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All By Myself - Part 1

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The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier

John Stott examines the two statements of scripture: "It is not good for the man to be alone" Gen.1:18 and "It is good for a man not to marry" 1 Cor.7:8 and gives a frank and Biblical view on singleness.

Transcript

[Music] We are not to regard singleness as a curse from which we long for escape into the blessing of marriage. Nor are we to regard marriage as a curse and singleness as a blessed freedom from it. Neither is a curse.

Both are blessings. Each is a love gift from God.

[Music] Welcome to the Bible for today with John Stott.

The 20th century gave us a number of great evangelical Bible teachers, and for many, John Stott stood above them all. Perhaps no one raised the standard of biblical teaching as did Stott. It was Jesus Christ that he made preeminent in all his teaching.

Whenever he preached his home church of all souls, Lang and Place, it was packed. During John Stott's centenary, we are bringing you some of his finest Bible teaching from almost 60 years of ministry.

[Music] The Bible is full of valiant people as well as ordinary people who had to face everyday struggles.

Their struggles with life are not overlooked in Scripture and are lessons from which we can learn. Today, Christians have to face difficult issues, unemployment, sickness, unfaithfulness, sexuality, persecution and death. John Stott tackled issues facing Christians head on in his sermons, and today we will hear the first part of a message he gave on this often neglected subject of singleness.

We need at the very beginning to remember that singleness includes several categories

of people, not only those who have never married, but those who have been married, have been separated or divorced or abandoned or of course widowed. All such people can rightly be described as single people, all who for whatever reason have no partner with whom to share their lives. And I think you'll agree with me that there is an increasing number of single people for a wide variety of reasons in the Western world today.

I don't quite know why Richard Bue's, in setting the topic, gave me the title all by myself, and I haven't unfortunately had the opportunity to ask him, but I guess knowing his wizardry, that it is a deliberately ambiguous title and that he intended it to have a do-blown torch, because the words all by myself could be either a celebration of an achievement of some kind, you know, I did it, I made it all by myself I did, or instead of a celebration it could be a lament of my loneliness. Everybody ignores me, nobody loves me, I'm all by myself. It's interesting, isn't it, I versatile the English language is, and how the very same words can have all most opposite meanings.

So whether our words are an appeal for congratulation on the one hand or for sympathy on the other, they remind us that people react to their singleness in a wide variety of different ways. For some people, singleness spells freedom and opportunity to serve the Lord in ways that would not be so easy if they were married. But other people singleness means pain.

The pain of unrequited love, the pain of solitary sexual struggle, the pain may be of rejection, and sometimes the freedom and the pain intermingle. So it's a very important subject, it touches us at a very sensitive place, many of us who are single here tonight. I want to begin with two biblical affirmations whose similarities I hope you will agree could not possibly be a coincidence.

I'm not asking you to turn to them at the moment, we'll come to a text later that I will ask you to turn to. But here are the two biblical affirmations, Genesis 2, 18, it is not good for the man to be alone. 1. It is good for man not to marry.

Well, both these texts are about marriage and singleness. Both declare something that is good or that is not good. But in Genesis, God says that singleness is not good, and in 1 Corinthians 7 he says that it is.

So how do you react to an apparent discrepancy? Drop the apparent discrepancy like that. Do we conclude the Bible is full of contradictions as you always suspected it was? No, I hope that is not your conclusion, certainly isn't mine. Then as an alternative do we take refuge in the fact that the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 was answering questions that the Corinthians had asked him, and we don't know what those questions were or why the Corinthians asked them.

No, I think that's a cop art. So thirdly do we argue that Paul was not actually giving his

opinion in 1 Corinthians 7:1, but quoting their opinion, which is how Oregon and some of the early interpreters understood it, said that we read now concerning the questions that you were asking. For example, quote, "It is good for a man not to marry." No, I think that's a little far-fetched.

So if you reject those explanations of the discrepancy, what's left? What's left is to say they're both true, and although they appear to be contradictory, they are actually complementary. Notice this important thing, the same adjective, good, is used in both verses. It's a Greek word "kalos," and in the Septuagint the Greek version of the Old Testament in Genesis 2:18. It is also "kalos," and "kalos" doesn't mean good in the sense of morally good.

It means good in the sense of beautiful, noble, and fine. So what Scripture gives us in these two verses, Genesis 2:18, 1 Corinthians 7:1, is not a moral judgment. Marriage is good, singleness is evil, or singleness is good, then marriage is evil.

