supplied in 6.12. Paul is quoting from their letter, which when that is understood really helps us interpret this properly. The translators did provide in the footnotes an alternate reading because, the wording that Paul uses here, was used to describe the physical intimacy that is enjoyed in the marriage relationship. He is not talking about holding hands.

Now for matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to marry." Some people have accused Paul of saying that marriage and intimacy is not the highest good for believers, but actually that is the view that some were promoting in Corinth that he was seeking to

correct. There were some in Corinth who were attempting to achieve spirituality through some forms of mysticism and asceticism. Those who were seeking to the mystical route were putting an overemphasis on the sign gifts and those who were seeking spirituality through asceticism were putting too much emphasis on punishing the body. Back in chapter 6.12-17, we studied Paul's theology of the body and we found out, that the body is not bad. Jesus had a body. The body has an eternal place in the plan of God, therefore, we are to use our bodies in God-honoring ways. Immorality is not God-honoring, but physical intimacy in marriage is! But, this is not a command for every Christian to pursue physical intimacy as we will see. I have entitled this message: Two gifts, because Paul deals with the gift of marriage and the gift of singleness. He deals much more with the marriage part of that in these verses than he does with the singleness issue. Later on in this chapter he does deal more with the issue of singleness. Let's look at the gift of marriage (7.1-5).

THE GIFT of MARRIAGE (7.1-5)

1. **Should a Christian enjoy physical intimacy?** (v.1)

YES, within the context of marriage. (v.2)

The phrase, "each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband" is a polite way of speaking about physical intimacy in marriage. Paul is not saying that because there is so much immorality, you need to get married so that you will never fall into it. Getting married is no guarantee of a person not being immoral. The text is addressing the deformed teaching that you can be married and not be intimate. This passage is saying, because we live surrounded with so much immorality, which affects us, you need to pursue physical intimacy in your marriage so that you can help yourself and your spouse in this area.

In fact, physical intimacy is an incredibly personal way of completing giving of yourself to another. This activity is not (as the world often presents it) ultimately for yourself, but it is ultimately for the giving of pleasure to the one to whom you are united with in a covenantal relationship called marriage. Intimacy within marriage is profound,

An intimately active marriage is a God-glorifying picture of oneness and at the same time helps to protect each other from sinful influences. Here we have some straight talk from the Scriptures on intimacy. Did Paul write these words with a red-face and awkward pen? No, then neither should the church of Jesus Christ feel the temperature rise in the Worship Center. This is good stuff and much needed in our homes.

2. **How Should a Christian marriage enjoy intimacy?** (3-5)

There are three commands here in verses 3-5. The first command has two parts to it, so I have presented it in the outline as two commands, although they are actually two parts of the same command.

A. A Husband should pursue his wife. – 3a

Wives, can I hear an amen?

Husbands, this is your God-given responsibility and of course you may be saying – “no problem preacher” this is one command I can happily obey. Now, hold the phone just a minute, because one thing that we are learning in this study of Corinthians and which your experience in marriage bears this out is that you cannot compartmentalize your life. In other words, pursuing your wife does not start at 11pm at night. It means that you treat her as a queen all day. If you do not respect your wife, and reverence her, and honor her, and exalt her and listen to her, and care for and protect her, and rejoice in her then, men, this is not rocket science when every night she has a headache.

B. A Wife should pursue her husband. – 3b

The second part of the first command is for the wife. Husbands, can I hear an amen? Wives, this is your God-given responsibility. This intimacy is not to be given as a reward, nor withheld as a punishment. This is not a deal where, if you take me out to eat, or buy me what I want then I will participate. If there is an area of bitterness in your life regarding your spouse that you are holding onto that is affecting your oneness in heart and mind, then this is often one of the first areas in a marriage in which that will become very obvious. The goal that God has established is not to have the “hottest” marriage in town, but to have the greatest oneness. If there is a barrier to the two of you pursuing oneness, then you need to address that and work on resolving that in a God-honoring way. Where this becomes a problem is often because people have the wrong view of intimacy. The goal is not what you get out of it, but what you give. Notice v.4

C. Your focus should be on your spouse – 4

Your focus should be on giving pleasure to your spouse, which means that you actually know what their needs are because you talk and you listen. Your goal is to be giving, not receiving. Now, this verse in no way is a biblical club for one spouse to be demanding of another to participate in things that the other is not comfortable with. You need to be focused on how you are obeying this, not on how your spouse is?

