



*7 Myths
about
Singleness*

Sam Allberry

“Sam Allberry flushes out the several hidden, barely conscious assumptions about singleness and celibacy that control our attitudes toward single living. Once he makes these assumptions visible, he uses the Bible to dismantle them and show us a better way. It would be a great mistake, however, if we were to think this is a book only for singles. If Sam is right—and he is—the entire church must understand the biblical teaching on this subject. The local congregation must be not merely a loose network of families but a close-knit family itself, consisting of both married couples and singles, all living together as brothers and sisters. This volume will show us how to do that.”

Timothy J. Keller, Pastor Emeritus, Redeemer Presbyterian Church,
New York City

“*7 Myths about Singleness* offers a refreshing, biblical perspective on an oft-neglected topic. Allberry writes to remove the stigma from the idea of singleness and to help Christians think biblically about the callings of singles within the body of Christ. This timely resource will benefit the church for years to come.”

Russell D. Moore, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty
Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“*7 Myths about Singleness* makes the glory of Jesus, a single man, more obvious in ways helpful to us all. Sam Allberry opens our eyes to how we can better understand ourselves and one another, how we can better steward our married or single lives, and especially how we can stop chasing the myths that break our hearts. He does this by showing us more of Jesus where it can be hard to find him—in the real lives we are living right now. So this married man was turning these pages thinking, “*I need this. I am helped by this!*” I think you too will be helped.”

Ray Ortlund, Lead Pastor, Immanuel Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“Far too often, the church regards single Christians as people who need to be fixed or fixed up. Sam Allberry provides a pastoral guide to correct this and help the church live like the family of God. I am grateful to God for Sam Allberry and for this new book!”

Rosaria Butterfield, Former Professor of English, Syracuse University;
author, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*

“Sam Allberry, in true form, doesn’t waste a single word in *7 Myths about Singleness*. His tone, structure, humor, and biblical undergirding make this book one of the best on the subject in recent years. Not only has Allberry thought hard about the subject of singleness; he has lived it and continues to glorify Christ in it. Too often, books on singleness still make marriage—or at least becoming marriageable—the point. There is none of that in here. Instead he dissembles the lies in which the unmarried can find themselves trapped, showing the abundant life Christ offers to every single person. People often ask me for the best book on singleness, and I’m grateful to have finally found one.”

Lore Ferguson Wilbert, author, *Handle with Care: Why Jesus Came to Touch and How We Should Too*

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For

Brian and Leslie Roe and Daniel and Sarah Roe,

Dan and April DeWitt,

Tim and Kathy Keller,

Ray and Jani Ortlund,

with thanks for giving me a key, making me a part of
your family, and giving me a home away from home

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Introduction

It turns out there are many things we don't know quite as well as we think we do.

One of the most popular comedy shows in the United Kingdom is *QI* (short for "Quite Interesting"). Each week the panelists are presented with interesting and little-known facts to discuss. Part of the show is dedicated to "general ignorance," things commonly assumed to be facts that are actually untrue. You do not, it turns out, have two nostrils, but four (two of them you can't see). Mount Everest, it turns out, is not the tallest in the world (it is the highest, but not the tallest). King Henry VIII did not, it turns out, have six wives (it's complicated). The earth, it turns out, does not have just one moon (there are all sorts of other nonman-made things floating around us that technically count as moons).¹ And so it goes on. Oftentimes, it seems, we know a good deal less than we think.

This is true not just of mountains, moons, kings, and nostrils but of singleness as well. Much of what we commonly assume to be the case with singleness is either flat-out untrue or, at the very least, really shouldn't be true. Almost all these things are negatives about singleness, as we shall see. In much of our thinking, singleness, if not downright *bad*, is certainly not seen as good. One writer has noted the difference between

Christian books on marriage and those on singleness.² In the books on marriage, marriage is assumed to be a great thing, and all that remains is to understand it better and perhaps be aware of one or two potential pitfalls that might arise. But books on singleness typically have a different starting point. Singleness is assumed to be pretty much awful; the point of the books is, therefore, to see if we might be able to eke out something just about tolerable from it.

