

Better Not?

Matthew 19:1-12, Part 3

8 August 2021 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: Is singleness a better option than marriage?

Big Idea: Singleness has advantages over marriage, if you can accept it.

Introduction

Singleness isn't a word that we use all that much and when we do, too often it's in hushed tones like we're talking about an embarrassing disease.

For some people, being single seems like a stigma that makes them feel alone, rejected and worthless.

Others feel very differently about singleness though.

There's no one-size-fits-all approach to singleness because there are many people who don't just feel comfortable, but revel in their singleness.

While there are a range of feelings and responses, we also need to recognise that singleness is a reality for a significant number of people.

One in four of the houses on your street will be single-person households, according to Australian data from 2017.

It can sometimes seem like everyone's married and that there's no place for singleness.

Not only is that just not true, it can't be true because singleness is a reality for so many people.

As we've been talking about marriage and divorce over the last couple of weeks, perhaps you've felt left out of the conversation once again.

Well, it shouldn't surprise us that the Master Teacher, Jesus, speaks to singleness as well.

Outline

We're looking at Matthew's gospel again this morning as we continue follow Jesus' ministry as presented to us in Matthew's biography of his life.

This part of the gospel sees Jesus leaving Galilee (where he did most of his ministry) and heading to Jerusalem where the cross awaits him.

The chapters in this section of story show us Jesus heading towards the cross.

They're the prep for his great achievement of defeating sin and death.

We're looking at these same twelve verses for the third time this week.

You might remember that some Pharisees came to Jesus with a question that they thought would test him and probably hoped would get him in trouble.

In verse three, we read:

Matthew 19:3b NIV11 They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

Jesus answered their question by taking the Pharisees back to the beginning, reminding them of how God planned marriage to be from the very start.

God made human beings male and female, both in the image of God.

And in marriage, God takes one man and one woman, and he joins them together for life.

Jesus’ conclusion is that what God has joined together, human beings shouldn’t tear apart.

What about singleness then?

We’re going to see that both singleness and marriage are good and valid ways to serve Jesus.

One’s not better than the other, but singleness offers some advantages.

The big question that Jesus is addressing is, “Is singleness a better option than marriage?”

The big idea is that **singleness has advantages over marriage, if you can accept it.**

- A Better Option?
- A Better Option for Some
- Thinking Wisely about Marriage

A Better Option?

Remember that it was the Pharisees who asked Jesus the testing question that kicked this whole exchange off.

We know that they asked a follow up question, but what we don’t know is how they ultimately responded.

The Pharisees have kind of melted away into the background and it’s Jesus’ own disciples who respond to what he’s said in verse ten.

Having heard how Jesus answered the Pharisees’ question, they’ve come to the conclusion that it’s better not to get married.

Matthew 19:10 NIV11 ¹⁰ The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”

God’s plan for marriage isn’t that you just get out of a marriage for any and every reason, whenever you feel like it.

Marriage is a special and unique union that's formed by God that human beings mustn't tear apart.

Even though you might go through the right procedure in divorcing your wife, Jesus says that it's not legit to then go and marry another woman.

In fact, Jesus goes so far as to say that would be committing the sin of adultery.

The only exception he gives is if there's sexual immorality during the betrothal period before the marriage has actually been finalised.

That's a really high view of marriage.

Certainly a higher view of marriage than most of the popular positions in Jesus' day and undoubtedly a higher view of marriage than we see presented in the media we consume.

Marriage is such a significant commitment because it's a lifelong commitment.

Commitment-phobes need not apply.

If that's the situation between a husband and a wife, the disciples conclude, then it's better not to marry.

If you can't get out, then it'd be better not to get in in the first place.

Jesus' view of marriage takes a bit of the shine off for anyone who thinks that they'll just give it a go and it doesn't really matter if things don't work out.

It closes down the idea that marriage is worth getting into because you've always got an exit route.

I think that the disciples are intimidated by what marriage means.

Their response shows us just how seriously Jesus takes marriage.

They thought what Jesus said was hard.

If you found last week's talk intimidating, then you're not alone – I didn't either and neither did the disciples.

However you understand verse nine, if it doesn't leave you at least considering whether singleness is a better option, then perhaps you haven't understood what Jesus said like the disciples did.

We need to understand how significant it is that the disciples were even considering choosing singleness as an option.

Such a choice would've been unthinkable to your average Jew because celibacy just wasn't an option in their culture.

It was considered a man's religious duty to pass on the faith to the next generation.

