

Single-Minded (1 Cor 7:17-40)

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Preacher: William HC

[0:00] A joke that Enoch and I used to share about is that Student Life had a bit of a nickname. Enoch, you want to share that? Student Life was also nicknamed Student Wife. Okay, so I don't know.

There's a lot of talk often on campus, not just about sharing the gospel, but finding a wife, right? And it worked for Enoch once. But what do we do with that?

What do we do with that when all around us there is this talk of partnering up, of sharing the gospel, but then also finding your lifelong spouse?

Amazingly, actually, the Bible is not silent on this. So this is our chapter. This is our passage. I'm going to read a small portion, and then we're going to journey through this passage together. So please, would you open to verse 17 of chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians.

And so I'll just read up to verse 25. This is God's Word. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing.

[1:21] Keeping God's commands is what counts. Each one should remain in the situation he was when God called him. Were you a slave when you were called?

Don't let it trouble you. Although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman. Similarly, he who was a free person when he was called is Christ's slave.

You were bought at a price. Don't become slaves of men. Brothers, each man is responsible to God should remain in the situation God called him to.

In 1993, the story is told. We've been talking about China a little bit, but this story is from China as well. Four single men from a university in a city called Nanjing.

They were a bit restless. They wanted to break away from their culture's obsession with marriage and dating and finding a wife. They were just four single men, as it were. They decided to pick a date on their calendar and to host a big celebration of being single.

[2:29] They picked this date and it was the 11th of November. Some of you who know Chinese, 11, 11. It really looks like four single men having a great time.

One, one, one, one. That's the idea behind it. Fast forward 20 years, Singles Day is now a thing. It's not just a thing. It's a global thing, right?

Global celebration of singleness and apparently, according to the New Zealand Herald, a celebration of shopping. Okay? Some of you who love shopping know, right? This is the day that the Lord has made for you to go shopping for some reason.

Apparently, 2021, two biggest online shopping websites made \$222 billion on Singles Day. Okay? Okay? And yet, ironically, actually, Singles Day has also become a very popular day to shed your singleness, to get married.

Apparently, in 2011, there was this thing where actually all these people had like mass weddings, you know, group weddings. They wanted that special day to be the day where they stopped becoming single, right?

[3 : 34] A bit of a wedding fever on Singles Day. And I don't know, the more I looked at that, the more I realized, actually, this is a little snapshot of our world, isn't it? Our world actually doesn't know what to do with singleness.

Do we celebrate it, throw a party? Do we try and shed it as fast as possible? Is singleness an excuse to spend lots and lots of money, usually on yourself? Is singleness a problem that needs to be fixed, like an illness?

And in our kind of church, I think we face two problems, right? We live in a Western society, right? We live in New Zealand, which no longer views marriage as God's Word does or gender as God's Word does.

Everything we heard last week from Pastor Michael about marriage, right? One man, one woman, one life. Every word is challenged, surely, today. And yet the other problem is, I think, for some of us, many of us who have grown up in an Asian culture, often we don't value singleness at all, right?

We've actually been taught, maybe schooled by our parents, grandparents. You've got to get married, you've got to get married, you've got to find a wife, you've got to find a husband, right? On and on it goes, right? And so we pressure ourselves, right?

[4 : 48] This is a very unique church. I think out of all the churches we've been to, I have not heard more about, I need to find Mr. Right or Mrs. Right, except in this particular church. I think that's our culture coming through.

Thankfully, as we heard, God is not silent on this issue of singleness, of marriage, right? The Apostle Paul's instructions to Corinth is good news for all of us, no matter if you're single or married.

Because I think the main passage, the main point of this passage is that if you're bought by Christ, we are free to follow Him with single-minded devotion, whatever our relationship status.

I'll say that again. Bought by Christ, you can follow Jesus with single-minded devotion, whether you're single or married. As we know and we've heard, the young church in Corinth had lots of questions, right?

Lots of questions. By God's grace, they had become Christians, and they're turning to God and repentance and faith. And now, questions for Paul. Paul writes this letter back to them, but you'll notice, right, as we heard last week, Paul starts to address their questions.