Even the way we describe singleness reflects this. It is almost always defined in the negative, as the absence of something. It's the state of not being married. It is the absence of a significant other. This defining by negation reinforces the idea that there is nothing intrinsically good about singleness; it is merely the situation of lacking what is intrinsically good in marriage.

I often see this when people are having some sort of introductory conversation. When someone asks, "Are you married?" or, "Do you have family?" and we answer in the affirmative, the person asking is delighted, and it sparks a fresh round of discussion about how you and your spouse met or the age of your children. But when answered in the negative, people often don't quite know what to do with it, and the conversation grinds to a halt. Marriage is a conversational intersection, with all sorts of interesting avenues of discussion. Singleness is more of a conversational cul-de-sac, requiring an awkward maneuver to exit.

It is worth pointing out what we mean by "singleness," as this will have a significant bearing on our discussion. From the point of view of Christianity, to be single means being both unmarried and committed (for as long as we remain unmarried) to sexual abstinence. The Bible is clear that sex outside of marriage is sinful, something that is underlined in the teaching

of Jesus. To be single is to refrain from any sexual behavior. If you're single long term, as a Christian that means being sexually abstinent long term.

This is very different from the predominantly secular culture around us, which holds that to be single involves the former (being unmarried) but not the latter (sexual abstinence). And since marriage is often seen as a constraint in many ways, being single in a secular context can be thought of as a positive boon. You have the freedom to find sexual fulfillment without any of the commitments that come with marriage. You are free to play the field in whichever way you think might make you happy. A prominent British journalist and broadcaster, Mariella Frostrup, described singleness as “solvency, great sex, and a guilt-free life.”³

So singleness for the Christian can look very different from singleness for someone who is not. It is little wonder, then, that so many think of Christian notions of celibacy and chasteness as unappealing. I just realized as I typed those two words, “celibacy” and “chasteness,” just how old-fashioned they seem. They sound more like they'd belong in *Downton Abbey* than in contemporary life. I suspect there's a very simple reason for that: there are no equivalent contemporary notions today, so we can only borrow language from previous generations to describe it. Celibacy is, frankly, weird for most people today. Harmful, even. So with this cultural backdrop, it is no surprise to find so many within the church thinking along similar lines.

This is where “general ignorance” quickly kicks in. Henry VIII didn't actually have six wives. And singleness isn't actually a bad thing. In the Bible it's good. It's even described as a blessing. In and of itself it's a wonderful gift from God that should be affirmed and celebrated. Read on, and I hope you'll find out why.

Most of what we think we know is actually untrue. And the point of this book is that the goodness of singleness is something the whole church needs to know. It's obvious that singles need to be clear about it, but so too does everybody else. The Bible's teaching on singleness is given to all of God's people.

The most lengthy and thorough discussion of singleness comes in 1 Corinthians 7, and at first glance it seems to contradict the point I've just made. As Paul takes us through issues of marriage and singleness he turns to different sections of the readership and addresses them directly: "To the unmarried and the widows I say . . ." (v. 8); "To the married I give this charge . . ." (v. 10); "To the rest I say . . ." (v. 12). But here's the thing: even as Paul addresses each of these groups specifically, he wants and expects the whole church to be listening in. I am not a widow (and can never be one). But the Scriptures addressed to them are still given to me. I must not skip over them. Similarly, though I am not a parent, passages directed to parents are still God's word to me. The same is the case with Scriptures about singleness, even when directed to singles. God's word to singles about singleness is something you need to know about, whatever your stage of life or marital status. There are two reasons for this.

First, most of us who are married will one day be single again. We don't like to dwell on this reality if we're married. But think about it. It is rare for a married couple to die at the same time. As I write this, it is twenty-four years pretty much to the day since my grandmother died. Our family was devastated, and no one more so than her husband, my grandfather "Pop." None of us was sure how he would cope, even with a large and supportive family who cherish him. Yet he has had to experience singleness for whole decades since she died. Pop is not far from spending more of his life unmarried than married, which is

something, given that they were married for over fifty years (he is only a few months shy of turning one hundred).

