

Part 1: Singleness

Tyler Velin | 1 Corinthians 7:17-31

September 30th, 2018

One of the games I'm oddly fascinated with is the Game of Life. I can't imagine what the pitch meeting was like for that game. All these men in suits gathered together: "We have a great game idea," "Oh yeah, what is it." "It's called the Game of Life." "What do you do?" "Well after surviving the grueling decision of going to college or entering the work force, the rest of the game is really a balance between paying taxes, dodging medical bills, and worrying about life's unexpected disasters."

Why would we gather our families and friends around to play a game which makes us stress about the things we are all already stressed about? Well I think I know the answer: clarity. In the game of life it is clear the way forward, you can see the obstacles you need to avoid, and the clear markers of success: get a job, get paid, start a family, have kids, invest well and you'll quickly find yourself in Millionaire estates.

In the game you don't consider if you want to get married or have kids you just do it. A spouse, kids, they are all achievements which provide you an advantage. They are commodities, we use them to add value to us, and hopefully we will win in the end.

Unfortunately the philosophy of our entertainment has pervaded the mindset of our lives. We feel bound to the same things. There is an earnestness behind our life decisions that seems to thrust us forward in life for the simple reason that we feel we need to advance.

The playwright, Arthur Miller pointed out a similar sentiment through one of his characters when he said, **"For many years I looked at life like a case at law. It was a series of proofs. When you're young you prove how brave you are, or smart; then, what a good lover; then, a good father; finally, how wise, or powerful or [whatever.] But underlying it all, I see now, there was a presumption. That one moved . . . on an upward path toward some elevation, where . . . I would be justified."**

Single, married, widowed, parents or grandparents, I imagine we've all felt that same stress of finding proof of validation in our relationships. Our single adventures prove we are sufficient, our spouses prove we are lovely, our children prove we have value, our families prove we are capable. Like merit badges we wear them hoping to be noticed.

But the Bible provides paradigm for success in life. That's why we just read the passage in 1 Corinthians 7. Paul speaks to race, vocation and relationships and presses pause. The Bible is one of the places where the urgency of our lives is lifted and we can breathe and actually understand who we are and what we should consider in our life.

What the world actually tries to tell you is that those around you are really just pieces you can use strategically for your own affirmation. The gospel actually shows us that we can figure out how to truly love people, glorify God and find total contentment in whichever stage of life you find yourself in.

This is what we want to look at in this Gospel Focused Relationships and Family series. Paul himself says that it is a gift to be single, it is a gift to be married. But he doesn't see them as stages you need to process through in order to win.

The analogy we are going to use for this series is gears on a bike. Singleness, marriage and parenting are all different gears that work to the same end. Being in first gear is not better than being in fifth gear, and being in third gear is no worse than being in second gear. Each of them is designed to carry you somewhere and each gear has specific benefits and challenges associated with it.

Try to go up a hill in eighth gear and it's going to take more effort, but it's not wrong. Try to go faster in first gear and you will need to work harder, but it doesn't mean it's impossible.

To understand this we need to understand how the gospel changes the way we view ourselves in relationship to God, and secondly ourselves in relationships to others. How we understand our relationship to God influences the way we relate to everyone else in this world.

If we fail to see our identity chiefly through what Jesus has done for us on the cross, then we will always see people as game tokens used to advance us through life even if we tell ourselves it's out of a pure desire. The gospel frees us to serve others and glorify God instead of using others and glorifying ourselves.

This paradigm is the very heart of Christianity itself. In fact if you don't understand this, I don't think you actually understand Christianity. Because when Jesus came to us, he came as the King. The one who is due all worship, all honor and all praise. If anyone was obligated to view people as objects for his own comfort it was Jesus. But look at the massive paradigm Jesus laid down for us in: **Mark 10:42-45**.

The gospel will not only change the way we view God, but it will change the way we view others. That's what this series is about. And today we are going to talk about this in terms of singleness.

Today we aren't going to talk about how to find a Christian spouse, or how you should even think about that. And I'm not starting there because unfortunately that should never be our starting point when thinking about our singleness.

What we are going to look at today is how we have been knocked off course in this area, and how Jesus calls us back to have right thoughts on it. This actually isn't a single person's problem, I think many of us are in relationships and we are already working out of a faulty understanding of ourselves. In talking about singleness what we are really talking about is a view of yourself. In a sense it is a theology of you. But this idea has been lost.

