

The background of the entire page is a dark, moody photograph of a person's hands holding a cup. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the skin and the rim of the cup. The overall tone is intimate and contemplative.

# MM

MARRIAGE MATTERS  
*POINTERS*

**BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE  
ON SINGLENESS**

**A FOCUS ON MARRIAGE AT FELLOWSHIP**



# SINGLENESS: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

## HOW SCRIPTURE CHALLENGES OUR CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT SINGLENESS

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By Albert Hsu

Donna, a 40-something college professor who had never married, was a member of her church's music ministry. One December, her church prepared a short take-home worship service to be used on Christmas morning.

The pastor explained from the pulpit that this service was to be a family observance, with parents lighting candles and reading blessings. No mention was made of people living alone or singles living with roommates.

"Where do singles fit into this?" Donna wondered to herself. She felt hurt and overlooked. The implication seemed to be that only married couples with families could properly celebrate Christ's birth.

At the beginning of the 20th century, about 95 percent of the adult population in America was married. Life expectancy in 1900 was only 47 years, and most people married in their teens. Divorce was nearly unheard of, and those who were widowed remarried quickly. So for the most part, being an adult was synonymous with being married. Being single was by far the exception. As a result, most churches spent most of their time and resources ministering to the needs of married couples and families.

At this end of the century, however, the landscape is quite different. Now nearly half of the adult population is unmarried. About 45 percent of today's adults have never married or are divorced, widowed, or separated. One in four adults has never married. People are staying single longer, no-fault divorce laws are available in every state, and rising life expectancies mean that widows and widowers often remain unmarried longer after the death of a spouse. Now, singleness is almost as likely to be the current status for American adults as marriage.

However, the church has been slow to give more attention to the experiences and needs of single adults. Single adults make up only 15 percent of the average

evangelical church. This means most churches are failing to reach a significant segment of their surrounding community.

But many Christians are not yet convinced that their local church should focus more resources on ministry to single adults. A significant barrier to ministering to single people is the view that it is somehow "more Christian" to be married than to be single.

Biblical teachings actually challenge this all-too-common assumption. Jesus revolutionized the relationship between those who are married and those who are single. The gospel brings a new dignity to single persons, valuing them equally with those who are married.

### OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

In Old Testament times, being single was viewed as abnormal and unwelcome. Like most of the ancient world, Israelite society was a patriarchal culture centered on family clans. People derived their identity from belonging to a family by blood or marriage.

More significantly, God's people had not yet received clear assurance of an afterlife. Old Testament Jews had no guarantee of a resurrection; they only knew that at death they descended to Sheol, the grave. In the Old Testament mindset, the way to eternal life was to have descendants who would remember you and bear your name.

This is why Old Testament narratives often place great emphasis on children, especially firstborn sons. Barrenness was a curse because it meant familial extinction, the end of a family's identity and existence. For example, in Genesis 30, Rachel is distraught that Leah is able to have children while she cannot. This could have meant that Jacob's children would be remembered as the children of Leah, while Rachel would be forgotten. This prospect was so distressing that Rachel says to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!" (Genesis 30:1). So the curse of being single was not only that one had not married, but more significantly, that one did not have children to carry on the family legacy.

Though Israelite society as a whole disregarded the single person, God used many singles in His purposes. Many of the prophets were single, such as Elijah, Elisha, and Daniel. God commanded Jeremiah not to marry or have children (Jeremiah 16:2) as part of his prophetic testimony, perhaps as a public sign that Jeremiah was placing his trust in the Lord alone, not in a spouse or family. God also promised Old Testament singles that He would remember them even

though they did not have families or offspring. He says to single women, “More are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband” (Isaiah 54:1), and to single men, “To them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons or daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off” (Isaiah 56:5). So by no means did God withhold blessings from His followers because they were unmarried. On the contrary, He gave singles specific assurance that their memory would never be forgotten.

Though God clearly cared for singles, Jewish attitudes against them had grown harsh by the time of the New Testament. According to rabbinical teachings, Jewish men were required to be married and beget children. One rabbi taught, “Any man who has no wife is no proper man.” Another claimed that if a man reached the age of 20 and had not yet married, God declared, “Blasted be his bones!” All religious leaders, including priests and Levites, were married. For a rabbi to be unmarried would have been unthinkable.

