

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 September 2021

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] I worship you.

and the kingdom of God, and this is the last part. I began last week's sermon by speaking about the immediate setting of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians chapter 7.

And tonight I want to begin by setting the kind of wider context of Paul's words. And as I do so, it's a bit of a reminder, I hope, of where we've been in this series. So Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 7, he's very conscious of how God made the world.

He speaks with a deep awareness of what God created and what God said in the beginning. And one of the wonderful things about the Bible is its profound coherence.

It's not when you come to the Bible you infer one worldview from Genesis, and then you come to the New Testament and you get a completely different worldview from 1 Corinthians. The Bible is not a collection of multiple perspectives on life.

[1 : 24] Rather, the Bible is a coherent story that contains a coherent theological framework. And within that framework, we find the true picture of ourselves, and we find God's truth for us in things like marriage and singleness and in belonging to the kingdom of God.

And that's why this sermon series has deliberately not given you a range of perspectives from which you can choose, but rather a total picture of what all the different parts and thoughts teach you.

That's been my aim, at least. And what I'm reminding you of here is that 1 Corinthians 7 is building on Genesis chapter 2. Paul's teaching reminding us that God made the world.

But secondly, I want to remind you that 1 Corinthians 7 also comes to you in the context of the authority of Jesus. I should have told you there's an outline at the back of the sermon. That'll help you follow me tonight. And not only is Paul's writing consistent with creation, it's also consistent with the words of Christ.

So week one, we looked at Genesis chapter 2. And Jesus drew on Genesis chapter 2 when he taught us about marriage and singleness in God's kingdom. And now Paul builds on Jesus' words too.

[2 : 40] In Matthew chapter 19, do you remember, we listen to the voice of God's Son. And it's because he is the great Son of God that Jesus' words come to you and I with great authority.

We listen to Jesus and we honor his words because he is our Lord. And Jesus was the Apostle Paul's Lord too. And so Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7 are set in the context of Jesus' words and Jesus' authority.

But thirdly, I want to remind you that Paul's word, the Apostle Paul's word, have authority too. It is an authority derived from Christ's authority. It's not independent of it. And it is an authority that Jesus invested on all his apostles, of which Paul was one.

And so we read his words in that context too. In fact, Paul draws our attention to it. Do you remember from verses 10 and verse 12 last week? How Paul distinguished between the words that he received directly from Jesus and his own words.

It would be a mistake to conclude that those words therefore come with different authorities. They don't. Jesus Christ gave the Spirit to his apostles that when they speak, they would speak and write what is true.

[4 : 01] And so when we listen to the Apostle Paul's word, it is as though we are listening to the words of Christ. And to submit to their teaching is to submit to Jesus. And that's why Paul says in verse 25, which we've just read tonight, that even though he has no direct command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.

He says something similar in verse 40 if you look there. And again, he underlines that his judgment is from God's Spirit. So God's judgment is not merely an option, but it's a divinely inspired word given for our instruction and benefit.

And so I hope we come to Paul's words tonight, which are quite shocking, with an attitude of submission. Ready to hear what God has to say. So what do we find Paul saying in the second half of this chapter?

Let's look and kind of go through the chapter. First of all, verse 25 to 28, it's a paragraph that he addresses to virgins. And Paul's focus here is on those single people who've never married. And Paul's encouragement to these people in Corinth is to remain as they are. And he says in verse 26, because of the present crisis. What does he mean by that?

[5 : 20] What crisis is he referring to? I think this is probably a reference to the difficult circumstances that all believers face in the last days.

Remember the last days? The time from Christ's ascension, resurrection and ascension, is the time when Christ comes back. The battle of sin. The challenge of doing God's work in a hostile world.

I think he's saying something similar in verse 29. He talks about the time being short. And so Paul goes on to say in verse 27 that if someone is bound to marriage, they shouldn't break it off.

But if they're not committed in that way, they shouldn't seek marriage. He's very quick to underline the point that marriage is not sin. Verse 28. If you do marry, you've not sinned.

And if a betrothed woman marries, she's not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles. And I would spare you that. And so Paul is really keen to underline the freedom of all to marry.

[6 : 25] Despite the fact that this second half of the chapter is a sustained testimony to the value of singleness. Paul doesn't want his words to be misunderstood. He doesn't think that unmarried Christians must remain unmarried.

His advocacy for singleness is not a command. It's not a matter of obedience if people do not heed Paul's encouragement to remain single.