[5 : 57] Now, for the matters you wrote about, verse 1 of chapter 7. And so, Paul's going to address all kinds of questions, and our passage today, we can really divide into two parts, right?

So, I've got two main points. Firstly, Paul, from verse 17 to 24, he challenges certain views about being called. And then secondly, from verse 25 to the end of the chapter, he starts to clarify certain questions about different people's questions about singleness, okay?

So, he's going to challenge some certain views about being called, and then he's going to clarify certain questions about being single, okay? Time prevents us, I think, from addressing every point of this passage, but actually the main point is fairly clear for each of us.

I wonder if you noticed in the reading, okay? Three times, Paul says, remain as you are at the time that God called you to Christ, okay? He says it in kind of variations, right?

Verse 17, nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. Verse 20, if I go further down, each person should remain in the situation they were when God called them.

[7 : 12] And verse 24, right? Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to. Why make this point three times?

It must be important. This is the main principle that we need to be thinking about. But Paul, maybe he's responding to a situation like, I don't know, maybe there was a crisis in Corinth at the time.

Perhaps there was a pandemic, okay? And everyone was getting real panicky, okay? We're going to put all marriages on hold, okay? I've got to just, you know, cut all ties to my husband and wife, right? We heard about that last week.

Maybe some were considering, maybe my wife's not a Christian. I need to ditch them. And Paul's like, hang on, hang on. Live as you're called.

Stay in your calling. It's actually a spiritual gift from God, not something to panic and run from. So that's the main point, okay, that Paul's trying to flesh out for people.

[8 : 07] Now, if I say stay as you're called, I think a church like ours, all right, younger, we struggle to stay anywhere, right?

Okay? We change phones every year, okay? It's hard to commit to a job. I was actually talking to Enoch over lunch, right? And actually, you know, it's hard to find part-time workers at cafes because, especially if this, he was talking to someone who tries to hire uni students.

Sometimes the uni students will then take sick leave, and then they never come back, all right? It's like, man, ghosted by my employee. What's going on?

This is the age we live in. It's harder and harder for people to commit. So to hear something from Paul like, stay as you're called, and you're like, no way. How can I stay as I am, right?

Are you saying I can't look for a wife? Are you saying I can't go on a date? Are you saying I should stay in school all my life like Enoch? Are you saying I can't change jobs or move house?

[9 : 03] No, that's not what Paul is mainly meaning here, okay? We need to remember Paul's own testimony. What happened to Paul?

When the risen Lord Jesus met Paul on the Damascus Road, he did not remain as he was, did he? Okay? Right, look, as he realized that Jesus is the promised one, okay, that his scriptures have been teaching all his life, his life did not stay the same.

It totally changed. His work totally changed. His friends totally changed. When you're called to Jesus, in one sense, everything in your life changes.

And yet it didn't change everything about his life, did it? Because Paul is still Jewish by ethnicity. He's still a former Pharisee by his upbringing.

His hometown, he can't change that. He's from Tarsus. And he still spoke several different languages. So he's a bit of a bilingual third culture kid, right? Well, not a kid anymore, but you know what I mean.

[10 : 06] In many areas of Paul's life, he remained as he was before God. And I think this is what Paul gets at, right? Have a look again at verse 18, because Paul uses this example about circumcision.

He talks to the Jewish people in his congregation and says, you don't have to hide your circumcision. Okay? You imagine this, all right? You're living in a Greek city like Corinth, and there's not many Jews, okay?

It's kind of like living as a bunch of Asian-looking people in a city like New Zealand. You feel like you're in a minority, okay? And maybe there's pressure for you to fit in, okay? To talk like, g'day, mate.

And I don't know. That's Aussie. That was really bad. Okay. She'll be right. Cheer, bro. Yeah. Okay. Look, we try to fit in, don't we? Okay?

We kind of just put on lingo and fit in. Paul says you don't have to do that. And notice, Paul also says to the Gentiles, okay? People who weren't Jewish. You don't have to become Jewish, all right, for God to love you more.