When we think of singleness we almost immediately think in terms of relationships and this brings with it a myriad of pressures. The pressure has always been there, but now it's far more multifaceted.

Twenty to thirty years ago the message to singles was always the basic principles of the Game of Life: Get married, have kids, move to Millionaire Estates. It wasn't right, but at least the path was clear.

Now if you're single you have to be single while juggling far more options. One social commentator spoke about our modern culture of relationships and said: "The world is available to us, but that may be

the problem." The weight of social advancement is still there but the options are endless: date, don't date, have lots of partners, have one partner, marry the same-sex, marry the opposite sex, don't get married, have kids, don't have kids.

This is part of the stress, there are now all sorts of choices and we are seemingly free to pick whichever we want to find relief from singleness and satisfaction in life.

This is why Paul's words in 1 Corinthians are so important to us. In a world of endless options, Paul provides principles which bind our hearts. **1 Corinthians 6:12-13**

The creed of the day in the Roman Empire is really the creed of the day in Western culture. We want to legislate everything except for sexuality. "All things are lawful." The Roman Empire had lots of rules for all sorts of different things, but relationships and sexuality were completely open to individual preference.

Paul sees that the church in Corinth has adopted this idea for itself and he says "Everything might be lawful by Rome, but not everything is helpful as a Christian." As a Christian you are free to eat whatever food you want, but that doesn't mean that food is your God. So too the primary way you understand yourself and your desires is not your relationships and sexuality. In fact quite the opposite he says, "Your body belongs to the Lord." Look where he ends in **1 Corinthians 6:19-20**.

The point Paul is making in this text is that the first thing we should consider when it comes to our relationships is the glory of God. That is to say this: God cares about your relationship status. He is not unconcerned with it. It is not outside of his area of interest. It is directly related to how God wants you to worship him. The whole of you belongs to God.

Now I'm sure many of us in here say: "I get that, I mean he's God." But there are probably other people in here who respond the other way and say, "Who are you and who is God to tell me what I can and cannot do with my body or with my relationships."

We love freedom. We don't like being told what to do. The reality is that inside of our culture and even inside of our churches there has been freedom given as the gospel has been left out of this arena. The question is do we like where this freedom has led us? Has it really made us satisfied?

In 1 Corinthians 6 and 7 Paul talks about all sorts of stages of life we can find ourselves in. And his constant theme is do not consider your stage of life in the same way everyone else does. Back in chapter 6 he warned us to not be mastered by anything, but look at how he warns us again in **1 Corinthians 7:23**.

So far we have seen two clear commands from Paul, both stemming from our salvation. The first is that in our salvation we are to glorify God in our bodies, the second is that in our salvation we are not to be bound to the thoughts of men.

I think if we are honest with ourselves, part of our lostness surrounding singleness is that we are enslaved to culture. Our thoughts on being single are shaped first and foremost by our world and not by the gospel.

Why do I think this? Because even the word singleness is loaded with cultural meaning. When we talk about singleness no one views it through the lens of how you as an individual relates to God. The primary way we understand ourselves and make decisions is not generally us and God, it's us and our relationship to others. What should be a theology of self has become a theology of sexuality.

You ask someone what it's like to be single and no one tells you about the wonderful goals they have to make the world a better place. Immediately the conversation drifts towards ideas of loneliness, frustrations with the opposite sex, and feelings of general helplessness. We can't help but think of ourselves through the lens of how we relate to others.

This is not confined to the secular world either. The sexual revolutions have messed up all sorts of things. But it has also exposed in the church places where we as believers think to strictly through the lens of marriage, kids, Millionaire Estates. Though we say everyone has value, the experiences inside our church say something different.

Single people often feel isolated from the community of our churches because what is modeled to them is that they are second class citizens. You are on the bench and once you get married you can find meaning, once you have kids you can participate in our programs.

An even lonelier place to be is a believer who is trying to faithfully follow God and avoid sin while wrestling with same-sex attraction. They struggle to find acceptance not because of their sin, but because we feel like their sin has handicapped their future. If you can't grow up, get married and have kids then you don't belong here.