Bereavement will return many who are married now to singleness again. It is sobering and sad to think about, but also necessary. Add to that the number of marriages that will end in divorce, and the proportion of those who will become single for a second time rises even higher. A ring on our finger now is no sure sign that we will not be single in the future. Better to think carefully and biblically about singleness now rather than later.

Second, singleness directly affects all of us. The Bible repeatedly speaks of the local church as a body, which means that we aren't free to come and go from it without obligation. No, Paul tells us, "For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Rom. 12:4–5 NIV). We're a body. We belong to one another. What happens to part of us therefore affects all. If some struggle, it hurts us all. We're invested in one another, and therefore I need to know what the Christian life is like for you in your situation, and you need to know what it's like for me in mine.

This applies far more widely than merely to issues of marriage and singleness. But it shows me that as a single person, I have a stake in the health of the marriages in my church family. And those who are married have a stake in the health of my singleness. It's part of what belonging to one another involves. And when we think of the proportion of our local church that might be single, it makes it all the more urgent that we're all on the same page, talking about the same thing, and heading in the same direction. It is in the interests of all of us, the whole church, single and married, to understand the positive vision the Bible gives us of singleness.

But that'll involve overturning some common misconceptions.

Singleness Is Too Hard

In wider culture, singleness (as we have already noted) is not a problem in and of itself. But *celibacy* is. It is fine not to have married. It can even be a good thing—you are footloose and fancy-free. (Though I confess I've no idea what either of those terms actually means.) But to be without sexual or romantic intimacy is another matter.

Two recent movies highlight this.¹ Take the Steve Carell comedy *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. The whole premise behind it is that to be a virgin at forty years old is utterly laughable. People are horrified when they find out. Some treat him like a child. After all, he's not properly grown up yet. And, of course, the happy ending to the movie is that he finally does lose his virginity. Although the impact on him is overblown, the point is real: he's now entered into one of the key things life is about.

Another example is the movie *Forty Days and Forty Nights*. The tagline says it all: "One man is about to do the unthinkable. No sex. Whatsoever. For forty days and forty nights." Think about that for a moment. Forty days and forty nights

is neither an arbitrary length of time nor an arbitrary way of describing it. In the Gospel accounts Jesus was in the wilderness without food for “forty days and forty nights” (Matt. 4:2). Christians observing Lent typically give something up for the same period of time. Forty days and forty nights has become the standard unit for those who want to be serious about depriving themselves of something. We’re willing to go this long without chocolate or carbs or social media or TV. But to go this long without sex? *Unthinkable*. I’ve just calculated that I’ve done the equivalent length of time well over two hundred times. Once is unthinkable. Two hundred plus? Well, I am *way* off the charts. I heard someone describe long-term celibates like me as being like unicorns: you’ve heard of them, but you never think you’re going to actually meet one.

Behind the comedy of such movies lies a serious belief, one that is widespread in the Western world today: without sex you can’t really experience what it means to be truly human. According to this thinking, our sense of personhood is directly attached to our sex life. To ignore this side of us, to deliberately not express and fulfill it, is to actually do harm to ourselves. It is a fundamental aspect of our humanity, and repressing it is not healthy. Those who are long-term single are not just quaint and old-fashioned; we might actually be deluded. Something is very wrong with us.

Choosing to live this way is questionable enough, but there is a unique distaste for those who might, in the name of religion, require it of anybody else. Calling others to live sexually abstinent outside of marriage is now regarded as unnecessary and cruel. Those wanting to uphold the Bible’s teaching on sexual ethics are criticized for “enforcing celibacy” on others and, by doing so, causing considerable damage.

All this means we need to be crystal clear about what the Bible really says about these things.

Jesus on Sex and Marriage

One of the prevailing myths today is that Jesus was tolerant when it comes to sexual ethics. Sure, people tend to think, the Old Testament had some strict things to say about marriage and sexuality, and Paul was evidently having the theological equivalent of a bad-hair day when he was writing some of his letters, but Jesus was much more relaxed about these things and didn't seem to have any of the hang-ups that his followers today are accused of having.

