

17. Learning to Minister to the Unmarried

In our last topic, we saw that we are to help our children learn to accept the background that they have experienced and learn to use the things from that background to help them in their ministry. In our topic today, we are going to see that Paul also answered questions about those who are unmarried to help them learn to minister effectively from their singleness. That will be the focus of our topic today.

Paul pointed out in the beginning of 1 Corinthians 7 that marriage is good and singleness is also good. In 1 Corinthians 7:25-27, we read, “Now concerning virgins: I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy *has made* trustworthy. I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress--that *it is* good for a man to remain as he is: Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife.” As we look at the last verses of this chapter, we see that Paul explains why singleness is good.

Here, we see that Paul pointed out that singleness was good because of the present distress. Paul was already experiencing persecution and he saw that persecution could easily come against the entire church. Religious persecution was coming from the Jews and false religions. Severe persecution from the Roman emperor against the church began about ten years later. Acts 17:10 tells how Paul and Silas had to flee persecution. That verse says, “Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.” A single person could flee much more easily. A person with a family would find it much more difficult to have to escape during the night. Paul said that those who were married should not seek to become single. However, for those who were still single, Paul said that the situation at that time would be easier for those who were single.

Paul gave a second reason for singleness in 1 Corinthians 7:28. That verse says, “But even if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Nevertheless such will have trouble in the flesh, but I would spare you.” Paul began by making it clear that it was not a sin for a person to get married. However, Paul said that those who marry will have trouble in the flesh. The word that is translated “trouble” is usually translated “*tribulation or affliction.*” Paul used this word in Acts 20:22-23 where we read, “And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me.” Paul knew that he was going to face various pressures. In the same way, marriage will add certain conflicts to a couple because they have to learn to adjust to each other and they may have come from very different backgrounds.

Paul gave a third reason for remaining single in 1 Corinthians 7:29-31. Those verses say, “But this I say, brethren, the time *is* short, so that from now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none, those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, those who buy as though they did not possess, and those who use this world as not misusing *it*. For the form of this world is passing away.” Here, we see that Paul reminded the Corinthians that the time is short. As Christians, Colossians 3:2 tells us, “Set your mind on

things above, not on things on the earth.” Our time here on earth is short and we are to use our time wisely for the Lord. Those who are single are able to use more of their time to focus on the things above because they do not have family responsibilities.

In fact, the shortness of time on this earth and the importance of putting the Lord first will affect everything that we do on this earth. As verse 31 says, “For the form of this world is passing away.” 1 Corinthians 3:13-14 says this about our works on this earth, “Each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on *it* endures, he will receive a reward.” If we are single, we can devote our time to those things that are eternal. If we are married, we should devote our time as a team to those things that are eternal. If we want eternal rewards, we want our works to stand when they are tested and that causes us to change our priorities while we are here on this earth. That will be true also as we go through times of sorrow or rejoicing.

In fact, as a result of the shortness of time on this earth, Paul encourages us not to place our focus on the business of this earth. Many Christians, both single and married, can become so focused on the business of this world that they neglect their spiritual ministry. That is why Paul warns here of the danger of focusing on possessions. Christ said in Matthew 6:19-21, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Earthly possessions can easily be misused and cause us to neglect spiritual ministry.

Paul goes on to point out a fourth benefit of singleness for ministry. 1 Corinthians 7:32-35 says, “But I want you to be without care. He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord--how he may please the Lord. But he who is married cares about the things of the world--how he may please *his* wife. There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world--how she may please *her* husband. And this I say for your own profit, not that I may put a leash on you, but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord without distraction.” The word that is translated “care” means *to be free from concern or anxiety*.

The person that is not married does not have to be concerned about providing for the needs of a wife and children. As a result, such a person is able to devote his time to pleasing the Lord. In contrast, a person that is married has to be concerned about providing for the needs of his wife and children. In fact, 1 Timothy 5:8 says, “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” As a result, every husband is responsible before God to provide for the needs of his wife and children. That is a part of his witness to the world around him.

Paul goes on to point out that a wife also has certain responsibilities that a single woman does not have. As a result, the unmarried woman is able to be holy in both body and spirit. This reminds us of the fact that an unmarried woman does not have to deal with all of the responsibilities that go along with a husband and a family. A married woman is concerned how to please her husband.

As a result, a single woman is able to serve the Lord without distraction. This makes it possible for a single woman to devote her life to ministries that might be impossible for a woman with a husband and a family.

In 1 Corinthians 7:36-38, we go on to read, “But if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin, if she is past the flower of youth, and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes. He does not sin; let them marry. Nevertheless he who stands steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but has power over his own will, and has so determined in his heart that he will keep his virgin, does well. So then he who gives *her* in marriage does well, but he who does not give *her* in marriage does better.” In the city of Corinth, some of the fathers had apparently dedicated their daughters to the Lord so that they could remain as virgins permanently.

However, as those daughters became mature adults, some of them wanted to get married. Here, we see that the fathers of those daughters who wanted to get married are instructed to allow those daughters to marry. Paul wanted the fathers to understand that it was not a sin for them to allow their daughters to get married. They could still serve the Lord as married women. In contrast, some of the daughters had no strong desire to marry. In that case, the fathers were free to allow them to remain single. A daughter who wanted to devote her life to serving the Lord without the additional responsibilities of marriage was to be allowed to devote her life to serving the Lord as a single woman. As a result, we see that both a married woman and a single woman could serve the Lord with their lives.

Finally, 1 Corinthians 7:39-40 says, “A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But she is happier if she remains as she is, according to my judgment--and I think I also have the Spirit of God.” Here, we see that a marriage is to last until a partner dies. Both husbands and wives were to realize that if they were married that they were to serve the Lord as married partners until one of them died.

If a partner dies, a person is then free to remarry. However, there is no requirement that a person must remarry if the partner dies. In fact, Paul said that many women will be happier if they choose singleness after their partner dies. That will give them the opportunity to serve the Lord without the responsibilities of a marriage and caring for a husband. As we look at this chapter on marriage, we see that marriage is good. We also see that singleness is good. When people become Christians, they need to realize that they can serve the Lord effectively whether they are married or single. We want to help our physical and spiritual children know how to help both those who are married and those who are single learn how to serve the Lord effectively. The Lord will greatly use their ministry as they are able to answer the questions of others about marriage. May the Lord richly bless you as you equip your children to help others serve the Lord.