D. Do not withhold intimacy. - 5

The third command is to not deprive each other. There are occasions when your marriage is pursuing oneness but is providentially hindered from the physical expression of it. That may be due to a crisis in the family, in your church or nation. You may then together choose to take that time and pray. Once again, the pattern is oneness and in praying together we see another important aspect of Christianity. Genuine Christianity is meant to be done together, not simply sitting in church together, but spiritually, growing together and praying together as a family and couple. But, again, Paul’s counsel is careful, this is not open-ended. This decision must be in harmony. Put a time limit on it, so that you do not open a door for temptation. A marriage that is not pursuing oneness

and therefore intimacy is opening the door and asking for serious problems. If you withhold intimacy from your spouse because you think that it may drive him or her to pursuing it elsewhere which will then give you “grounds” for divorce, do not fool yourself. God’s Word is not given to turn you into a lawyer who tries to get someone off on a technicality. In your heart of hearts you know better, because you know that God does. Oneness in marriage is the goal because this reflects God’s oneness in the Trinity. But, marriage is not for everyone.

THE GIFT of SINGLENESS (7.6-9)

If you are married it may be difficult for you to relate to this. But God has given to some people the gift of singleness and they are not less of a person, or have less of a status because of it. What is good for you is not necessarily good for everyone. Paul is extremely balanced here. He is not saying that marriage is a last resort for the “burners.” The issue is this, what has God called you to?

1. **Do impose your gift on another.** - 6 – 7

In v.6 it appears to me that Paul, after rejecting the ascetic view that some were championing (v.1), now in a qualified way says that there is some practical benefit to being single as he is, though he is careful to say that this is not a command. If God has given you the gift of singleness, like He did Paul, notice that while Paul sees the advantages of this, he does not impose this on others. And, if you are married, and have friends who are single, do not assume that it is your job to marry them off. In fact, one of the themes that is woven into this chapter is that of contentment. So, whatever gift (marriage or singleness) do not impose your gift on another. Do not assume that your position in life is superior to others.

This issue is part of a bigger picture for the church family. If you are married, it is easy to look at the church through the lens of being married. If you are single, then it is easy to judge the church on that basis. If you are old, or young, have little kids, have no kids, have grandkids, - whatever your circumstances happen to be right now often become the lens by which we judge things in the church or elsewhere. The rest of the church is not necessarily just like you, and that is good.

2. **Each gift has its privileges.** 8-9

In the Roman society, a widow was expected to marry within a year of the death of her husband. If you were divorced, there was great cultural pressure to remarry within six months. This was the result of factors surrounding the acquisition of property, the expectation to have at least three children and of course the low life expectancy of women which was between 20-30 years of age since so many died in childbirth. Even though this was the expectation of the society at large, Paul urges caution. Before you get married, look carefully and not through rose-colored glasses.

Paul sees the day to day benefits of being single in light of God's call upon his life. Paul lived in danger. Paul's schedule could be unpredictable. The fact that Paul did not have the responsibility for a wife and family gave him the opportunity to carry out his ministry in a way that would have been wrong for a married man to have done it.

Ok, we have now come to verse 9. I grant you that this verse is a bit of a challenge. In fact, one scholar wrote a short research article on it called, "That Embarrassing Verse in First Corinthians." It appears that Paul is saying, "Look if you cannot control yourself, then, instead of getting into trouble, just go get married." Since the verb to burn does not say that they burn with anything, one popular interpretation is to take the burning as referring to the judgment of God. I do not think that interpretation fits the context. Now, frankly, I do not think that this verse needs to be quite so embarrassing as some may think it is. After all, Paul is talking about the two gifts, is he not. What is one of the ways you know whether or not you have the gift of marriage or the gift of singleness? Would this issue not be a factor? But, this is not a license for lust as an excuse to marry or as a reason to violate some other biblical principle.

I think that what Paul has in view here is an unmarried couple who love Christ and love each other. In a very practical way, their love for each other becomes so powerful that it distracts them from their love for Christ. They want to be fully committed to Christ, but they have an unfulfilled longing for each other that seems to affect everything else. If that becomes the case, and there is no reason why you should not, then get married. Because at this point, you aren't accomplishing anything for Christ any way as long as your thoughts are on what you do not have. In that case, it is better to marry.

So there you have it. If you have the gift of singleness, take advantage of the ministry opportunities that provides and help the church pursue oneness. If you are married – live like it and pursue oneness!