You've not sinned. And that's such an important point that he comes back to it again. But nevertheless, he does encourage, doesn't he, the person who is never married to stay as they are. Well, he says he wants to spare them those troubles that married people face.

Well, in verses 29 and 35, Paul then expands on the thought of the previous paragraph. And here he takes the encouragement that he's given to virgins and he applies it to all the Corinthian church and to all of us.

And he says, verse 29, the time is short. These are the last days. Jesus will come back soon. Which means that there's no guarantee of a lifetime for anyone.

[7 : 34] Jesus says, do you remember, he'll come back like a thief in the night. And I guess if time was short in the first century, well, it's at least even shorter now, isn't it?

He says in verse 31, can you see that? The world in its present form is passing away. And so in this paragraph, he counsels those who are married to live as if they were not. Those in grief, as if they were not.

Those who were happy, as if they were not. Those with possessions, as if they were not able to keep them. And those engaging with the world, as if there's no reason to be engrossed by it.

Now, of course, Paul doesn't mean these things in an absolute sense. I don't think he means, if you're married, just spend all the money in the joint account. Plan a holiday without your spouse. Move out to get a flat of your own.

It's ridiculous, isn't it? In fact, in the next paragraph, to make it really clear, that husbands and wives should be invested in pleasing with one another. Pleasing one another. Caring about each other. And we know from his writings elsewhere, Paul knows full well the real place of grief.

[8 : 43] And the real place of joy. And he knows about using possessions for good purposes and working diligently in the world. So I don't think he's saying that Christians should just forget about these things altogether.

But he is saying that there's a sense in which these things should be held on to lightly. Because the world is passing away. The things of this world should not be our primary focus.

Or our attention. And he considers marriage to be one of those things. Of the world that is passing away. And he learned that, of course, from Jesus, didn't he?

Which we saw in Matthew 19. Just a couple of weeks ago. In Matthew 22, actually. That there'll be no marriage in heaven. And on that basis, he finds it very easy to see the benefits of being

unmarried.

Because the unmarried person can be more focused on the Lord's affairs. Verse 32. On how to please the Lord. The unmarried person doesn't get anxious about married life.

[9 : 49] And so they can be anxious about the things of God. They can be devoted to the Lord in body and in spirit. Devoted to the Lord's work. Devoted to obedience.

Devoted to the Lord's word. And so Paul runs out his paragraph in verse 35. And I think it's quite possible that he's not just saying that we should stay single.

So that we can be undivided in our devotion to God. Rather that everything he said up to this point is for all believers. Single and married.

That they might live in a right way. Let me read to you verse 35 again. I say this for your own benefit. Not to lay any restraint upon you. But to promote good order. And to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

Well then Paul has a paragraph. Doesn't he? Verses 36 to 8. And here he echoes what he said earlier. He addresses somebody who's engaged. And he feels it would be improper to not go through with the wedding.

[10 : 54] Especially if that person's got strong passions. And into that situation Paul encourages the person to go through with it. Once again he stresses it's not sinful for you to get married.

You're free to do so. But in verse 37 he also says that somebody who makes the opposite choice also does right. If the circumstances are different.

And he doesn't feel compelled to proceed to marriage. He enjoys good self-control. Paul affirms the decision not to marry. I think Paul's notion of Christian freedom is really, really helpful to us.

It's very striking. It's a challenge to those of us who love things to be black and white. And we like rules about everything. And in these verses Paul can say two opposite responses to the same dilemma.

And both are right. He says they're both pleasing to the Lord. And it's because Paul has a very, very high role for Christian conscience. It's one of the things I want to look at over the next year with you.

[12 : 02] On decision making. So consistent with what Paul has already seen in this, we've already seen in this passage. Paul summarizes in verse 38. He says, so then he who marries his betrothed does well.

He who refrains from marriage will do even better. And finally in verses 39 and 40 there's a word addressed to a woman after the death of her husband. And it continues with the same theme, really.

It reminds us that marriage means being joined to your spouse until parted by death. And he's underlining, isn't it, what we've seen each week, that marriage is lifelong.

But if a woman's husband dies, she can marry again freely. Providing, do you see it, her husband is in the Lord. It's very important. But once again, Paul recommends, isn't he, remaining single.

He thinks she'll be happier if she does so. And Paul's judgment is that that will be the path to greater blessing. And once again, you see the really careful balancing act of the apostle.