[11 : 08] So I think that's what stay as you are is trying to get at. I think Paul is referring to a deeper issue, your identity, right? And this book has been full of teaching about where should we put our identity, our trust in?

What defines you truly, okay? And I think Paul would say to us, look, God has called you to be here in a church that has lots of Chinese people. But look, being Chinese is nothing.

Being Maori is nothing. Being Cantonese speaking is nothing. Being Kiwi is nothing. All right? You don't have to cut off your heritage to be more acceptable to God or to your neighbor.

And yet you don't have to cling on to it either for God to love you more. Okay? You can stay as your call. I think that is how we flesh out this principle. And yes, it's a challenge, right?

A church like ours, we wrestle. How should I feel about the fact that I'm in an English-speaking congregation of a Chinese church?

[12 : 12] Well, let me remind you, look, the body of Christ is bigger than just our local church. But if God has placed you here at PCBC English, he's wise and he's gracious.

And he can use your mixed-up background, your cross-cultural experience to see things far more clearly than others. He can shape you to love and serve a group of people that maybe they never hear about Jesus otherwise if you weren't here, if you weren't connected the way you are.

Be satisfied in Christ. Stay as you're called. Don't try and be someone else. Be someone who's satisfied in Christ as your ethnicity, as your upbringing, as your stage in life.

Paul, he continues, right, to explain verse 21 onwards. He uses another principle, another illustration. He moves from circumcision to slavery. Slavery was a commonplace activity, a situation in Paul's day.

Actually, Paul doesn't believe in slavery himself. We'll see that in his other teachings. Perhaps some in the church, though, when they became Christians, they were still slaves in their culture at the time.

[13 : 24] And Paul says to them, look, if you can get your freedom, feel free to do so. Verse 21. But if you can't, don't let it trouble you. You see that? Because you're standing before God is what ultimately counts.

He fleshes us out. If you're a slave called to faith in the Lord, you're free in the Lord. And the flip side, if you're someone who's not a slave, you're free by status. You're still a slave of Christ.

So when Paul says, remain how God called you, he's saying, if you know the Savior who has freed you, nothing on earth can change that standing before God.

Our relationship to Jesus is the only relationship status that matters most. And everything else needs to be seen in light of that. Now think about verse 23 for a moment.

You were bought at a price. And then it says, don't become slaves of human beings. But look, most slaves, right, physical slaves in the church of Corinth, they wouldn't be able to gain their physical freedom.

[14 : 29] Some might have been slaves all their lives. So this is an instruction here that only makes sense if Paul is thinking about more than just physical slavery. I think he's saying here in verse 23, don't be slaves to people's expectations of you.

If Jesus has redeemed you, only his opinion, his will counts the most. Some of you, you might be living in situations that are very pressured.

Maybe you feel pressure from your parents, your relatives to achieve something by a certain age in life. Maybe you hang out with friends and they're all at a certain stage in life. They all have this ticked off their bucket list.

But don't feel like you have to be a slave to their standards and expectations to be accepted. Don't feel like you need to work so much or serve so much or earn to a certain standard to be accepted.

That's not the gospel, right? That's slavery to other people's expectations of you. You know what? If we love Christ and his will for our lives, as we love our neighbors out of that love that Christ has given us, that's the only actions that truly counts.

[15 : 44] Maybe even as we reflect on that, these past four verses, you might be single here. And you're hoping maybe one day you'll get married. Maybe you long for it.

Maybe you pray for it every night. Look, can I suggest you apply what we just heard to yourself? All right? Instead of slaves, just put your situation in.

If you get the opportunity to be engaged and married, take it. Take it. If you don't and it doesn't come, don't let it trouble you.

Don't let it trouble you. You may have friends and family saying you need to be married to be mature. Okay? You may have K-dramas you watch that say, you know, you need to be attached to be accepted and welcome.

Right? Those are false gospels. Because if Jesus has redeemed you, you already have a one true love. And his will for you is what matters most.

