



NG Study Guide: 1 Co. 7:32-38 “Honoring God In Singleness” [12.2.18]

Love God + know the Bible better:

1. Read the passage cited above, and try to answer the questions below before your group meets.
2. *Leader note: Please review the brief instructions for leaders at the bottom.*

The Study

Thesis:

The Church is a very diverse place. One area of diversity comes in the form of varying marital status. Churches are full of both married and single people. These are broad categories, and even within each one there is much diversity. As God’s children, we are meant to honor Him in all relational seasons. We are also called to support one another as we grow in Christ-likeness together. It is essential that the Church develops a theology of singleness that speaks to both singles and marrieds. This will empower singles to honor God in their present season while also equipping marrieds with an understanding of Christian singleness in order that they might be supportive in the holistic growth of Jesus’ Church.

I. A Biblical View of Singleness [32-37; Matt 19:12]

We first must acknowledge the diversity *within* Christian singleness. The New Testament affirms three types of Christian singles, as seen in Matthew 19:12:

“For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother’s womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it.”

The word for eunuch here refers to a person who holds an unmarried status within society & practices celibacy (abstaining from sexual relations according to God’s design). The three forms of this, according to Jesus are; (1) *celibates by birth*, where something in their genetic make-up prevents the ability or desire to marry, (2) *vowed celibates* who have made a decision not to marry in order to more wholly devote their lives to the service of God’s kingdom, and (3) *dedicated celibates* who are honoring God by pursuing sexual purity while single, but are also open to the idea of marriage. It’s important also to note that, within the category of dedicated celibates, there are some who are single and pursuing marriage, and some who are single as a result of divorce or death of a spouse. Some of this latter group may desire to remarry while others may not.

Next we look at the benefits of singleness:

32 But I want you to be without care. He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord—how he may please the Lord. 33 But he who is married cares about the things of the world—how he may please his wife. 34 There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world—how she may please her husband.

The initial benefit Paul confronts us with is that singles are free from cares associated with marriage. A married person has to devote much time and energy to take care of his or her spouse, whereas a single person is freed up from this obligation. As a result, a single person is able to more freely care about “the things of the Lord”. At first glance, this may sound as though it is exalting singleness & condemning marriage. However, in context, Paul makes it clear at several points that neither marriage nor singleness is a

superior position (v.25; v.38). The implication is that the single person has a unique ability to broadly focus on God's kingdom by virtue of the fact that they don't devote most of their time/ energy to one relationship. A single person is able to participate in a plurality of relationships, and has an emotional and spiritual availability that married people simply cannot (and should not) try to achieve. New York City pastor/author Peter Scazzero says that while the married Christian demonstrates the *depth* of God's love, the single demonstrates the *breadth* of His love. It's important to know that the single's freedom does not necessarily mean that they have more time than their married counterparts. Since singles don't have a deep, life-giving relationship built in to their lives in the same way marrieds do, they must cultivate these relationships outside of the home. This takes a great deal of time and energy. Married Christians and church leaders should be sensitive to this, and be careful not to send messages to singles that they need to be available to volunteer at every church event, babysit the kids of their married friends, etc... Singleness, indeed, also comes with its unique struggles:

36 But if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin, if she is past the flower of youth, and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes. He does not sin; let them marry. 37 Nevertheless he who stands steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but has power over his own will, and has so determined in his heart that he will keep his virgin, does well.

"Behaving improperly" alludes to the struggle that singles feel towards sexual temptation. Paul is saying that if you feel the temptation is overwhelming, it isn't wrong to seek marriage. Indeed, many singles within the 'dedicated celibates' category desire to marry. However, in the meantime, they are forced to navigate their call to purity in an over sexualized culture. Preston Sprinkle notes that the popular false narrative of our day is that "sexual freedom and expression" is the apex of the human experience. Singles (of all varieties) uniquely face the challenge of navigating this issue to find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ. Another struggle of singleness that Paul doesn't specifically address here, but implies, is loneliness. Although married people can struggle with sexual temptation and loneliness as well, single people experience these struggles in much more nuanced ways. Most singles face these challenges without the same point of reference as married people. Married people know from experience that neither sex nor marriage can fulfill the deep longings of the human soul. As always, the answer to that longing is Jesus, and married Christians must lovingly and sensitively point their single brothers and sisters to that truth.

