

I Was Just Wondering...How do I Approach Dating, Marriage and Singleness?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Peter Jonker

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

This is our second sermon in our “I Was Just Wondering...” series. All the sermons in this series are based on questions and Bible texts submitted by the younger members of this congregation. Today’s question is a perennial question that young people ask: “How do I sort out dating, marriage and singleness, from a Christian perspective?” I’ve chosen an interesting Bible passage as a way into this question. 1 Corinthians 7 is all about relationships, marriage, and singleness. I imagine many of you younger members don’t know this passage, so let me set up the reading: as you listen, ask this question: What does Paul think is better for a Christian, marriage or singleness?

So what does Paul recommend more highly: marriage or singleness? He’s OK with both of them, but he thinks singleness is preferable. You all heard that, right? He says that in verse 38: “a person who marries does right, but a person who stays single does better.” Verse 27: “are you unattached? Do not look for a wife.” And in verse 7, which we didn’t read: “I wish all of you were as I am”, that is: single. The message is clear and consistent: singleness is preferable to marriage.

Is that the message you get in the Christian community of today? No. I think most of you singles here would say the opposite. Most singles would say that churches seem to value marriage and family more than singleness.

So why does Paul say “A person who marries does right, but a person who stays single does better?” It’s a complicated answer, but once we understand Paul’s answer, we will be better able to understand God’s will for all our relationships: singleness, dating, marriage, everything. Before we get to that, let me say this: When Paul puts singleness ahead of marriage, he doesn’t demean marriage. Marriage is a good and beautiful institution! If you have a strong desire to get married, you don’t have to feel guilty about that. Marriage is good, and that’s true both socially and Biblically.

We know marriage is good because it’s created by God. In Genesis 2 you have the story of how God did that. Adam was alone, so God made a woman so that Adam would have a fitting helper. And now, ever since that day, ‘a man leaves his father and mother and unites to his wife and they become one flesh.’ In Genesis 1 and 2, everything God creates is good and one of the good things he created is marriage.

Not only does God create marriage, he supports it. There are many laws in the Old Testament guarding the institution of marriage, not least the 7th commandment. And in the New Testament, Jesus continues to value and support the institution of marriage. In Matthew 19 he pushes against the free and easy divorce practices that prevailed in his day. He says, “Remember that the husband and wife become one flesh, so what God has brought together, let no one put apart.” The Bible is pro-marriage and pro-family. Jesus is pro-marriage and pro-family. This is not shocking information to you.

But the way the Bible limits the institutions of marriage and family might be shocking to some of us. God created the institutions of family and marriage, but they are not ultimate. They are not eternal institutions. A close reading of the Bible suggests that marriage and family are meant to function for a time, but then in eternity they aren’t as central.

Where do we see that? A few places. In Matthew 19, right after Jesus has spoken out against casual divorce, right after he’s said ‘What God has brought together let no one put apart,’ the disciples say, “Wow! That makes marriage really hard! Maybe it would be better not to get married?” And Jesus doesn’t say, “No, marriage is good! You should all get married!” he says (and I’m simplifying his words here) “You know, there are some people who choose to be single and “The one who can accept this, should accept this.”” If you can do singleness, that’s great!

And then in Mark 3 there’s that famous passage where Jesus’ blood family comes to see him because they don’t like all the trouble he’s causing, and Jesus says, again simplifying, you know who my real brothers and sisters are, it’s my disciples. It’s the people who do God’s will.” Jesus puts the fellowship of the church above the fellowship of his family.

And finally, in Matthew 22, when the Sadducees try to trick Jesus by asking, “Hey Jesus, if a woman’s husband dies and she remarries. If she has more than one husband in this life, whose husband will she be in heaven?” And Jesus says, “You guys don’t get it do you. There is no marriage in heaven. We will have a new kind of relationship, more like the angels.” You can see the theme, right? Marriage is important and family is important, but they are not ultimate. There’s a suggestion that when we get to the new creation, marriage will give way to something deeper and better. Marriage will be fulfilled by a joyful fellowship of brothers and sisters sharing the deep love of Jesus.

That brings us to our passage. When Paul says that, for Christians, singleness might be preferable to marriage he’s building on Jesus’ words. Paul says that we should approach our relationships from the perspective of heaven, from the perspective of the new creation. He’s saying, “You know, since there won’t be marriage and romance in heaven, since we will all be living in a close community of deep joy, a community where, even though they aren’t romantic, all our relationships will be even better than marriage, you could start living that way now.” “We’ve been transformed by the Holy Spirit, so instead of getting married, a person could choose to remain single. They could build a whole circle of friends, people who love each other with the love of Christ, people with whom they share joys and sorrows, people who build each other up when they’re down, people who show up for each other when they are in need.”

That’s what Paul means when he says, “The time is short, we are in the new age of the kingdom, from now on those who have wives should live as if they do not.” When Paul says that, he doesn’t mean that people should leave their spouse. No, marriage still requires the full depth of your attention and love, but Paul is saying that when the new creation comes, there will be a deeper form of love and community, and that’s Jesus’ love and community. Someday, Jesus’ love and community is going to fill the world so you might want to start practicing it right now.

Put it all together and the Biblical story of marriage seems to look something like this, marriage was created by God as a tool for companionship, for helping each other, and for bringing children into the world. This good institution is blessed by God and supported by God. God will continue to bless and support it until Jesus returns, at which time the purpose of marriage will be fulfilled. Marriage and family will give way to a deeper and wider and more joyful, community.