[16 : 45] If Jesus died and rose again for you, he's your living hope, as we just sang. And he can ask you, he invites you, glorify him just as you are.

Others may try to define you by your relationship status. Don't worry about them. You might get boxed in because you have a certain last name. Don't care about that. Only the gospel gives you and I an identity that truly matters.

In Jesus Christ, we are called into his family. We are bought with a price. So don't go be slaves again to human beings. Live as you're called.

From verse 25 to 40, Paul moves on. And he gives some specific situations, right? He starts to address. Some Corinthians had specific questions. How do we apply staying as we are, right?

In our stage of life. And here, Jesus may not have taught directly about these specific situations. But Paul says here, I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.

[17 : 53] Verse 25. And then he goes on to explain his counsel, right? He addresses three kinds of unmarried people. He has three in view. Verse 25, 28, he talks about unmarried men and women.

And then later on, he talks about either parents with unmarried kids or unmarried, unengaged people. And then he addresses widows in the last two verses of this chapter.

And what the thread in common is that it's all about singleness. It's all about singleness. And in these verses, the rest of the chapter, Paul is balanced. And we see he values both marriage as a gift and singleness as a gift.

He shares his view that marriage is good. But you might be surprised to hear him say that singleness is better. And if you're not married, actually, you'll be happier staying as you are.

And that really hits us, right? It's like, how can we believe this? But that's a reflection of our culture, our obsession with finding Mr. and Mrs. Right. Paul, though, he gives two reasons to consider singleness as the better option, right?

[19 : 06] And I need to preach this because it's right here in the text, right? Verse 29 to 31, he first says, think of the future. He reminds them that time is short. He tells them, look, World War III might not be coming, but the things that you value and love and long for are all temporary.

Your marriage is temporary. Your house, your car, things you buy, things you laugh and cry about, all of this stuff in its present form is temporary.

It's going to pass away, okay? When we think of happy fairy tales, they all end with happily ever after. That's a lie because there is no happily ever after.

Things are passing away, even marriage, even your career, even your family. None of these things last forever. So think of the future, all right, when you're trying to weigh up the options.

The second reason to prefer singleness, think of the focus. Verse 32 to 35, Paul gives some really hard-hitting stuff. He says, single people, man, they can be single-minded in a way that someone who's married can't.

[20 : 21] And some of you who are married, you'll nod your heads. You know this, right? You've experienced this. You might be like, yep, I can do this. Yep, I can do that. Oh, wait, okay, let me check with my wife. Let me check my husband first.

Okay, oh, sorry, I can't do it anymore, right? But the freedom you have when you're not married yet, not yet married, it's lovely, actually, isn't it?

All right? You can say yes to so many things. Actually, you know, don't embarrass them, but actually a sister in Christ this morning could say yes to picking up someone and meeting up with them and going to church with them, right?

That's amazing. Single-mindedness, right? Think of the focus that a single life can bring you. And so Paul then fleshes this out for different groups of people, right?

Verse 27 to 28, to young couples in Corinth wondering, should we get married, should we not? Paul the pastor is very relaxed. He says, if you're engaged, you should stick to it.

[21 : 19] If you're not, don't worry about it. But if you do want to get engaged, that's fine, right? This is not Paul saying, you must do this or you must not do that, is it?

Some of you aren't in relationships, and praise God. Some of you aren't yet. Praise God, too. Now, in verse 36 to 38, a different group of people, Paul has advice as well.

And again, it's trying to apply, stay as you're called. Now here, older translations talk about parents who are worried about their children's future, okay? And whether to marry them off or not, okay?

It was a different time. But you could also translate this as someone who you're already engaged to, okay? If you're engaged to someone, and you know you need to get married, then go for it, Paul says.

But look, if you don't end up together as well, that's fine. It's annoying, isn't it? We want Paul to say, thus says the Lord, this is how you should map out your relationship life. But he doesn't. He doesn't, because the main point is stay as you're called, all right?

[22 : 22] It's a valuable stage of life. And I love the last two verses of our chapter. He speaks to widows, people who have lost their husbands, all right?