But it is wrong to suggest Jesus had nothing challenging to say about sex. In fact, he takes the broad Old Testament sexual ethic and intensifies it. First, Jesus defines sex outside of marriage as sinful:

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. (Matt. 15:19–20)

Jesus is saying that it is all too possible to be defiled, to be spiritually unacceptable to God. The Pharisees he is talking to generally believed that defilement was a bit like catching a cold: provided you avoided infected people and places, you could stay healthy. So they went to great lengths to wash themselves ceremonially and to stay away from people they thought were spiritually unclean. But Jesus shows them that defilement is not primarily something external to us but internal. It is not outside of us and to be avoided, but inside of us and to be acknowledged—it comes *out of the heart*. Various attitudes and types of behavior reflect this, and Jesus provides a sampling of them:

evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, and slander.

This is not an exhaustive list but a representative one. And in the middle of it comes the phrase “sexual immorality.” It is a translation of one Greek word, *porneia*, which is what Matthew originally wrote. If that word sounds a little familiar, it is because we get the word *pornography* from it. At the time of Jesus, *porneia* referred to any sexual behavior outside of marriage. It would have included premarital sex, prostitution, adultery (which Jesus also lists separately), and same-sex behavior. Such sexual activity, Jesus says, defiles us. It is not the only form of behavior that does (as the rest of his list indicates), but it is one of the things. Sex outside of marriage is a sin. In other words, what, I suspect, is the vast majority of sexual behavior in our culture today, Jesus regards as morally wrong. He’s not so sexually tolerant, as it happens.

But Jesus’s teaching is even more challenging than that. In his famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus included these words:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matt. 5:27–28)

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is contrasting the traditions of the religious teachers at that time with the heart attitude that God intends his laws to promote and his people to have. Evidently it was common to teach the law primarily in terms of externals, so Jesus shows that it was always meant to go much deeper. It is not enough, he shows us, merely to refrain from physically committing adultery. What God requires is honorable intentions and a godly attitude. It is not just about

what we *do* (or manage not to do) but what and even how we *think*. Jesus doesn't take the Old Testament law and go easy on his hearers; he dials it up for them.

One more passage reflects this:

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." (Matt. 19:3–6)

Jesus is asked about divorce, but his answer doesn't cover divorce. Instead he talks about marriage. To do that Jesus goes back to Genesis 1 and 2. When he says, "He who created them from the beginning made them male and female," he is referencing Genesis 1:27. Then he directly quotes Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man shall leave . . ." But Jesus makes clear that by referencing these early chapters of Scripture, he is not merely seeking wisdom from the ancients. Notice it is "he who created them" who says, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife." It is the Creator himself who provides these words of commentary on what marriage is. What we are seeing is, therefore, the Creator's blueprint for human sexuality. This is not the best of human wisdom; it is our Maker's design for us.

That design clearly shows us that God's template for marriage is one man and one woman for life. This, Jesus shows us, is the union that alone enables two people to become "one flesh." This is not something designed to be undone or reversed. And as Jesus continues to unpack this, and its implications for how we think about divorce, the disciples respond in a telling way:

The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” (Matt. 19:10)

This is telling for a very simple reason. I’ve read these words countless times over the years but only really noticed just recently that when Jesus talks about what marriage is, he actually puts people *off* getting married. The disciples realize how serious marriage is. *Maybe best to give it a miss*, they think. It sounds a little too much like commitment. Their reaction is understandable, but it got me thinking. One of the perks of being a pastor is that I get to preach at weddings fairly often. But never has someone come up to me after I’ve preached on what marriage is and means and said, “Maybe it is better not to marry.” This makes me wonder if it was *Jesus’s* view of marriage I was actually teaching. His is not an easy standard when it comes to sex and marriage.