Doesn't a moral judgment of good and evil? It's a value judgment of what has worth and nobility. And putting the two verses together, we want to say both states are good, in the sense that they are noble, beautiful, and pleasing to God. Marriage is good, but singleness is good.

And since both of them are good, we must never affirm the goodness of the one in such a way as to deny the goodness of the other. Now, both are good. In fact, why don't you turn to 1 Corinthians now, if you kindly will.

In verse 7, having expressed his personal wish that all well like himself, he goes on with this very important statement. "Each has his or her own special gift from God." One of one kind, marriage, one of another, singleness. So both states are good, and both states can be gifts of the grace of God.

In fact, the Greek word, therefore, his special gift is charisma. We're all familiar with the charisma term, which means something rather different, that charisma is a gift of God's grace. Marriage is a gift of his grace, singleness is a gift of his grace.

Both are good, both are gracious gifts of God. So we're not to regard singleness as a curse from which we long for escape into the blessing of marriage. Nor are we to regard marriage as a curse, and singleness as a blessed freedom from it.

Neither is a curse. Both are blessings. Each is a love gift from God.

Well, that's the introduction. Now, I hope you're ready to do a little bit of study tonight, because I think it's very important for us to get a biblical perspective on singleness. And I want to plot out the territory that I hope will cover if we have time.

Firstly, I want us to look at the teaching of the Bible as a whole, just get a little overview

about marriage and singleness. Second, we're going to look at the teaching of Jesus on singleness, and thirdly, we're going to look at the teaching of Paul on singleness, and then I have a multiple conclusion. Actually, fourfold if there's time.

So first the teaching of the Bible is a whole, because it's very important for us to know the whole Bible. Many, many, many of our troubles arise, because we only know bits and pieces of the Bible. And then we find all sorts of conflicts and problems, but we need to learn to read the whole Bible, to understand the whole Bible, and to synthesize the teaching.

Well, if we do it, there is no doubt, whatever, that marriage is God's general will and purpose for human beings. Sexuality is a divine creation. Genesis 1, God made man, male, and female in his own image.

Marriage is a divine institution. Genesis 2, therefore a man shall leave his parents and cleave to his wife, and sexual intercourse is a divine intention. Genesis 2, 24, there shall become one flesh.

So there in sexuality, marriage, and intercourse, you have a divine creation, a divine institution, a divine intention, and with that background, in Genesis 1 and 2, the Earth Testament glorifies marriage and the family. Indeed, God's promise to Abraham that through his posterity all the families of the earth would be blessed could not have been fulfilled. If it wasn't for marriage and sexuality and sexual intercourse and the precreation of children, so God's whole historical purpose depends upon marriage and upon the precreation of children.

Jesus endorsed the truths of the Earth Testament, and indeed, particularly Genesis 1 and 2 that I quoted when he said what God has joined together, let no human being separate. Then the apostles went on to teach the duties of husband and wife, parents, and children, and Paul says that the love of husband and wife is a dim reflection of the love of Christ for his church and vice versa. And in Hebrews 13 verse 4 we read that marriage should be honored by all, including single people.

If marriage should be honored by everybody, then it should be honored by those of us who are single as well. When Paul assumes in the pastoral epistles that pastors will normally be married, since he says they should be married only once and have children who are well behaved and believers. Now that's a very quick perspective, if you like, of the Bible.

Marriage is the general will and purpose of God. Sexuality, marriage, and intercourse are all the good gifts of a good Creator. At the same time, all their marriage is the general will of God and singleness therefore the exception that does not mean that singleness is an unmitigated disaster, or even that it is the second best.

How can I affirm that so confidently? Well for this reason, Jesus was single. Of course in the nature of the case he had to be as the son of God, I have no doubt. But I need to remind you, Jesus is the perfect exemplar of a human being.

And therefore, if Jesus is the perfect human being and Jesus was single, it is possible to be single and human at the same time. Indeed more than that, it is possible to be single and fulfilled as a human being simultaneously. Singleness is good.

It's a gift of God's grace to some. Well that is the first part of my address, the teaching of Scripture. Just as a little overview.

Now let's come down to something more particular. Would you mind turning back to Matthew 19 and come to the teaching of Jesus on singleness? And after his teaching on marriage and divorce, in answer to a question from the apostles, he said verse 11, not everybody can receive this saying. I think it means a saying he's about to speak, although there's controversy there, but only there is to whom it has been given.

I think that is what Paul is echoing in 1 Corinthians 7-7 when he says that it's a gracious gift, a charisma. God gives marriage to some, he gives singleness to others, and singleness here is for those to whom it has been given. But there are eunuchs, and I don't think he is literally referring to those who physically eunuchs.