Now I’m guessing that for many of you that doesn’t sound like particularly good news. Maybe you’ve lost a close family member, and as you think about heaven, you think, ‘One of the reasons I’m looking forward to it is so that I can see my husband my wife, my bother my sister, my mom, my dad. And now you’re saying there’s no marriage?’ Let me be clear, Paul’s not saying, and Jesus is not saying that you won’t be reunited with your family. I think you will be reunited and I think that reunion will be as joyful and wonderful as you can imagine. This is personal for me as well as you. There are people I’m very much looking forward to seeing again in the new creation! I am super excited to sit down with my wife’s brother Bryan whom I have never met, but whom I’m pretty sure I will like and, more importantly, who can almost certainly tell me some good stories about my wife that I suspect she’s holding back. I think all that wonderful will be just as wonderful as you hope. But in addition to that, I see here the promise of more wonder and joy multiplied with the whole family of God, a growing circle of closeness that won’t take away from the goodness of the relationships I already have, but only add to them. Joy rippling outward in an ever-widening circle. Joy that goes on forever.

What does this mean for the romantic relationships? Well first of all, if you are a person who wants to get married, if that’s something you really hope for and long for, if having a family is a central hope of your life, go for it. I think you can hear Paul saying that in this passage, if marriage is your thing, go for it. I am married, the Lord blessed me with a family and it’s been a great joy.

But, secondly, and this is something people do all the time, do not make your happiness, don’t make your identity dependent on your romantic relationships and romantic hopes. As part of my sermon preparation this week, I read some Taylor Swift lyrics. It’s true. Actually it’s Larry’s fault. He was reading them at our lunch table. You see, he’s been asked to play a few of her songs on the organ as part of a wedding that he’s doing. Now, it may shock you to know: Larry is not familiar with Ms. Swift’s repertoire. So he was trying to familiarize himself. (You haven’t lived until you’ve heard Larry read Taylor Swift lyrics).

As you read her lyrics you definitely notice a theme. They are hyper-focused on romantic love. Just about all her songs are about romantic love. Not only that, in Taylor Swift's lyrics romantic love is the brightest star in the sky, it's the best thing there is.

Here are some examples. In the song "Enchanted", Swift describes how she's in a sad and lonely place where everyone is fake, and then she meets her guy at the party and: "This night is sparkling, don't you let it go. I'm wonderstruck, blushing all the way home. I'll spend forever wondering if you knew I was enchanted to meet you." Romantic love saves her from her darkness. Romantic love gives her light.

In the song "Daylight", same sort of beginning: she pictures herself in a dark and cruel place and then she meets her man and: "I don't wanna look at anything else now that I saw you. I don't wanna think of anything else now that I thought of you. I've been sleeping so long in a 20-year dark night. And now I see daylight, I only see daylight". All the things of the world go strangely dim in the light of her lover's face.

In the song "State of Grace", she talks about walking alone through busy streets and then she meets her guy. "I never saw you coming. And I'll never be the same. This love is brave and wild. This is a state of grace." It sounds a little like amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

Now I like Taylor Swift; I think she's genuinely talented. But in these songs she talks about romantic love as if it is salvation. She idolizes, in the full sense of the word, romantic love. And how has that worked for her? I don't know her, but because she's a public figure I know that she has been through a whole series of failed relationships. Making an idol out of romantic love hasn't helped her find it. And no wonder! How would you feel if you were dating someone who told you, 'you are my everything, you are my salvation!' You would be flattered for a second and then you would be terrified. You are just a person! How can you be someone's salvation when you can't even find your car keys in the morning?

I don't blame Taylor Swift. She's looking for love, and we're all looking for that. Our life is meant to be grounded in love, we know that, we can all feel that. But there is only one love that can be the ground of your life, and it's not the love of a romantic partner. The love that's meant to ground your life is the love of Jesus Christ our Lord. Jesus knows your worst secrets, the sins and thoughts that you don't even dare mention to anyone else. Jesus knows those things and he doesn't move away from you, he moves towards you and gives himself for you. He lifts you up and cleans you up and he brings you back to life. He teaches you joy. Jesus says to you, "I will be with you for better or worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health as long as we both shall live, which is forever." When it comes to love, whether you are married or single, the best thing you can do is to train yourself to love like Jesus. Stand on his grace and his promises, know the security of his love. Then from that secure place, love others with his forgiving, sacrificial, gracious love.

In his book on Marriage, Tim Keller mentioned something I didn't know. The word dating wasn't really used in the English language until 1914. Dating wasn't really a word until a hundred years ago! Before that, people didn't go out on dates, they would meet each other in family settings. They would come calling at each other's homes, they'd meet each other in the context of family. The process was centered on character and community. It was designed to discern character and place people in community. Dating is a much more fun-centered activity. You go to a movie, you go to a restaurant, you go out dancing. It's centered on having a good time. So the whole apparatus of meeting someone moved from getting to know their character to having fun. The same thing has happened in the realm of friendship. Friendships used to be formed by people who were thrown together as they struggled together through difficult tasks. Now when you go out with a bunch of friends, you are all looking for something fun to do. Having fun is great, but real friendship and real relationships need to go to deep things, they need to be about character. Our character comes from our identity in Christ, from the fruit His Spirit places in us. Let the love of Jesus flow through you. Stand on his grace and his promises. Then from that secure place, love others with his forgiving, sacrificial, gracious love.

If you love people that way you will be well-guarded against loneliness. If God leads you to a life of singleness, your love will nourish joyful relationships of strength and substance. If God leads you to a romantic partner you will be well-trained in the kind of love that needs to be at the center of marriage. Love people that way and you will be building deep relationships. In fact, as Paul says in our passage, you will have a foretaste of the fellowship of heaven.

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