

Choosing not to marry

Various texts

I remember when I was in high school our year went away on a camp. And on this camp the Principal stood up. And he outlined three goals that he thought we should have as young men (This was a boys school I was attending). He said “You need to be thinking about a career. Get educated get qualified, establish a career”. He said “You need to be thinking about the spiritual side of things. Work out what you think about God and what lied beyond”. And then he said this “You need to be thinking about a life-partner. Aim to make a good choice in partner” he said. Was he right to have that third goal as part of his top three? Here he was, standing in front of a room full of 16 year olds, setting the expectation that life was about three things: work, God, and finding a spouse.

Jump forward 12 years and I was attending a baptism. I was asked to be the godfather for young Thomas and the parents asked me to pray for my godson in the service. When praying like that you start thinking about the baby’s future and so I prayed that he would grow spiritually and that he would be blessed with good health. And I also prayed that God would grant him a loving spouse. When I got home I remember wondering about whether I did the right thing, about how appropriate it was to include marriage in my list of what I thought was best for my young Godson.

This brings us to the question that I want to explore with you today. We are concluding our 4 week series on marriage, and today I want to ask the question: *How necessary is marriage really?* I think most of us at one point in our lives want to get married, most people with children hope that their children will marry one day, but I doubt whether setting marriage as *a default position* is really Biblical. Now please don’t mishear me on this. I am not saying that marriage is a bad thing. I want to affirm the opposite; marriage is a good thing. I am not saying that we shouldn’t pray for marriage to happen, either in our own lives or in the lives of our family and friends. But I do feel that there is a problem if we act like it’s obligatory part of life, because I hope to show you that the Bible paints a very different picture. How so? Let’s take a look.

No single passage to share with you in today’s sermon, rather we will be in a couple different parts of the New Testament beginning with the end of last week’s reading in Matthew Ch 19. If you remember, Jesus has been explaining how for those who do get married, the normal expectation is that they stay married to the one person. Are there exceptions? Yes, I argued that the Bible made provision for marriages to end in cases involving adultery, abandonment or abuse. But failing those circumstances, marriages should be ongoing. The disciples find this hard to hear. They say in Matthew 19:11 If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry. If marriage means staying with the one person, who can do that! And Jesus’ reply in verse 11 is to say “Yes, it is hard. Not everyone can accept this word. Not everyone can accept this

standard of marriage.” And then Jesus says something radical in verse 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.

What is a eunuch? Someone who is missing their reproductive organs, either because they were born that way or because they’ve been removed. In the Old Testament (Deut 23), eunuchs were excluded from worshiping with God’s people; they were classed as an unclean type of person. But in verse 12 Jesus is pointing to those people and saying “This is now a legitimate way of living. If indeed you feel that my approach to marriage is too strict, then its ok to not be married. It’s ok to live as the eunuchs do.” And again, this was a radical departure from what the Old Testament would have us expect. The single, unmarried life was unheard of in the Old Testament; to be a member of God’s people was to be member of an extended, flesh and blood family; Abraham’s family. Marriages needed to happen for God’s people to grow in number. But in the NT we see a new understanding of God’s people. Galatians says that we are all Abraham’s offspring through faith in Christ; the physical connection to Abraham is no longer necessary, and so the possibility of membership is thrown open to everyone: men, women, Jews, gentiles, marrieds, singles. Jesus is making the declaration: there is a legitimate place for the unmarried in God’s plan.

But it’s hard to feel this way sometimes. I don’t know whether you know the story of the last Chinese Eunuch? Back in the days of the Chinese Emperor the imperial court was served by a civil service of eunuchs. They were often men with great power and influence. The last eunuch died in 1996, his name was Sun Yaoting. His own father castrated him when he was eight years of age in the hope that he could serve a long and protected life in the imperial court. A few weeks after the operation, the emperor abdicated, and the days of the imperial court were over. “He was castrated, and then the emperor abdicated” writes Sun Yaoting’s biographer “He felt life had played a joke at his expense”. What a cruel turn of events. It’s bad enough to be castrated but then to have the one opportunity that would make it worthwhile snatched away from you. I think sometimes for those who are unmarried there is a similar feeling. There is a sense of life being wasted, we feel that we would be so much better with someone, that we were made for family life. There’s a bewilderment as to what single lives are meant to achieve, perhaps a sense of life playing a cruel joke. But at this point in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus is saying “Just wait a minute. Contrary to what we might think there is great value in being single, there is a purpose for those who are not married”

This begs the question: *What does that purpose involve?* Well, we catch a glimpse of that purpose a few chapters later. In Matthew 22 Jesus is being questioned by some members of a Jewish sect. The Sadducees are posing a tricky question about life after death. “If a man is married 7 times, to whom will he be married in the age to come?” In his answer Jesus gives us a glimpse of what the age to come will look like.

Verse 30 At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. Jesus says there will be some differences between life now and in the age to come. One of those differences is that marriage will be a thing of the past. The Bible tells us in a number of places that marriage ends at death, we heard this in our second reading, Paul writes that a woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. So while marriage is a good thing, it's not an *eternally* good thing. Marriage is something belonging to this world, not the next. And single people are a symbol of this truth. Unmarried people are a gift to the church, reminding us of what lies ahead. They teach us that there is more to this world than our families, that there is meaning beyond getting married and having children, that ultimately our true home is not the one we have a mortgage on but the home that is awaiting us in the age to come. You've seen those films where someone comes back from the future to warn and prepare people in the present about what lies ahead. That's the part that unmarried people have in our congregations. Instead of being invisible to rest of us or pitied in some way, these brothers and sisters of ours should be seen as playing a vital role. And they do so without having to say anything, but simply by living faithfully as men and women who are unmarried.