And yet the disciples concluded that singleness mightn't just be a valid option, but a better option.

Did you notice that Jesus doesn't tell them that they're wrong and they've misunderstood?

He doesn't start telling them how wonderful marriage is: being able to take a long walk in the rain before snuggling up under a blanket in front of a warm fire together.

He doesn't try to convince them that having someone to watch a beautiful sunset with and share your hopes and dreams for the rest of your life together is better than being single.

What Jesus says is so different from the belief that the only way that you'll be happy is to be married.

Or, as human beings apply it, that the key to happiness is finding the right person to be in a relationship with.

Jesus' words were so radical that they brought out a radical response in the disciples.

They concluded that singleness is a good option and Jesus agrees.

Singleness isn't a second-class situation, as people sometimes think of it as.

I think that many of us would make John the Baptist, the apostle Paul and Jesus himself blush if they were standing next to us when we said what we really think about marriage and singleness.

They were all single and lived full lives.

And yet so often, we think that we can't.

We're not matching up with the Bible if we're so pro-marriage that we make singleness seem like it's second-class.

Marriage is a high calling, but not a HIGHER calling than singleness, which is a high calling as well.

If we're tempted to think that singleness is second-class, remember that singleness is in all our futures, even if we're married.

Marriage isn't forever, it's not ultimate.

A marriage between a husband and a wife ends when one spouse dies.

In Matthew 22:30, we find that there won't be marriage in heaven.

I take it that's because it won't be needed.

Ephesians 5 tells us that marriage points to the union between Christ and the church.

That pointing won't be needed anymore once we're in heaven, united with Jesus forever.

Singleness is a good option.

A Better Option for Some

If singleness is a good option, does that mean it's a better option?

Jesus says that singleness IS the better option for some people to choose.

While Jesus doesn't disagree with the disciples' conclusion, he does say that not everyone can accept it.

As good as singleness is, not everyone can or will choose to be single.

Verse eleven:

Matthew 19:11 NIV11 ¹¹ Jesus replied, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given.

What exactly is the "word" that not everyone will accept?

It could be what Jesus has said about marriage and divorce in verses 3-9.

While it's true that not everyone accepts what Jesus said, it's not because what Jesus said is optional.

The word that not everyone can accept is the conclusion that the disciples came to in verse ten – that it's better to be single than to be married.

Not everyone can accept singleness, but what Jesus has to say about marriage isn't optional.

Jesus starts talking about eunuchs in verse twelve.

Eunuchs are people who don't have either the equipment or drive for a marriage relationship.

By their very nature, eunuchs aren't married but chaste, single people.

There are some who don't get the choice to be eunuchs.

Some people are eunuchs by birth, born without a clear gender or with both male and female organs.

The effects of the fall mean that some people are born with physical deformities or hormone imbalances that mean that they can't have a typical sexual union.

One of the very few good things that's come out of the current gender mess is that people who are intersex and asexual have had their humanity affirmed, rather than being treated like freaks as they often were in the past.

Some men became eunuchs by being forcibly mutilated by other people.

In ancient cultures, eunuchs were often welcomed into the leader's inner circle because they could be trusted.

They were particularly used to work with the king's wives and concubines in the harem.

Sometimes they become eunuchs voluntarily, but slaves and captives were also forced to undergo the procedure by their masters.

But there's another group of people, Jesus says, who CHOOSE to live like eunuchs.

It's this group who choose a life of singleness that Jesus is focusing on.

They're the type of eunuch that describes the position that the disciples are advocating.

Those who choose singleness.

This is a surprising category of people because in the Old Testament, there was a stigma with being a eunuch.

It was a shameful position because they weren't allowed to be priests¹ and they weren't even allowed into the Lord's Assembly (Deuteronomy 23:1).

Their brokenness was a sign of sin and judgement, but there was hope for eunuchs.

Isaiah looked forward to the time that they would come into God's place along with all the nations and find blessing.

Isaiah 56:5 NIV11 ⁵ to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever.

And so you get the Ethiopian eunuch who comes to worship in Jerusalem in Acts 8.

This group of eunuchs that Jesus is talking about – those that choose to live this way – aren't people who actually mutilate themselves though.

They choose to live LIKE eunuchs.

Jesus' words shouldn't be a motivation to get out a knife and undergo a painful procedure.

He's talking about single people who live singly!

Recognising the temptation and devastating effects of adultery, Billy Graham didn't give himself the opportunity to sin in that way by having a rule of trying to never be alone with a woman who wasn't his wife.

Origen went one step further.