Jesus’s response to the disciples seems to underline this:

But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given.” (Matt. 19:11)

There is discussion among scholars about whether “this saying” refers to all that Jesus had just been teaching or to what the disciples have just said in response to his teaching. If it is to the former, Jesus is underlining how the Christian standard for marriage will not be for all; hence what he says next about the life of celibacy as the alternative. If Jesus is referring to the latter—to the disciples’ remark about it being better not to marry—he is saying that not all will be able to follow the way of life they are commending, although some do and hence the comments about eunuchs. Concerning one way, it is the Christian view of marriage that will be hard to accept; concerning the other, it is the Christian view of singleness that will be hard to accept.

In one sense, it doesn't make much difference. The fact is, marriage can be hard and so too can singleness. Each brings its own challenges. Neither option is the easier one, and the challenges of marriage are quite different from the challenges of singleness. But I suggest Jesus is referring to what he has just been teaching. It is a hard word for many to hear and receive.²

If the disciples had hoped the strength of their reaction might make Jesus equivocate in some way, his response would have felt like a slap in the face. Jesus doesn't soften his stance. He tacitly agrees with what they say about marriage.³ It's difficult. So what's the answer? Interestingly, it's not cohabitation.

It's celibacy.

Jesus continues:

For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 19:12)

Eunuchs were celibate men in Jesus's day, particularly those who had been emasculated. Jesus goes on to show that some were eunuchs involuntarily: they were born that way or made that way by others. But alongside that, some were willing to forgo marriage by choice. Barry Danylak notes, "In using the term eunuch, Jesus meant more than someone simply not marrying but rather one's setting aside the right of marriage and procreation. . . . Jesus is suggesting that there are some who will willingly give up the blessings of both marriage and offspring for the sake of the kingdom of God."⁴ We will think more about this in due course, but for now we can simply note this: when the disciples raise the possibility of not getting married, Jesus talks

to them about being eunuchs. As far as he is concerned, that is the only godly alternative to marriage.

These are all challenging statements, but they are very clear. To summarize these three passages:

- Sex outside of marriage is sinful (Matt. 15:19).
- Sexual sin includes not just the physical act, but our thoughts and attitudes too (Matt. 5:28).
- Marriage is between a man and a woman, for life, and the godly alternative is to be celibate (Matt. 19:4–5, 10–12).

Jesus is therefore not as sexually tolerant as people today commonly imagine him to be. Far from relaxing the common Jewish traditions on sexual ethics derived from the Old Testament, he actually intensifies them. For those wanting to follow him, being unmarried very much involves singleness with sexual abstinence.

The Goodness of Singleness

That may clarify the terms of our discussion. But we still haven't answered our central concern: Is biblical singleness too hard? Look again at Jesus's exchange with his disciples following his teaching on marriage and divorce:

The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 19:10–12)

Notice again the disciples' premise: marriage sounds too hard. Jesus doesn't contradict that. Marriage (as he presents it) is not easy. It *is* hard. It will not be the best path for everyone. That is why some choose to be like the eunuchs. Our starting point today is often the opposite. Celibacy sounds too hard, so we should make marriage more readily accessible, even redefining it so that more people can enter into it. But Jesus's thinking seems to go in the opposite direction. Marriage can be too hard for some, so he commends celibacy.

We also need to remember that Jesus made himself a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom. Jesus willingly became fully human for us. He willingly became a male. He was a sexual human being, as we all are. But he lived a celibate lifestyle. He never married. He never even entered a romantic relationship. He never had sex. Jesus was not calling others to a standard he was not willing to embrace himself. He wasn't calling singles to sexual abstinence while knowing nothing of it himself. He lived this very teaching.

But there's more than even that. Jesus is not just an example of a nonhypocritical teacher. He is the example of the perfect man. He is the humanity all of us are called to be but which none of us are. He is the most complete and fully human person who ever lived. So his not being married is not incidental. It shows us that none of these things—marriage, romantic fulfillment, sexual experience—is intrinsic to being a full human being. The moment we say otherwise, the moment we claim a life of celibacy to be dehumanizing, we are implying that Jesus himself is only subhuman.