[13 : 08] Paul says, on the one hand making the case for the benefit of singleness, but on the other hand saying you're perfectly free to marry. So, let's try and summarize what we've taught, looked at this evening already.

This passage teaches us, let's start with the freedom to be married. And I want to point out three things that the apostle says about marriage.

And this is the first of them. It's really obvious, it's not sinful. Now, at one level, that's a really strange thing for the apostle Paul to say, especially in the context of what we've seen in the other sermons of this series.

Paul himself, in this chapter, if you look at verse 7, calls marriage a gift. The gift of God, he knows that God made marriage for intimacy. And fellowship from the very beginning. He knows the very high esteem that Jesus held marriage in.

So, of course, it's not sinful. It is an immense blessing. And Paul would definitely affirm that. But it's in the context of the second half of chapter 7 that Paul feels that he's got to stress this.

[14 : 24] He makes such a strong case for the benefits of singleness that he thinks it's important to say it. And so he does. He says it in verse 28. He says it in verse 36.

And he says it in verse 39. There may be moments when a marriage, in particular circumstances, may be sinful.

But in general terms, it's not. It's certainly not for a young Christian person who's never been married before to marry another believer. That is never sinful. And any Christian in that situation ought to feel a great freedom to get married. That's the first thing.

The second thing Paul says here is that marriage is troublesome. Look at verse 28. Those who marry will face many troubles in this life. Marriage is marked by conflict.

[15:27] By anxiety. By the burdens of responsibility. Sometimes by boredom or disappointment. Often by the stresses and strains of caring for children.

Marriage is marked by the niggling frustration of living with differences. Marriage is marked by the constant reminder of your own selfishness. By the persistent need to bear with the failings of another.

By painful repentance. By difficult forgiveness. Marriage also is marked, isn't it, by sharing in all the sufferings and all the sadnesses of a spouse. As one writer puts it, a married couple have become too exquisitely tangled with one another to be safe from one another.

That's brilliant. A marriage, you're too tangled with one another to be safe from one another. And of course, I need to say singleness can be marked by those things too.

And it's also true that marriage in many ways is deeply joyful and deeply satisfying. But that isn't Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 7.

[16:37] Paul's point is marriage means trouble. And I think it's a really biblical perspective that we don't hear often enough. Might I suggest that it's a perspective on marriage that most married couples are not brave enough to share very regularly either.

But I do think our church would be better off if our marriage couples shared more of their troubles as well as their joys. If we did that, the other married couples might stop thinking that it's only them that are having a hard time.

A generous honesty. Can I call for that? And if we did that, I think single people might be given a more true picture than the one sometimes we project.

And it is, of course, true, as we've seen many times, that unmarried are deprived of something good. That's something that we've affirmed over and over again in the series. There is a righteous reason why many people, many single people, desire marriage and many grieve at not being married.

But that isn't the whole story. And here Paul wants to say that in part the single person is better off. In part they're not missing out. And it's important, I think, that we tell the whole story about marriage.

[17:59] We must foster in our church and in our denomination a vision of marriage that foregrounds rather than overlooks how demanding marriage is.

It's very important that we demonstrate the kind of fallacy of the Disney happily ever after story that dominates our culture. It's very important that we're honest that Mr. and Mistress Mouse is a fairy tale.

It's important that we teach our young people that marriage is not primarily living blissfully with your soulmate. It's primarily a workshop of sanctification.

It's fundamentally a lot of hard work. To use Paul's words, trouble. And the third thing that Paul says is marriage is full of concern. And in many respects, that is very similar to the point of being troublesome.

So I'm only going to speak about it briefly. But I think Paul's point is saying something different. He is saying that not only does marriage bring trouble, but by its very nature, it's distracting.

[19:13] That's what we see in verses 32 to 34. It is right, it says there, doesn't it, if you look, for a man to seek to please his wife and for a woman to seek to please her husband. Now that may not feel troublesome at all.

In fact, as part of God's good purposes, that is what ought to be part of what makes marriage delightful. But nevertheless, it is an investment in something that is passing away with the world. It's a concern that by its very nature deflects people from other concerns. From what Paul calls here the Lord's affairs. It is not possible to be radically devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit, as Paul says here, if you are married.

Not in the same way that a single person, an unmarried person, is able to. And we have to hear Paul here. It is a fact of married life that marriage is full of godly but distracting concern.

And so some of the examples in church history of people who are held up as heroes because they did so much for the Lord actually were terrible husbands.