Origen was a Christian pastor who lived in the early third century.

He was one of the greatest theologians of his time.

He took matters into his own hands by castrating himself so that he could teach female students with integrity.

He was a good theologian, but he badly misapplied this particular passage.

Why would anyone want to wear the sacrifice and shame of choosing to be single?

At the very least, people would think there was something wrong with you, possibly even morally wrong.

It makes me wonder what people's attitudes were to Jesus.

Why would you give up the companionship of having a spouse?

Why would you voluntarily give up the blessing of having children?

Is it only crazy cat ladies who aren't looking to get married?

I can think of some good reasons for staying single that Jesus DOESN'T mention.

We live in a different cultural context where singleness might be a good thing for various reasons.

For example, you might have a genetic condition that you don't want to pass onto the next generation.

Or perhaps you've got some really complex health needs and you know that you just don't have the capacity to be a good spouse.

That's a wise reason to be single.

Of course, there are bad reasons for being single too.

Some people want to be single so that they can be selfish.

They don't want the responsibility of a spouse and children.

In the age of Tinder and friends with benefits, they want some of the blessings of marriage without any of the commitment, not realising that they actually lose out on many of the benefits that commitment brings.

Singleness isn't shameful as long as you're not using it for selfishness.

But Jesus gives one particular reason for being single in verse twelve.

A good reason to be single is for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

A good reason for choosing to be single is for the sake of the gospel.

Paul talks about the advantages of being single when he writes the Corinthians, noting that the married person's interests are divided.

1 Corinthians 7:32–34 NIV11 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.

Marriage takes time and energy.

And it means that our interests are divided from being able to focus on the gospel in the same way due to family responsibilities.

Sam Allberry is a pastor who's single and he writes about some of the benefits: he's able to travel, be more flexible to respond to people's needs and can live differently all because he's single.

Being single has allowed him to be free to serve God more fully.

That's all very well if you CHOOSE to be single, but what if you don't?

What if you're single not because of choice, but because of the circumstances?

You're single because you're waiting to meet the right person and it's just hard to meet the right one.

Or there are demographics working against you since there are usually more women than men in churches.

If I said that you should use your singleness for the kingdom, you'd probably tell me that I'm crazy.

You might think, "That's all very well. You're married."

Yep, that's the pastor's dilemma.

If you're a single pastor, then married people think you don't understand and if you're married then single people think you don't understand.

But I'm saying that you should be using your current situation to serve Jesus as best you can.

Living for the kingdom is really what we should all be doing, isn't it, whether we're single or married.

Being single for the kingdom might seem crazy, but I don't want to be heard saying that ONLY single people need to live for the kingdom.

See, here's the rub.

I'd suggest that being single for the kingdom sounds crazy because being married for the kingdom seems just as crazy.

Paul has a word for married men that many would find utterly shocking:

1 Corinthians 7:29–31 NIV11 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.

Those who have wives should live as if they do not.

I take that to mean that they should put the kingdom above family.

This isn't some extra high standard for single people.

Some people have the gift of marriage and some people have the gift of singleness.

There's great advantages to singleness, but only if it's the gift you've been given.

It's not for everyone.

Paul wished that everyone was single like himself, but recognised that it's not for everyone.

1 Corinthians 7:7 NIV11 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.

Some have the gift of marriage and others have the gift of singleness.

Singleness is therefore better for some.

Thinking Wisely about Marriage

Jesus says that not everyone can accept this word though.

Not everyone will think that it's better to be single than to be married.

What if that's you?

Then you need to think wisely about marriage.

There are lots of reasons why someone might be single.

You might be single because you've never been married before.

If that's you, then I think that Jesus' words mean that you need to think about whether you should get married or not.

Can you serve Jesus better by being single or by getting married?

Our Christian subculture has some really strange defaults when it comes to marriage and singleness.

It's scandalous that most of us don't really choose to get married.

I don't mean that we don't decide that we're going to get married to a particular person on a particular date.

Actually, I'm not completely opposed to arranged marriages either.

I mean that we don't really consider singleness as a live and valid option.

We don't really even ask the question and often no one encourages us to.

Singleness is just kind of the fallback position when everything else doesn't work out.

Coupling up isn't the only option.

Paul says that getting married isn't sinful, but he thinks that there's great advantage in being single.

If you haven't ever been married before – teens, I think that includes all of you – this's something you should make a conscious decision about.

The only question isn't WHO you should marry, but WHETHER you should get married.