Most modern English versions translate those who are either incapable of marriage or have not married, and I will take it like that. So there are some who are incapable of marriage and have been that way from birth. And then there are others incapable of marriage who have been made that way by men.

And then thirdly, there are those who do not marry because they have made themselves that way for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it. So Jesus very clearly there says that some people are called to singleness.

Singleness is a gift and a calling to some, and he gives three reasons, three categories, and we better look into them, I think, a little bit more. A, there are those who are born that way. In other words, they have a congenital condition that makes it either undesirable or maybe even impossible for them to marry.

It might be a physical defect, for example, in their sexual organs. It might be a disease which could be inherited if there were to be children of a union. Or it could be a psychological disorder such as a homosexual orientation or for that matter a bisexual orientation in which the desire for the opposite sex is not great enough to be a sufficient basis for a stable marriage.

Those who are born that way. Secondly, there are those who are made that way by men. In their case, what inhibits marriage is not an internal condition, whether physical or psychological, but an external situation of some kind that imposes singleness upon

them.

Again, it might be a physical or psychological handicap caused in their case not by birth, but by an accident, or in some cases by inhumane, cruel treatment, maybe torture, for example. It might be a circumstance like a single girl called to look after her elderly parents who are failing in health and reaching the end of life's journey. And her brothers and sisters are married and have their own families.

She is the only person who could look after them. And therefore she does not feel free. This circumstance more or less imposes singleness on her.

She doesn't have freedom to marry. Or indeed, it might be a person who hasn't met the right partner who has never been proposed to or never proposed himself or herself. I know it tends to be a bit reciprocal these days.

Or it might be a person whose fiance died or broke the engagement. And to after that has never felt free to marry anybody else. You see, there are a number of external situations that seem to impose singleness on some people.

Then see the others who've made themselves single who have renounced marriage deliberately for the sake of the Kingdom of God. That is in the service of the Kingdom of God. Because they have been called to some demanding work in which marriage would be in expedient and singleness would be more expedient.

It might be somebody called to be a Christian worker where the church is oppressed or persecuted. And then a spouse and family would be in hardship and even in danger. It might be somebody called to an itinerant ministry in which spouse and children would need to be left behind and therefore conceivably neglected.

It might be somebody called to serve in a situation in which there are simply no funds available to support a spouse and family in addition to him or her. It might be somebody called to a demanding service that requires total commitment and would be incompatible with alternative or rival commitments, for example, to a spouse and family. So you see, here are people who deliberately make themselves single and renounce marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

And Jesus concludes the one who can accept this, should accept it. In other words, if the cap fits, wear it. If you belong to one of these three categories, embrace singleness as God's good gift and calling.

So we move from the teaching of the Bible as a whole to the teaching of Jesus on singleness. Now we need to look at the teaching of Paul on singleness, therefore we conclude. We turn back to 1 Corinthians 7. We've already seen that the chapter does present special problems to the interpreter because Paul says he is answering questions that the Corinthians have addressed to him and we don't know, at least in any detail,

what those questions were.

But I want to ask you tonight straight away that Paul makes several statements which color his teaching about marriage and singleness. Please follow in your text. 1st, 1st, 26.

He refers to what he calls the present distress. Greek word present could mean impending or present. It probably means both.

It's about to come and has already begun and distress could be translated crisis as in the new international version, but it's some particular situation to which he is referring. 1 Corinthians 7, 29. He says, "I mean brethren, that the time has been shortened laterally." Then there's 31 at the end, the form of this world is passing away.

Now notice those three statements, they're very important. He refers to the present distress, the shortened time and the transient nature of the world. You've been listening to the first part of a message by John Stott on Singleness which will be concluded next week.

This was the first of a series of sermons on sexuality, marriage and divorce. He gave it all souls church which you can hear by going to their website. John Stott often preached on tough subjects and many of these messages formed the basis of a very popular book he wrote called Issues Facing Christians Today.

It's the recommended book this week on our website where you'll find new material is regularly added for this John Stott's Centenary Year. Just visit premierchristenradio.com/JohnStott The legacy of John Stott lives on and is growing, touching every level of society across the world. Today Christian leaders throughout the majority world are being equipped to provide pastor training and resources in their own countries thanks to the vision of John Stott who donated all his book world is to support this ministry through Langham Partnership.

To find out about this and other ministries John Stott founded go to premier.org.uk/JohnStott Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for Today with John Stott.

[Music]

(dramatic music)