The significance of this came home to me recently. I was speaking to a pastor who was expressing reservations about calling same-sex-attracted members of his church to the sexual

ethic we have just been outlining. He summarized his concern with these words: “How can I expect them to live without romantic hope?” I was grateful for his concern for them. Many married pastors can be blasé about what they’re asking of some of their unmarried church members. He, at least, was aware of the potential cost for them, and it mattered to him. But there was an assumption behind his concern that troubled me. The assumption was that we can’t really live without romantic hope, that a life without any potential for romantic fulfillment is unfair to demand and unbearable to experience. It assumes romantic fulfillment is fundamental to a full and complete life.

Some time later I was preaching from 1 John and found myself teaching a passage that includes these words:

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. (1 John 4:2–3)

There was an opportunity for questions from the congregation after the sermon, and someone asked whether there is, in fact, anyone today who denies that Christ has come in the flesh. Wasn’t that just a first-century heresy that the early church was able to see off? I was thinking for a moment about how to respond when I suddenly remembered that conversation with the pastor. It dawned on me that the very kind of thinking that claims a life without sexual fulfillment is not really an authentic way to live is actually saying that Jesus did not fully come in the flesh, that his was not a full human life. To say that it is dehumanizing to be celibate is to dehumanize Christ,

to deny that he came fully in the flesh and that his humanity was a “real” one.

A couple of times when I’ve spoken on this issue, people have questioned whether Jesus really was celibate. The Gospel accounts don’t explicitly say that Jesus didn’t have sex, so it’s a bit much to forbid others to do so on that basis. I’ve even heard some senior church leaders in my own denomination say this.

It is a rather unusual approach to say that anything we’re not told Jesus didn’t do can be morally justified. There is no account in any of the Gospels of Jesus, say, punching a horse in the face. But the fact that the Gospels don’t say he didn’t do it doesn’t make me think I can thereby justify doing it myself. If someone responds to this (admittedly daft) example, that such behavior doesn’t fit with the Jesus we see in the Gospels, then I’d reply that this is precisely the point. It doesn’t. It is absurd to think of Jesus behaving this way. And the same is true of the notion that he might have had sex. This, after all, is the man (as we’ve seen) who presented a much higher standard of sexual ethics to his contemporaries than was commonly taught. Are we to think that Jesus would have explicitly and repeatedly taught one thing while doing the opposite? Quite apart from this is the constant reminder throughout the New Testament (very much reflected in the Gospel accounts) that Jesus lived without sin.

So far, all we’ve really done is see how high is Jesus’s standard for sexual ethics and how his teaching on marriage makes it much harder than we might typically think. Hardly encouraging stuff. But the message of the Bible about singleness is much more than this. Paul is able to express ways in which singleness can be a good thing. There are ways in which it can actually be easier than marriage. He puts it both ways around: there are

certain hardships we are spared if we are single and certain ways in which we are more free because of it.

Let's deal with what we're spared. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul shows how Christians are both free to marry and free to remain single. Though he is single and wants to commend his singleness to them (1 Cor. 7:7), there is nothing wrong with single people who are able to marry getting married:

But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.
(1 Cor. 7:28)

Paul assumes that married life will include certain "worldly troubles." This is by no means a criticism of marriage. Elsewhere Paul writes in the loftiest of terms about how marriage reflects the church's spiritual marriage to Jesus (Eph. 5:31). It is not that Paul is down on marriage. It's just that he is realistic. The character of life in this world is that marriage will not be easy. There will be some heartache that comes with it.

It's important for us to know this. From the earliest of ages we have been presented with the idea that the period following marriage is best described as "happily ever after." While most of us know enough to realize life isn't as simple as that, the fact is, we are exposed to endless stories as adults where the wedding is the end and climax, the resolution of the tension. It is the goal and destination. Once the couple finally gets together, the story is over. While not *entirely* "happily ever after," it seems at least *mainly* "happily ever after."

I've been a pastor for about fifteen years, and a close friend to various married folks for a lot longer. I have seen a number of marriages at close hand and walked with married friends

through some of the trials that have come with married life. It is good to have open and honest friendships in which both the ups *and* downs can be shared.

There are some “worldly troubles” caused by marriage itself.