[20 : 30] You have to see that. And they did not live faithfully as husbands. And on the day of judgment, the Lord will ask them about how they were as husbands. So what about singleness? How do we summarize what Paul's insights are into singleness in this chapter?

And again, three points. It's the first or the flip side of what Paul said about marriage. So number one, singleness is less troublesome than marriage. Verse 28, Paul says, the person who is unmarried will be spared of many of marriage troubles.

Of course, you're not spared troubles altogether, are you? Life is full of trouble. Suffering does not discriminate between those who are married and those who are single. Paul reminds us that there are some troubles that are special domain of the married person.

And the single person is free of those. The single person in many ways is unencumbered by those issues. And I think that is in part what the disciples had in mind. Do you remember Matthew 19.10? Remember they reflected back to Jesus that perhaps singleness would be preferable. To marriage. Jesus has set such a high bar for marriage. Well, is the singleness better?

[21 : 42] Marriage brings with it certain troubles. And so by contrast, singleness is less troublesome. But number two, the single person can be undivided in their devotion to the Lord. The single Christian is not bound by the commitments of marriage and therefore is free.

But of course, they're not free to please themselves. They've been bought at a price. Do you remember that from last week? They belong to Jesus. So the single person is free to please him. Now, I don't actually think that Paul's distinction here is fundamentally about time.

There's a lot of that in kind of books on marriage and singleness. That the single person has more hours in the day for the Lord than the married person does.

I'm not sure about that. I'm not even sure it's about opportunities. I don't think he's imagining that all the single people go off and be missionaries and do all the kind of summer camps and kind of beach missions and the married people stay at home and they look after each other.

But married people can become missionaries too. And no doubt there are certain opportunities, aren't there? Maybe some sort of kind of time issues that come into it.

[22 : 52] But I don't think that's Paul's main concern here. It seems to me about the core thing that Paul is saying, and the word that's key is concern. It's about a person's attention, their cares, their focus.

It's what we would call today, I think, headspace. I think Paul is saying that the unmarried amongst us have the headspace that a married person doesn't have.

They have the headspace to consider God's interest first and foremost. The single person has the headspace to care in a more focused and undistracted way about pleasing the God who saved them.

Of course, it's not automatic. It is quite possible for a single Christian to not even be remotely devoted to serving the Lord.

Listen to the words of one Christian writer on this. A single person is not necessarily a sign of the kingdom. If he's tangled in his longing and sense of loss.

[23 : 59] But a single person can demonstrate with a remarkable clarity that he knows the reason he was created to love and serve God and him only. If that singleness of vision, that purity of heart possesses him and shows itself in his purposeful service of others.

And his preoccupation with prayer and worship. That he makes a radical statement with his life about the kingdom. I think that's what Jesus was talking about in Matthew 19, 12.

Do you remember where he spoke about the person who chooses singleness for the sake of the kingdom? And there are some people in churches today that have done that. They're not people who are not single before they get married.

Or they're single between marriages. Or they're single after marriage. But they're people who are single by choice. And there are some who've made that conscious decision Jesus spoke of. There are not many, sadly, these days.

And I wonder if there could be more. I wonder whether tonight the Lord is asking you to consider that. And if you say no to that question, I wonder what would stop you considering it.

[25 : 11] But even when somebody hasn't consciously chosen singleness for the kingdom, Paul's assessment still applies. Whilst ever a person is single, they have the potential to fill their

headspace with the Lord's concern.

With an undivided devotion to him. If they so choose. And if they do that, they'll not only live productively for Jesus. But they'll also point all Christians, whether single or married, whether young or old, to the things that matter most.

By their undistracted devotion to Christ. They will prioritize the future over the present. The kingdom of Christ over the cares of the world. But... You see, the Bible teaches that God uses marriage, doesn't it?

To point us to the nature of Christ's relationship with the church. It's one of the beauties of marriage. That as you look at a godly marriage, you see a picture of Christ and his church.

But I also think that God uses Christ's devoted singleness to teach us to point to eternity. Eternity where there will be no marriage. But just Christ and people who love him with all their heart.

[26 : 20] And there'll be undivided devotion. And so in the present, they prefigure that undivided devotion of eternity. It's a great gift to the church, people like that, isn't it?

Christ devoted singleness. Our brothers and sisters who've chosen that remind us of what really matters. They remind us that marriage is not ultimate.