So Jesus is painting a radical picture here in Matthew's Gospel. It was radical for his day, and I suspect it's quite radical for us too. And he isn't the only one to speak about singleness. The Apostle Paul also has a few things to say, and they can be found in 1 Corinthians 7. The argument in 1 Corinthians can be little difficult to follow, but the gist of what Paul is saying is this. He seems to be responding to some misguided spiritual teachers who are insisting that Marriage is a bad thing; that we're better off single. Paul's response is really interesting. He doesn't respond by claiming the opposite. He doesn't say "Oh you've got it back to front. Marriage is great, it's singleness that's the problem!" No, what he does is that he responds with a point of view that's quite neutral. He says "You know what, they're both good options, and you're free to pursue whichever one you wish." But then he adds one more point. He says that even though they're both good, he actually thinks there are distinct advantages to being single. In fact, he sees two advantages in remaining unmarried.

The first is there at the end of verse 28. He says those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this. When I was a single man I remember spending an afternoon in my local Westfield. And you know how on the concourse they'll have some couches set up? I sat down next to some young fathers who were there with their children. They were about my age and we got talking and they asked if I had children. I said "No" and they said "Oh that's a shame". They then asked whether I was married. I said "No", and they said "Well that's good! Children are great, but marriage is terrible!" I was completely taken aback, "What horrible men" I thought. Let me be clear, the Bible tells us Marriage should be honoured by all, and that dismissive attitude is not honouring marriage and it certainly is not an example of how to love your wife. But they were expressing something of the reality of marriage in a fallen world. I remember an old spiritual teacher of mine speaking about what he called the 'dark side' of marriage. This is something the Bible speaks about from time to

time, about how marriage is can be very testing relationship. Paul says that there is an advantage in being spared this trouble.

And he goes on to mention another advantage from verse 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.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.

The second advantage that Paul sees is simply that being on your own allows you more freedom. When I was a child my parents had a single friend who would come for a meal from time to time, and it seemed to be that whenever Stuart paid a visit he's have a slide show of his latest adventure. Pictures of him hiking the Himalayas or something like that. I remember thinking "This guy lives an incredibly exotic life!" I remember wondering why my parents ever did anything like that. The most adventurous thing that they ever did was weeding in the garden. It wasn't until I was older that I realized that if Stuart had children then his life wouldn't have looked anywhere near as exotic! Single people have a freedom that married people simply don't have. Paul sees this as a great spiritual opportunity. He's not so much interested in encouraging people to climb mountains but in devoting that time to God. I've heard it said that the single woman is the backbone of global mission. Which is a great compliment to single women, not so much to single men. Sometimes in life we find it hard to look beyond the problems of our situation, but there are advantages to every season in life, and Paul is keen we don't overlook the advantages of not being married.

So the New Testament is very positive about being a single person. However, it would be unrealistic to ignore that there are difficulties associated with not being married. I got married a month before my 31st birthday, which at the time was older than the average age for men, certainly older than many of my peers. I found being a single man to be a very difficult thing. One feeling that I remember was an incredible sense of loneliness. Holidays were hard. I was a postgraduate student with lots of holidays but no-one to spend the time with. You might not know this, but often single people will have to pay an excess for their accommodation because they're only one person taking up a room. It's a remarkable form of discrimination. Weddings were hard. Not because of jealousy but because I was sick and tired of turning up on my own. I actually decided to stop going to weddings.

What's the solution to loneliness? Marriage can be one solution, but not always, there are plenty of lonely marriages. And even a good marriage on its own isn't enough, I don't think. The Bible actually talks more about friendship as a solution for loneliness. And so friendship is a really important element of living as a single. But friendship takes effort. Here's an insight I've had over the last week. Whatever your situation in life, you have to work hard to be content. To have a happy marriage

takes effort, and to find contentment in singleness also takes effort. You have to work hard at finding and fostering supporting friendships.

Married people can help. At our old church Jas and I would have a regular dinner with a single man in the Growth Group that we led. Each week he'd come over and eat with us beforehand. I think the key was in its regularity; it just became part of the weekly routine. It was like something you'd do with a family member. Jas and I visit my parents every fortnight, and here we were doing something similar with a brother in Christ. And we all looked forward to it, we were each enriched by it. As a child I learnt a lot from Stuart, my parents' friend; a lot about the world, a lot about what people could do as a pastime. I think our world doesn't make it easy for single people, but if we are going to have church people fulfill this high calling, then we can make it a bit easier by being open to the friendship that single people can offer. So there's the challenge to the hopes and dreams that we have for our children. Unlike us sometimes, the Bible is very positive about the unmarried.

I want to leave you with a comment that a friend of mine left on Facebook a couple of years ago. Like me he is a minister, and his comment is a great example of what we need to hear more of in our churches.

I have enormous admiration and gratitude for my brothers and sisters in Christ who persevere in purity as single people, who often are fighting a long battle to be content in every circumstance and to receive their situation as a calling from God, who keep working to not believe the lie that sex is everything and that apart from it we cannot be whole, and to instead delight in fellowship with God and the redeemed relationships with others this makes possible. They are a living testimony to the truth of the resurrection and the promise of the kingdom of God; and I would be deeply glad for my children to grow up to be like them.

Rev Andrew Errington, Facebook 9th May 2014

It was the last line that really made this comment stand out for me: *I would be deeply glad for my children to grow up to be like them.* How's that for an affirmation of the single life? There's a man who has been listening carefully to Jesus, a leader who clearly sees the value of the single people under his care. Let's learn from his example, let's listen to the New Testament on this, and let's learn to encourage and support those who are serving us as single people.