One of the first couples at whose wedding I officiated has now divorced. I know of several marriages going through very serious problems. One friend was recently quite candid with me: he and his wife simply don’t like each other anymore.

I know couples for whom married life turned out dramatically different from how they’d expected. One lady with a long-term incapacitated husband said to me one day, “This isn’t what I signed up for!” (*Actually it is*, I thought, but didn’t say.) I know another couple in which the husband has a condition that has dramatically weakened his arms. He is unable to button his own shirts, let alone lift his own children—a far cry from how he had imagined being a husband. I know of a Christian who married someone who wasn’t, and though she thought it wouldn’t matter, it has turned out to matter profoundly. I know another case in which a woman married someone who presented himself as a strong Christian but has shown himself to be far from it.

Other “worldly troubles” relate to children. I’ve seen friends devastated by the news that they will not be able to have children. Suddenly all the expectations they had about what family life might look like for them came crashing down. Though they have had the blessing of being able to adopt multiple times, and regard their children as full family members, they know that the grandparents will never be able to say of their children, “He definitely has your eyes!” or “She has the family nose!”

More than one couple I’m very close to has had children born with special needs and gone through the deep distress of not even knowing if these children were going to survive their

first few days in the world. Other couples I know have experienced the searing pain of seeing a child stumble into serious sin or walk away from the faith entirely. One very dear family I know lost one daughter to cancer and another to suicide.

I could go on. The point of all this is that there are both ups *and* downs in married life and that these are all griefs that, as a single person, I will never directly experience. That is not to be taken lightly. I will experience a measure of these pains as I seek to walk closely with friends through such times, but that is not the same as having to directly face these difficulties myself.

None of this is to put us off marriage or to imply that it is simply a litany of woes. It is a gift from God and not to be despised. Paul describes those who forbid getting married as teaching the “teachings of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1–3). Marriage is intrinsically good. But like all good things in a fallen world, it is tarnished by sin and not without problems.

The fact is, both singleness and marriage have their own particular ups and downs. The temptation for many who are single is to compare the downs of singleness with the ups of marriage. And the temptation for some married people is to compare the downs of marriage with the ups of singleness, which is equally dangerous. The grass will often seem greener on the other side. Whichever gift we have—marriage or singleness—the other can easily seem far more attractive. Paul’s point is to show singles that there are some downs unique to marriage—some “worldly troubles”—that we are spared by virtue of our singleness. Our common assumption—marriage is better or easier—is simply not true. Seeing what I have seen in the last decade or so, I have to say I would choose the lows of singleness over the lows of marriage any day of the week. I think being unhappily married must be so much harder than being unhappily single.

But as well as the absence of some problems, Paul also talks about the presence of certain opportunities. Singleness is not just about what we're spared but about what we're given.

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. 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. (1 Cor. 7:32–35)

If we are not careful, it is easy to misunderstand this passage. Paul is not saying that singleness is spiritual and marriage unspiritual. Nor is he saying that singleness is easy but marriage is hard. No, the contrast is between complexity and simplicity. Married life is more complicated; singleness is more straightforward.

Paul reminds us of something of the character of marriage: both the husband and the wife are “anxious about worldly things.” Paul does not mean that in a pejorative sense. He is not saying that their focus is on ungodly things. He is saying that for the husband or wife, much of their attention is on the things of this world. This is at it should be. The husband and wife have a duty to each other and to any children. They are to think about how they can love and encourage each other. They are to be mindful of each other's spiritual, emotional, and physical needs as well as those of any children they may have. The concerns of the married man or woman are split because of this. Life can easily feel like a swirl of immediate, pressing, and competing needs. Married people by necessity are engrossed in the things

of this world. To live and act otherwise would be a dereliction of their responsibilities.

For the single person, there is greater freedom. Our focus is less divided. Life is less complicated. We are able to give of ourselves in a way that married people are not. Paul is no doubt thinking of some of the ways he has seen this freedom in his own life and ministry. He has been able to travel widely, to spend extended periods of time in particular places, even risking his life for the cause of the gospel. None of this would have been the case if he was married.