1 Corinthians 7:28 NIV11 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.

If you don't think that you've got the gift of singleness and you're hoping that you'll be married in the future, the Bible sets the bar quite low when it comes to the requirements for getting married.

There are really just four criteria for a potential spouse.

That they're:

- Free to marry
- A human being who's not a close relative
- Of the complementary gender
- Christian

However, beyond that, we enter the realm of wisdom.

There are people that you get on with better than others.

Given your mix of background, personality and preferences, there are some people who it'd be easier to be married to than others.

While any two Christians who meet those four criteria could make a marriage work (and I've seen that in an arranged marriage before), there's wisdom in considering compatibility given the high view of marriage that Jesus gives us.

Who you marry matters.

Think about whether being married really is the best way of serving the Lord.

It's been said before that who you marry will double or halve your ministry.

That doesn't just apply to people who do ministry as their job, but it applies to every Christian.

There are all sorts of criteria that we have for getting married, even if we don't know it.

You might think that the most important thing about getting married is that you're in love.

Or you should get married because you've conceived a child or are hoping to conceive a child together.

The reality is that often at the top of the list is the fact that she's hot or he's successful.

Nothing wrong with any of that, but it shouldn't be top of the list.

You might be looking for someone who's drop dead gorgeous or someone who's successful.

But as certain as death and taxes is that life's full of change and drama.

Looks will change with age and success can easily crumble in an instant.

How do I know who's right to marry... what sort of person?

Even as Christians, we often get the priorities around the wrong way.

Godliness should be the biggest part of why you're getting married.

Having the same life goals, desires for family and approach to finances are all important, but not as important as them being Christian and serving the Lord together.

And what makes you think that they're a Christian?

If she's hot, it might seem good enough to you that she's stepped into a church once in her life.

But how are you going to be able to serve the Lord together?

That's what a Christian marriage is about.

But enough about the person you're going to marry, already.

There's a fairly common idea that you need to find "the one".

The much more Biblical idea is on BEING the one.

If you're single and you'd like to get married, then work on being the person you'd want be married to.

How are you working on your own godliness and character to become the person your spouse should want to marry?

Maybe you're single because your spouse died.

If that's the case, then you're free to get remarried.

The only requirement is that you get married to a Christian.

But Paul says that might not be the best thing to do and that you should still consider remaining single.

Despite the assumptions that many of us have, you might even be happier that way.

1 Corinthians 7:39–40 NIV11 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.

Another reason you might be single is that you have been married but you're divorced from your spouse.

The question for many single people is, "How quickly should you date again?"

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul comes to the conclusion that the marriage bond created by Jesus is so important, that it mustn't be separated.

If a wife does separate, she must remain unmarried or reconcile with her husband:

1 Corinthians 7:10–11 NIV11 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.

If that's you, you can ask the same question we should all be asking: "How can I use my situation for the sake of the kingdom?"

We buy into the idea that the only way to be happy is to be married, which we know just isn't true.

Don't believe me?

I saw a Christian lady from Sydney who's divorced recently write, "I am single for Jesus and one of the things about that is that it makes me happy. It is a sacrifice, but it is not a miserable sacrifice."²

If you're single, think wisely about marriage.

Conclusion

Both marriage and singleness have great value in Jesus' eyes.

They're different, but both good and valid options.

Both marriage AND singleness will work for some and not for others.
Singleness has the potential to free you up to serve in different ways.
Remaining single is a good option, a great option, for those that can do it.

But regardless of what state you're in or want to be in, living to God's glory is the point.

It's the same question for all of us: how can I serve Jesus best?

Sam Allberry writes, "The issue is not whether this path or that path is better, whether singleness or marriage would bring me more good. The issue is God and whether I will plunge myself into him, trust him every day."³

Let's ask for God's help to do just that.

¹ Leviticus 21:20

² Ruth Baker, 'Declaring Myself Single', The Gospel Coalition | Australia, accessed 7 August 2021, <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/declaring-myself-single/>.

³ Sam Allberry, *7 Myths about Singleness* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2019), 149.

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Introduction

1. What are some reasons for a Christian being single?
2. Why do the disciples think that it's better not to marry?
3. What is the 'word' that not everyone can accept in verse eleven? What other possibilities could there be?
4. Why might we conclude that Origen misunderstood this passage?
5. What does it mean to "live like a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom"?
6. What are some good and bad reasons for being single?
7. What should someone do if they can't accept the disciples' conclusion?
8. Explore 1 Corinthians 7:8-11, 25-38, noting the verses that are relevant to singleness. How do these help fill in what Jesus has said?