And that family are not ultimate. That leads me to point three. Better. The things that I've been describing leads Paul to claim that in these last days, singleness is better.

That's a word he uses in verse 30 and verse 40. The word he's using is happier, more blessed. And they are very striking words. He is not saying singleness is more righteous.

He's not saying that singleness is more godly. Both marriage and singleness are good and they are right. The Christian in Christ has freedom to walk either path.

[27 : 27] The freedom not to choose what Paul says is the better thing. And we have to remember that these words are not aimed at helping us to distinguish between right and wrong.

But they are aimed at helping you to distinguish between what is good and what is better. But what is clear is that Paul is not going to sit on the fence at this point. And he tells us plainly what he thinks. And he says singleness better.

Not in an absolute sense, of course. But when viewed from one crucial perspective, when it comes to what is best in serving the kingdom in the last days, Paul says singleness is preferable.

Now, my observation would be that at this point in history, the Christian church in the UK, that does not sit very comfortably with us.

And I think that a lot of times this sounds really counterintuitive and maybe unnatural, perhaps even impossible. And so I want to take a few moments to explore why that might be.

[28 : 28] Why does Paul's conclusion not come very easily to the UK church? Well, there are many reasons probably and many reasons why we might feel uncomfortable with this.

But there are some common reasons and I think there are three. One of them is that we hunger for the kind of intimacy that marriage seems to promise.

God made us that way. Part of what it means to be a human being is that we crave the company and the closeness of other human beings. And in marriage, we see the beauty and the desirability of a lifelong companion.

And a closeness that we believe will satisfy the great yearning that we were made with. And as I pointed out in previous sermons, the Bible affirms and says that it's a good desire.

But that is one of the reasons, perhaps the primary reason, why it can be hard for us to see singleness as better. Because it feels like for us marriage would be better.

[29 : 29] But of course, the second reason is our society keeps suggesting to us that marriage should be where we all lead ahead. We're under this implicit pressure all the time.

I think from popular culture, the happily ever after books and movies and magazines all seem to involve a wedding. And that implicit pressure, as you know, comes from our friends and from family who just see settling down and having a family as the most normal thing to do.

The most fulfilling thing for us to do. Sometimes that pressure becomes explicit, doesn't it?

Sometimes we have, people ask us, perhaps family ask us, when are we going to settle down and find a husband or a wife?

When are you going to produce some grandkids? And then on top of that, there's a third reason.

And maybe we struggle with Paul's conclusion. Because we feel some of the same pressure and temptation within the church.

Now, in many respects, I think IPC doesn't always fall into this trap. It's a church where there are single people of every age.

[30 : 44] And many have felt comfortable and normal. And yet, I think it is still possible for people to feel an implicit pressure in a church environment. That marriage is preferable to singleness.

Perhaps it's seeing a growing number of people in the church get married. And of kids. Perhaps it's a product of the way some single people have addressed their grief about singleness.

We are a product of the culture and the context in which we live. Here's a quote from a book that I've been reading. It landed a punch. The author says, We tend to think that the normal Christian life consists of a happy childhood, a dream wedding, a successful career, and a cozy retirement.

And there are plenty of churches where either the teaching promises these things, or the social background of the congregation leads people to expect that. It is possible, is it not, that some of the ways we express ourselves when it comes to talking about the normal Christian life might be more middle class than biblical.

So, if there's three reasons why I think we might find it hard to swallow Paul's conclusion about singleness, let me suggest three responses. Three antidotes.

[32 : 05] So, here are the three. Number one, retrain your desires. Number two, resist the world. And number two, reform the church. So, number one, retrain your desires.

And if one of the reasons why we find it hard to agree about Paul about singleness is because we desire and we think that marriage offers intimacy so deeply, then perhaps we need to retrain our desires.

Now, by this, I don't mean that we should suppress what I've said all along in this series, that there's a very healthy and there's a God-given desire for human intimacy and partnership. That desire is not wrong.

But I do wonder whether it looms larger in our hearts than any other good desire. And whether we need to nurture the desires of our hearts for other things a little bit more. By other things, what I'm talking about is what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7, the Lord's affairs.

And to be honest, I think this is a good question for married people to ask themselves, as much as single people amongst us. Do you crave the joy of intimacy with another human being? That's good. But how much do you pray for the joy of intimacy with God?

[33 : 23] How much do we want to spend our best energies in life growing our faith and making disciples and playing our role in Christ's church? How much do you want your life to be characterized by an uninhibited and an unwavering commitment to the work of Christ's kingdom?