Paul is not saying that married people have concerns and single people do not, but that those concerns are necessarily different. The single life is not meant to be free of all responsibilities. We still have friendships and family that we need to honor. But as Vaughan Roberts writes, “we are pulled in fewer directions than those who are married and are therefore free to give more time to ‘the Lord’s affairs.’”⁵ Our lives as single people are generally less complicated than those of our married friends.

I was talking to a married friend about some travel I had coming up. There was going to be a lot of long-haul flying. He immediately winced at the thought of it. I looked puzzled.

“Don’t you just *hate* flying?” he asked.

“No, I love it. I get so much work done. All those hours uninterrupted. I do some of my best studying and thinking on planes.”

“Yes, I keep forgetting: you don’t have children with you when you fly.”

Although this is a fairly trivial example, it made me realize that even in some of the mundane details of life, he and I see things from very different perspectives. Travel for me (especially on long flights) represents an opportunity to get lots of things

done. For him, it represents finding ways to keep some small energetic people occupied for hours at a time. Apply that to many parts of life, and it becomes clear that life for me is much less complicated.

There are dangers that come with this, of course. Paul is assuming we singles will be “anxious about the things of the Lord.” This is a battle for many of us. It is easy to channel our flexibility and energies into merely pleasing ourselves rather than God. A significant temptation for many singles, especially if we live on our own, is to become self-centered. I can easily become anxious about “the things of me.” It is easy to do what I want, how I want, when I want. I don’t have a “significant other” to have to flex around. If I want to go out, I can. If I want to have some space for myself, I can. For us singles it is much easier to eat when we want and sleep when we want. We need to remind ourselves, daily, that our singleness is not for us but for the Lord. It’s not for our concerns, but for his.

I’m reminded of this when I stay with others. As I mentioned, I tend to travel a lot these days, and where I can, I try to stay in friends’ homes rather than in hotels. I prefer this not only for the company but because it gives me a set of people to whom I have to adjust. I might need to be home by a given time to fit in with family mealtimes. There might be chores to help with. I can’t simply take over the living room and binge-watch TV if I’m feeling tired and antisocial. Even if it is just for a few days, living with others is—in all the right ways—inconvenient.

None of this is to say that singleness is easy or that it is necessarily easier than marriage. It is simply to say that we are wrong to assume singleness is too hard. To do so easily overlooks the many ways in which marriage can be very difficult. It is not for nothing that the disciples said, “It is better not to marry.” There

are some specific “worldly troubles” that come with married life. We must not overlook the ways in which singleness frees us up for undivided devotion to Jesus. It is easy to think of singleness as a burden, a constraint, restricting us from real life. Paul says the opposite:

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. (1 Cor. 7:35)

Paul does not want to restrain us—literally, “to throw a noose around you.” We all too readily assume that is precisely what he *is* doing. Singleness, for him, is not primarily about what we do without (except for the “worldly troubles” that come with married life) but rather what we are free to do. He is commending singleness because he wants “good order,” the advantage of a more orderly, less complex way of living, which itself enables us to wholeheartedly serve the Lord.

If marriage shows us the shape of the gospel, *singleness shows us its sufficiency.*

Much of what we commonly assume about singleness—that it is primarily about the absence of good things like intimacy, family, or meaningful ministry—is either flat-out untrue or, at the very least, shouldn't be true. To be single, we often think, is to be alone and spiritually hindered.

But the Bible paints a very different picture of singleness: it is a positive gift and blessing from God. This book seeks to help Christians—married and unmarried alike—value singleness as a gift from God so that we can all encourage singles to take hold of the unique opportunities their singleness affords and see their role in the flourishing of the church as a whole.

“It would be a great mistake if we were to think this is a book only for singles. If Sam is right—and he is—the entire church must understand the biblical teaching on this subject.”

Timothy J. Keller

Pastor Emeritus,
Redeemer Presbyterian Church,
New York City

“Far too often, the church regards single Christians as people who need to be fixed or fixed up. Allberry provides a pastoral guide to correct this and help the church live like the family of God.”

Rosaria Butterfield

Former Professor of English,
Syracuse University; author,
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