

Week 4

On Singleness, Dating, Marriage

At Hope we often talk about **matter** and **manner** - this is where we're looking for unity, not uniformity of thought during these small group discussions. We should expect a range of thoughts on various topics, because our personality, experience, friends & family, upbringing, etc. all come into play as we shape our thoughts. Let's remember we all need Jesus and his grace is sufficient to cover each of us and our struggles, past or present.

How can we have a conversation that can honor God, the bible and each other?
Can we challenge ourselves to use this time to learn, listen and grow together?

? What are some of the most cringe-worthy lines shared by Christians towards those who are single?
e.g. Are you trusting in God enough? You're such a catch; what's wrong with the people in this church? Singleness is such a gift! So just enjoy it!! (typically from someone who is married). When you finally give it up to God that's when it's going to happen!

Leader's Note: We're trying to do a few things this week.

- 1. Dispel the notion that to be single is to be broken (no idolatry of marriage).**
- 2. Dispel the notion that to be married is the goal of the Christian life.**
- 3. Esteem both singleness and marriage as bona fide & equal in value life options before God. Both are beautiful if they fit within the most critical setting of life in Christ.**

Relational Status

1 Corinthians 7:1-11, 25-40

Now for the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."² But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband.³ The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.⁴ The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.⁵ Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.⁶ I say this as a concession, not as a command.⁷ I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.

⁸ Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do.⁹ But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

¹⁰ To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. ¹¹ But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.

²⁵ Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. ²⁶ Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. ²⁷ Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.

²⁹ What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; ³⁰ those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; ³¹ those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. 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. 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.

³⁶ If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. ³⁷ But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man also does the right thing. ³⁸ So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better.

³⁹ A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. ⁴⁰ In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

? The passage above infers that the author, Paul, is single, how do you understand Paul's comment in verse 7 that "I wish that all of you were as I am"

Possible answers: It seems to indicate there are positives to singleness that he sees that others may not be naturally inclined toward. In other words, they don't wish to be as he is but he wishes it were so. This begs further explanation within the rest of the passage as to what he sees as beneficial for the single and for the married. In other words, are we seeing each of these for the gift(s) that they are.

? What are some of the reasons Paul indicates would be justification for a person to seek marriage?

Possible answers: To guard against sexual immorality. To fulfill duties associated with marriage. To yield authority to another. For sake of mutuality. To protect your spouse from temptation due to lack of

self-control. If you cannot control yourself. It is a gift. You are not in sin or sinning by getting married. In some fashion, though married, they should live as if they are not (v. 29). If you are prepared to face troubles which accompany marriage and family. Recognize you will experience the challenges of a divided focus between God and spouse/family. If you have a relationship with a person of the opposite sex that you believe obligates you to marriage, you should strongly consider fulfilling this (but are not under compulsion).

? What are some of the reasons Paul indicates would be justification for a person to remain single?

Possible answers: If you have a gift or what some may call THE gift of singleness referenced in verse 7 (this is legitimate even though it has been used problematically at times within the church). It is good.

(Please see how many times it is referenced in this one part of Scripture as GOOD which should remind us of Genesis 1.) If you don't burn with passion. There's no command whether to marry or remain single. You are not in sin or sinning by not getting married. Live with the mentality that this world is passing away. You can be concerned firstly with the "Lord's affairs" in both body and spirit. This way of life is for your good. Singleness is not for your restriction (v. 35). Christians are not under obligation to marry. In a way, the choice to remain single can be conceived as "doing better" than those who marry (v. 38) and in Paul's judgment "happier" (v. 40)!

Esteeming Relational Status

1 Timothy 5:1-16

Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers,² older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.

³ Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. ⁴ But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. ⁵ The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help. ⁶ But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. ⁷ Give the people these instructions, so that no one may be open to blame. ⁸ Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

⁹ No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband,¹⁰ and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the Lord's people, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.

¹¹ As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. ¹² Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge. ¹³ Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also busybodies who talk nonsense, saying things they ought not to. ¹⁴ So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander. ¹⁵ Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan.

¹⁶ If any woman who is a believer has widows in her care, she should continue to help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.

? How has the church, including Hope, failed in creating a culture that esteems both the single and married alike? How has the church, including Hope, succeeded in creating a culture that esteems both the single and married alike?

Possible answers: Some of the same examples used in the icebreaker might resurface here. These lists may not be the same size based on the experiences of your group members. That's okay. The goal is to affirm that the church, including Hope, is not perfect in their execution of esteeming both single and marrieds alike. Hopefully, there are one or two positive examples that encourage us that God is at work in his church!

? (For those who are single in the group) What would you want those in the group who are married to know about the experience (good/bad, helpful/unhelpful, etc.) of being single within the Christian church generally or at Hope specifically?

Possible answers: Make sure your people know it's okay to highlight the challenges of being single. Paul calls it a gift and it is. But every gift has shadows to it. The gift of hitting a baseball brings with it fame that prevents that gifted hitter from being able to walk around in public. Even at a church like Hope that has a high percentage of singles compared to some other churches can bring difficulties. "Every engagement story is a reminder that I'm not engaged." Some of these may be readily known—feelings of aloneness, etc. But if you hear of something that surprises you, consider sending it to Team Small Groups. We want to hear how we as leaders are creating culture within the church family. And if we need to make adjustments, let's do so!

? (For those who are married in the group) What would you want those in the group who are single to know about the experience (good/bad, helpful/unhelpful, etc.) of being married?

Possible answers: This is NOT the time to provoke other single group members to envy because of "your HOT Christian wife or husband." Rather it's an opportunity to acknowledge the challenges which exist as a married person. It is a gift. But it also brings its own set of difficulties. How many times has Pastor Steve said, "Marriage doesn't solve your problems; it rearranges them." There is some truth in that statement.

(Hopefully, this conversation validates our lives in Christ, whether single or married, and permits people to get a window into the joys and challenges of the other.)

Real Life Scenario

You are a church consultant. A group of leaders, comprised of both singles and marrieds, has sought your help. Each group feels like they are not being seen or receiving ministry directed toward them. Marrieds feel like ministry to singles is being prioritized based on the types and times of events being offered. Singles feel like what is being celebrated in the church is weddings and babies. They've asked you to consult with their leaders so that a culture that esteems BOTH would be created. How would you counsel them?

Alternative: consider changing this from a local church to your extended family (because this dynamic plays out there too!)

For Discussion and Accountability

? What aspects of your relational status are you struggling to believe are a gift this week? What truth of our life with Christ can we encourage you with during this next week? (Month? Year?)

? What aspects of your relational status are you celebrating this week? Praise God together!

Additional Resources

- *7 Myths about Singleness* by Sam Allberry
- *Marriage: 6 Gospel Commitments Every Couple Needs to Make* by Paul David Tripp
- *The Meaning of Marriage: A Vision for Married and Single People* by Timothy and Kathy Keller