If you remember back to where Paul called us to glorify God in our body, it's important to unpack that idea. We use that phrase a lot but it's important to understand it. The glory of something is its visible or felt value and worth. So when we glorify something we show its value in our lives. For instance if the glory of the sun is its heat, then to glorify the sun is to make our homes on the beach laying on our towels, sunglasses on playing in the sand. Glorifying something displays the worth of that object.

Culturally we are told to look for something outside of us to find satisfaction, and inside of the church we unintentionally present the path of marriage and kids as the only way in which you can glorify God.

We are a sexuality first culture. Which is nothing more than a "me first" culture. And we need help navigating that landscape. What Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians is this: It's not about sex, it's about the glory of God. If you aim at sex and relationships you will always be broken, you will always be lost. But if you understand and experience the glory of God in the gospel it will transform not only your relational desires, but actually the whole of your singleness, your dating, your marriage and your parenting.

This is how we have been knocked off course, the question we have is how do we get back? This series is called Gospel-Focused Relationships and Families for a reason. We not only want our relationships to be centered on the gospel, but we want the constant focus to be the gospel. It takes effort not only to build on the gospel, but to constantly keep it as the focus in our lives.

So for each of these weeks there is going to be a focus from the gospel and a paradigm which shapes how we live. Here is the focus for singleness: **The focus of singleness is how Jesus related to God the Father, because in Jesus we see God's ideal individual.**

Jesus was simultaneously God's ideal man and personally satisfied in all of life. Yet Jesus died a single, unmarried virgin. There doesn't seem to be a death sentence our culture fears more than that.

And if you're single in here, I imagine you feel that. Outside of losing a spouse, culture says there are really only four reasons you'd be single: 1. You haven't found the right person, 2. You don't want to be committed to one specific individual, 3. You don't need anyone else to be happy, 4. You're broken.

Maybe there are some people from camp two and three in here who are constantly hoping that a new partner or new adventure will finally deliver you from the burden of being single. But my guess is that most of you in here are from camp one or two. You think that in order to be delivered from the swamp of singleness you must either try harder to find the right partner, or somehow fix yourself so that you can be desirable.

Culture tells us that we need to be saved from singleness. And you know what: it's right. Each and every one of us is born into this world as a single individual and it doesn't take very long for us to realize that we need something more. We need to be saved from our isolation.

As infants we cling to the support of our mother, and as adults we latch onto the social saviors of our culture.

Culture is right: you cannot find the right person, you cannot be satisfied by any other person, you do need something outside of you to make you happy, and you are broken. They have diagnosed us perfectly. But they don't know how to solve the problem. Their solutions always fail.

There must be a better way. This is where the gospel changes everything. Jesus wasn't less God's son because he wasn't married. Paul wasn't less apostle because he was single.

So why do we often feel like singleness is more of a grave than a gift? Because we start on the wrong premise. Jesus' life, and his death for our sins, modeled the lie that our greatest need and ultimate purpose is to progress through life and end up in Millionaire Estates.

Jesus' established a new goal: to do the will of his Father. Jesus gives us a glimpse into his own Game of Life in John 12 when he prays to his father: **John 12:27-28**. Jesus's single goal in life was to glorify God in the way God desired Jesus to do that.

I love the story of Jesus' temptation in the book of Matthew. I love it because Satan comes and offers Jesus three specific temptations each promising him something which Jesus was seemingly lacking at the time.

In the first temptation Satan comes to Jesus and offers Jesus a confidence in his divinity. In a world where no one is believing in Jesus, Satan tells him that if he turns these stones into loaves, then you will know you are the son of God.

In the next temptation Satan offers Jesus vindication. The very Jews Jesus came to save had rejected him, but if Jesus threw himself off the temple and was carried off to safety by angels, then certainly his public claims to be Messiah would be vindicated as everyone see him being saved in such a manner.

And in the final temptation, Satan offers Jesus the world. Bow down and worship Satan, get your worship, skip the cross. And Jesus again turns it down.

Would Jesus have sinned if he turned stones into bread or threw himself off the temple mount? I don't know? But what I do know is that he didn't do any of these things Satan wanted him to do. Why? Look at what Jesus says to the devil at the end: **Matthew 4:10**.