Do you have deep desires for those things? Or are your desires for those things much weaker than your desire to be loved and to love? I want to come back to that.

Number two, resist the world. If one of the other reasons why we find it hard to agree with Paul about singleness is that we're so influenced by the way the world around us thinks, then perhaps we need to work harder at resisting the world.

We do need to constantly remind ourselves that the happily ever after narrative is a fairy tale. We need to get better at discerning how and when this narrative of popular culture influences us.

We need to get better at reminding ourselves that that narrative lies to us. So the modern British dream is a long way from the British version of life.

[34 : 43] And so we need to foster deep in our hearts the conviction that romance and sex and marriage are not the ultimate things. We need to believe very deeply that children are not our future.

Jesus is. And so when young Christian people find themselves just assuming one day that they'll get married they need to remind themselves that that is not a biblical perspective. And so when Christian parents say things to their kids like when you grow up and you get married we need to remind ourselves that it's not necessarily a biblical perspective.

And when married people speak of their marriage as if it's the greatest gift God has ever given them they need to remind themselves that is not a biblical perspective. Do you get the idea? We need to learn how to distinguish between the thinking of the world and the thoughts of God and to resist worldly thinking and grow in our affection for God's truth.

Number three reform the church. Because the third reason why we might find Paul's conclusion of singleness being better difficult to swallow is that our church perhaps gives the idea that marriage and family is that the expected thing.

So I'm going to say we need what I'm going to call a singleness esteem ecclesiology. I think that's original to me. Ecclesiology is a big theological word for church.

[36 : 08] And to my mind we need a church where singleness is highly regarded and where it's genuinely esteemed. What would a church be like like that? Well it would be a church which really believes that the family of God is the first and most important family there is.

It would be a church which honors friendship as much as it honors marriage. It would be a church that places a high value on the intimacy of Christian fellowship. It would be a church where those who choose celibacy are wonderfully sustained by depth of relationship in the community.

It would be a church which acknowledges that sexual purity is not simply a matter of an individual saying no to certain acts but actually it's a project the whole church family invests in together.

Thinking all the time how do I love the person who says no to a sexual relationship out of obedience to Christ. It would be a church that embodies the conviction that the choice between marriage and celibacy is not a choice between intimacy and loneliness.

It would be a church that doesn't confuse biblical values with family values. It would be a church where preachers address single people and their servants as well as those who are married and have children.

[37 : 28] It would be a church where single people are not seen as objects of charity. Where the unmarried are not kind of perceived as a special needs category. It would be a church where generous devotion to church ministry is not seen as a consolation prize for those who missed out on marriage but as the essence of a life well lived.

It would be a church where singleness is not seen as an unwanted gift like a call to some remote and difficult mission field. It would be a church where singleness voluntary singleness is not seen as the preserve of kind of the ministry elite but something that's entirely normal.

It would be a church where single people find their way into leadership and service. It would be a church when I take a big job in America no one would think it's strange if you call a single pastor.

It would be a church where people talk about the merits of singleness and where single people are encouraged to remain single. It would be a church where the prayers prayed perhaps especially for the children of the church reflected what Paul sees as the real superiority of singleness.

It would be a church where contentment in singleness is encouraged without making it sound like we're asking people to put up with something terrible. It would be a church where married people don't generally talk to their single friends about well they'd make a great husband or they'd make a great wife as if that's their most important need.

[39 : 06] It might even be a church where married people talk to their single friends with occasional envy and not envy of their tidy houses and free Saturdays and child free dinners but envy of their head space envy of their undivided devotion to the Lord.

That is my vision and I think that is Paul's the Apostle Paul's vision of a singleness esteeming ecclesiology. I need a better title for the book. It's not the kind of church I grew up in.

But it's definitely the kind of church I want to be part of. It's the kind of church I want my three children to grow up in. It's the kind of church I want for this city.

It's the kind of church I want for you. And so that brings me to the last stop in this sermon series and as we all breathe a collective sigh of relief. Point five, the kingdom of God, alright?

Because in the end what Paul says here about singleness won't make sense to you unless you've seen the kingdom of God in all its glory. Unless you get how important, how precious, it will feel unnatural to you. It will feel utterly impossible to you.

[40 : 16] But if what Paul believes about the kingdom of God is true, then that finally explains everything he says about marriage and singleness. And if you believe what he believes, you'll be drawn into the life that Paul commends here, whether you're married or single.