Lost their wives. Paul says to you, you're free to remarry, all right? In the Lord, in the Lord. In fact, that's probably the only restriction, the only clarification he gives.

And I would say this applies to all of us, right? Whether we've been married or not. You should marry in the Lord. That means another Christian. And yeah, verse 40, right? He says, in my judgment, she's probably happy if she stays as she is.

Actually, the word happy there is actually blessed. Like when Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit on the Sermon on the Mount. Paul's preference for singleness goes against our culture.

Against our society that says you need to be shackled up to be somebody or someone. But you know what? Paul speaks from his own experience, okay? The value of singleness.

[23 : 26] Think about Paul's story after he became a Christian. Without a wife, right? We don't know whether she died or she left him or he never got married. Look, without a wife, Paul could take long and dangerous journeys to share the gospel.

Couldn't he? He could write half the New Testament, right? Half of this New Testament is written by Paul. Okay? Compared to Peter, who had a wife, right? Not as productive, wrote only two letters, okay?

So you see, look, there's a comparison, okay? And Paul could withstand persecution. He could handle being put in prison in a way that would be much harder for someone with a wife or children to worry about.

And yet, you notice in our entire chapter, Paul has never said, don't get married. Did you see that? Because this is a question of Christian freedom. This is not a thus says the Lord issue.

He's trying to apply, stay as your call, be content where you are to each of us here. And he gives us a wonderful example of applying it in his context in a sensitive way.

[24 : 33] And can I just share some of the most faithful Christians I know are single. Actually, some of you here are some of the most faithful Christians I know, struggling, trying to serve the Lord as you are.

But I can think of a sister of mine who has helped bring the gospel to an unreached people group in China. And she can do this because of her availability and willingness.

I think of a brother who, because of his same-sex attraction, has chosen to stay celibate. What an incredible gospel witness.

Showing to the world that Christ is enough. I can think of a widow at our previous church who lost her husband really young. And then decided, I'm going to teach English to all these new immigrants that are coming through our church, our community.

And for almost 30 years, she's been faithfully leading people to Christ. Our world may call them loose ends and spares. In Christ, they are some of the most spiritually productive people.

[25 : 43] Beginning children, grandchildren in the Lord. Their single-minded service is a wonderful example for us all. Because look, the family of God, it doesn't grow through making babies.

It grows through people being born again. That's how it works. One pastor puts it this way. Marriage, it shows the shape of the gospel. And singleness shows the sufficiency of the gospel.

Isn't that good? The shape of the gospel we can see through marriage. But that Christ is enough, we can see through our single brothers and sisters. And we know this because actually our Lord Jesus, we look to Him.

He was the perfect man. Single. And through Him, He saves the world. He gives His life as a ransom for many.

This is the gospel, isn't it? On the cross, we have a Savior who single-mindedly experienced the greatest loneliness. Far more than you've experienced.

[26 : 48] Far deeper than your sorrows. To bear your sins. To bring you eternal life and joy. What a Savior. Look to Jesus.

Look to Jesus. And we get God's undivided devotion. We get a new relationship status. Not single, not married, but in Christ. And in Jesus.

Maybe He's calling you today as well. To put your identity and your purpose in Him and Him alone. And so, PCBC, I want us to embrace the Bible's vision of singleness and marriage.

Of being staying and content in what we're called to. Let's celebrate marriage as a gift, but not as an idol. Let's honor our single brothers and sisters, knowing that in Christ, in Christ we are one family.

In a world that is so obsessed with sex, let's show them you can experience intimacy through deep friendships with each other. And when being single brings hurt or shame, let's bear each other's burdens.

[27 : 59] Let's point each other to Christ. Let's remind each other of the spiritual children and grandchildren we are bearing fruit for the world. Let's be a place, let's be a church family that knows what it looks like to follow our single-minded Savior.

Let's pray. Father, we thank You. We ask that You would bless this church, single or married. And we ask that You would continue to work in our hearts and lives.

In Jesus' name, Amen.