What bound Jesus was the purpose which God sent him for. He was sent to serve and worship his father and because he had such clarity, he was able to succeed in the face of temptation. He was bound by God's plan.

The truth is, for each and every one of us, this life will test us. It will test you precisely where you seem weakest. It will test your singleness, your sexuality, and your capacity for joy. And if you don't have a clear understanding of what you are called to do, you too will remain lost.

Jesus was bound by his task to bring about salvation, and because of that we too have been given a bigger purpose in life. A purpose which rescues us from a sexuality first mindset and brings us the anchor which Jesus himself had. **1 Corinthians 6:19b-20. Isaiah 43:6-7.**

You, as an individual, at the most basic level, regardless of your relational status were made to glorify God. You were made to see him as beautiful and to make him known in your world. That is what you were made for.

Jesus was the only sinless individual. Jesus was the perfect man. Jesus was the most joyful single person. Why? Because he so clearly saw the whole of his life through the lens of obeying and glorifying God in all things.

So if he is the focus for singleness then the charge or paradigm we view our singleness in is this: **Singles are called to give their lives to the things Jesus gave his life for, for nothing glorifies God more than Christlikeness.**

If you want to find value and meaning in singleness, you must look to Jesus. If we are to glorify God, and if Jesus is the one who glorified God the most, then we should live like Jesus.

Now how do we do that? Does this mean that instead of trying to please culture or my potential partner now I just have to please God with my performance? Isn't this just another burden?

That's again where the gospel is different. Because Jesus was not only the model of a perfectly satisfied single life in obedience to God. He did all of that for you because you couldn't do it.

None of us on our own, could do what Jesus did. We cannot glorify God rightly because we are broken. We cannot obey him perfectly because we are sinful. We see him as beautiful because we are blind to him and we cannot enjoy him as lovely because we are separated from him.

Jesus endured the temptations of the flesh and the demands of culture because we couldn't. Jesus found identity in his sonship because we were unable to. Jesus lived perfectly because we needed him to.

We can never understand ourselves or find peace in our lives until we first see that Jesus was the ultimate single person. He lived what we couldn't live and died the death we should have died so that we can have what we never deserved. And he has solved all the problems the world tells us we have: Jesus is the outside influence which brings us satisfaction. Jesus is the one we were waiting for. Jesus was the one who would fix the broken longings of our heart.

Why wouldn't we want to give our lives to his glory? Our worth isn't ultimately in what we can do for Jesus. It's in what Jesus has done for us. Why wouldn't we want to model our lives around that glory so that people could see the beautiful sacrifice of Jesus?

Jesus doesn't save us from singleness. He redeems our singleness. That's because at our core, the greatest problem we have wasn't that we were single, it's that we are sinful, and Jesus delivered us from that. You don't need anything else to do what Jesus has called you to do.

Your job, what you were made for was to worship and enjoy Jesus. And you are not handicapped by your singleness to do that. Where in your life do you live like there is something that needs to be overcome in your world which Christ has not overcome on the cross?

One of the major themes of 1 Corinthians is that of spiritual gifts. And the same word Paul uses to talk about spiritual gifts he uses here when he talks about singles and married people: **1 Corinthians 7:6-7**. Paul says it might be good if everyone were single like me, but I also know that God has gifted some people singleness and others have been gifted with marriage.

God has given you the gift of singleness right now and he expects you to steward that by giving your life to the things Jesus gave his life for. Use your free time and your excess income to build up the church, to help others follow Jesus, to call others to the gospel, to do good works which bear witness to the kingdom of God. If singleness is a gift do not waste it. But pour yourself out and find the process richly satisfying.

The idea of glorifying God and serving others is the building block upon which we are to consider marriage and parenting. If you are married or a parent, or a grandparent, and your goal in life isn't to live like this, then you've probably turned your kids or your spouse into a functional savior. You need to come back here.

It might be you feel crushed in your marriages because you are hoping your spouse or your kids will save you, but they won't. We must see that it is only Jesus and his glory which frees us from this mindset.

If we want to be a healthy church we must learn to prioritize the glory of God and the good of others first and foremost or we will be fundamentally broken in whatever stage of life we are in. We can't all be a church of single people, but because of what Jesus has done on the cross we can all be a church of a single mind seeking to give our lives over to the glory of God because that's how Jesus saved us.