And so I want to finish tonight by pointing out to you how Paul describes that life in these verses. Look firstly at the as-if life. Here I'm thinking verses 29 to 31. Let me read them. This is what I mean, brothers.

The appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none. Those who mourn as if they were not mourning. Those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing. And those who buy as though they had no goods. Those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.

For the present form of this world is passing away. Marriage is passing away. But relationship with Jesus, the great groom, lasts forever.

Grief is passing away. There will come a day when there will be no more crying, no more tears. Happiness is passing away. And many of the things that delight our hearts now in eternity will seem cheap and unsubstantial.

[41 : 22] All that we've ever purchased, all that I've ever bought is passing away. And we look to a future filled with the solid things that Christ has purchased for us. The things that we fill our hands with are passing away too and one day will be utterly consumed by the worship of our Lord and his heavenly kingdom.

And Paul says, life ought to be lived in the light of those things. Marriage ought to be conducted as if there are things more lasting and more precious than it. Grief ought to be felt like it's not always going to be with us.

Happiness should be enjoyed but not like it's the greatest goal of life despite the way our society incessantly talks about it. We should shop like we're filling our homes but not filling our futures or our lives.

We should work and rest like life consists of so much more. That is the as-if life. And in the light of the shortness of time, it is the life that every Christian is called to.

And when we're called to that life, we're not called to live in some sort of spiritual fantasy land, we're actually called to live more in line with reality than any other alternative. The as-if life, secondly, the pleasing life.

[42 : 42] Verse 32, I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. That's the kind of life that a single person has which is an advantage in living.

It's what Paul says, it is nevertheless the life that all believers are called to, like we saw in verse 19. Keeping God's commands is what counts. It's echoed again here in verse 34, where Paul talks about the person who is devoted to the Lord both in body and in spirit.

And when you've come to see that the kingdom of God is the ultimate thing, then your great preoccupation in life will be pleasing the Lord. And that's what I hope when it comes to the end of my life, people might say of me, and I hope they'll say it of you too.

That in a world that's obsessed with marriage and family, in a world that is obsessed with singleness, Jesus says, step away from those concerns. There's something weightier. He calls you to live for something that lasts forever, the pleasure of our Father in heaven.

And if we live for that, then we'll live the life of undivided devotion, as Paul says in verse 35. If you've seen the kingdom of God, then you will know that is the surpassing goal of life whether you're married or single.

[43 : 56] And if you've met Jesus the King, you will know that that is the life's highest calling. If you've grasped Christ's undivided devotion, the life that he lived in perfect obedience to God and the death that he died in humble submission to God's saving purposes, the majestic life that he was resurrected to, if you were to grasp that, then living a life of undivided devotion to him will seem like the most natural thing in all the world.

So that dream, that British dream of spouse, a couple of kids, restful retirement, compared to the Bible's version of life, what is it?

Don't get sucked in by it. Instead, bind yourself to the story that God is writing in the world. It's a story in which Jesus is the bridegroom and his people are the bride.

It's a story in which the bride is loved in such a way with generosity and power that her life is utterly and permanently transformed. It's a story in which the bridegroom gives himself up for his bride and he makes her holy and he cleanses her and he presents her to himself without blemish.

And it's a story which in the end culminates in a wedding banquet that will make the best party you can imagine like pass the parcel. And it will be never-ending days that stretch out from there.

[45 : 23] It's a story that's bereft of the tears of death and of mourning and of pain. Brothers and sisters, that is the story. And all the other stories here are pale imitations.

This is God's story and our lives have been caught up in it. And we can live like that. We can be thrilled to be part of it or we can get distracted by other stories. We can live for the ultimate thing or we can live ultimately for things that don't matter.

You can't do both. And I hope that's become clear to you over the last four weeks. If you're living for the kind of dream of the UK then you're distracted from the kingdom.

Because the only way to live rightly is in undivided devotion for the Lord. Get married by all means, alright? Enjoy marriage. Be single if you can, even better. But don't be defined by those things.

Don't live for them. Live for Jesus. Because he's the only one who's worth it. Will you be devoted to him without inhibition, without hesitation?

[46 : 32] Will you see the kingdom of God as the only ultimate thing and live for that kingdom?

That's my prayer for me and that's my prayer for you. Paul says, I'm saying this for your own good.

Not to restrict you, but that you might live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord. Let me pray.