## **JESUS: THE REVOLUTIONARY SINGLE**

Jesus came into this Jewish culture and shattered all its prejudices. His teaching and His very identity were revolutionary. Not only was He Himself unmarried at the age of 30, He also proclaimed radical teachings such as, “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage” (Matthew 22:30). In other words, He declared that marriage is not an eternal state. The biological family is only temporary.

Jesus proclaimed that instead of having eternal life through sons to carry on the family name, people would gain eternal life through following Him. More important than having a biological family was being in the eternal family of the church.

Jesus created a new family in His disciples, saying that whoever did the will of the Father in heaven was His brother and sister and mother (Matthew 12:50).

Jesus’ message was so radical that following Him even took priority over marital or parental relationships. Those who left parents, children, or spouses for the sake of the kingdom would receive much blessing (Luke 18:29–30). While Jesus was not advocating the abandonment of marriage or family responsibilities, He made it clear that following Him was more important than even the dearest of human relationships. Far more important than the question “Are you married or single?” is “Are you a follower of Jesus?”

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day presumed that only those who were Jewish, male, free, and married were acceptable to God. They despised Gentiles and

Samaritans, scorned slaves and women, and had no place for single people. But Jesus inaugurated a new society in which one’s status before God was not dependent on earthly distinctions of race, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic or marital status. All who would believe, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female—and married or single—could now find salvation through Jesus.

Jesus befriended and ministered to many who were single. A number of key people in the gospel accounts were probably single, including John the Baptist, Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan woman at the well, the widow of Nain, the woman caught in adultery, and the thief on the cross. All were welcome in the kingdom of God.

## **SINGLENESS AND THE CHURCH**

The Apostle Paul points out that singleness provides practical opportunities and advantages over marriage. He says, “Those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this” (1 Cor. 7:28). An unmarried person is “free from concern” and able to be “concerned about the Lord’s affairs” without having his or her interests divided (1 Cor. 7:32–34). We see this in the lives of Paul’s missionary coworkers such as Silas, Luke, Timothy, Titus, Apollos, Lydia, and Phoebe, all of whom were probably single. Acts 21:9 mentions Philip’s four unmarried daughters, who all participated in a prophetic ministry. In the New Testament, married couples such as Priscilla and Aquila are the exception, not the norm.

Without demeaning marriage, the New Testament gives a new dignity to singleness. Both states are now equally valid ways to serve God. If the Old Testament seems to value marriage more than singleness, the New Testament brings them onto an even level.

The church has not always been faithful to this biblical perspective. The early church and medieval Catholicism overemphasized singleness, presuming it to be more spiritual or more holy than marriage. This resulted in the Catholic doctrine of clerical celibacy. On the other hand, most Protestant churches have overemphasized marriage and the family, believing singleness to be an unnatural state. This has resulted in modern evangelical movements that emphasize marriage and family concerns to the exclusion of singles.

Today we need to rediscover the balance of valuing both marrieds and singles. Some of the greatest leaders of church history lived their whole lives as singles: Saint Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila, Thomas à Kempis, Bernard of Clairvaux.

More recently, Protestant leaders such as Methodist circuit rider Francis Asbury, missionaries Amy Carmichael and Helen Roseveare, and German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer were all single. C. S. Lewis was a bachelor for most of his life, married at age 57, was married for only four years, and remained a celibate widower after his wife's death. British theologian John Stott, now in his 70s and never married, has had a significant worldwide ministry. Mother Teresa spent seven decades serving the poor in India as a single woman.

A truly Christian view of singleness and marriage will honor both without disparaging one or the other

## **A CHALLENGE**

The church can best reflect a biblical perspective on singleness and marriage by encouraging all believers to live out the Christian life in their current state. Rather than pushing singles to get married, churches should help singles develop a healthy understanding of singleness, in which one does not need to marry in order to serve God or follow Jesus.

The Christian world offers plenty of books and seminars to help married couples work out marriage problems. But we don't assume that because some marriages have problems, marriage is a bad state. Rather, marriage is a setting that can be transformed by the redemptive power of Christ. In the same way, the church can help singles face the challenges of being single in today's world.

Whether you're single or married, it takes real commitment to live an authentic Christian life. *The challenge for all Christians—single or married—is to make a success of the single life if single and to make a success of the married life if married.*

One is not better than the other; both have advantages and disadvantages. Whichever one you happen to be, do your best to be a good steward of that gift.

Following Jesus means that some things in life are more important than marital status. But as Christians, we should not think of ourselves primarily in terms of our relationship with another person, even a spouse. Whether we are single or married, our primary identity is as followers of Jesus Christ and members of the household of God.