II. Response to the Biblical view of Singleness [38]

38 So then he who gives her in marriage does well, but he who does not give her in marriage does better. So how are we to respond to this Biblical view of singleness? Verse 38 affirms the goodness of both singleness and marriage. We must acknowledge this and realize that marrieds and singles together make up the whole of God's kingdom. There is much we have to learn from one another. Scripture describes both singleness (1 Co. 7:6-9) and marriage (Prov 18:22, Matt. 19:4-6) as good gifts from God. The gift of singleness is often misinterpreted to mean a lifelong obligation to remain single. While that would be the case for vowed celibates, it is too narrow an interpretation for dedicated celibates. Instead, it's better to understand your married or single status as God's gift to you *right now*. So how do singles and marrieds each respond from their unique perspectives?

The Response of Singles: Honor God

One of the more pressing questions singles deal with is in discerning whether or not they are called to marry. Based upon Paul's exhortation in this passage of Scripture, the desire to marry is a good and God-given. If you are single and possess a desire to marry, then you are probably not a celibate by birth nor called to a life of vowed celibacy. You can take comfort in the truth that God has given you that desire and you can devote yourself to praying that He would grant it according to His design. Another question is whether or not God has one person picked out to be your spouse, and what happens if you "miss" that person. Scripture simply isn't clear on that issue. What is more important is that God commands His people not to pursue marriage unless they are "equally yoked" (2 Co. 6:14). In other words, the person you pursue for marriage should be seeking to grow in love for Jesus and others just as you are. If you and a fellow believer of the opposite gender share a mutual interest, a love for Jesus, and an emotional/spiritual maturity that is affirmed by your spiritual leaders, there is nothing wrong with prayerfully stepping into a pursuit of marriage. Once in this space, it's important to realize that you remain "friends" until you enter into the covenant of marriage. The roles of husbands and wives set forth in Ephesians 5 aren't active until you are in covenant. However, it isn't wrong to devote yourself to practicing these roles and

learning as much as you can about Biblical marriage. For dedicated celibates, it's very important not to idolize marriage and remember that satisfaction is only realized in Jesus. For singles of all varieties, it's important to establish accountability in remaining pure despite temptation that may come your way.

The Response of Marrieds: Support

Married people are called to support the spiritual growth of their single brothers and sisters. One of the best ways married people can do this is by acknowledging the types of singles we discussed. As you become aware of people's reasons for being/ choosing a single life, be sensitive to how you engage them. For example, it's probably not a great idea to try and set up a date for someone who feels called to vowed celibacy. It's also important that married people don't look at singles of any type as though they are somehow incomplete. Scripture says that the "man of God" is complete, lacking nothing and thoroughly equipped for every good work through the truth of Scripture and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3:16-7; Jas 1:4). There is no reference of marriage as a sort of prerequisite for completeness. Lastly, marrieds should be sure to include singles in their lives. Naturally, we are drawn to people we share an affinity with (singles, young marrieds with kids, young marrieds without kids, retirees, etc...). This is seen in the structure of many churches, small groups and other ministries. Nonetheless, Acts 2:44 shows us a picture of the church in which all believers were "together and had all things in common". Because the majority of our churches are made up of married people, it's important we invite them into our homes, our groups and our lives that they might be full participants in God's Kingdom here on earth.

Study Guide Qs

Q1: How are you presently honoring God in your singleness or how did you honor God in a past season of singleness? What would you do or have done differently?

Q2: What are some ways we can have a more integrated approach to involving singles and marrieds in church life together?

Q3: If you are married, what do you believe you can learn from your single friends? If you are single, what do you believe you can learn from your married friends?

Q4: Based on what we discussed, what advice would you give to a dating couple who is trying to honor God?

"Digging Deeper" (optional or alternative study)

- 1. Read the entire chapter of 1 Corinthians 7. What do you discover about singleness? Discuss any new insights you have or any struggles you have with the principles Paul addresses. How can you apply these truths to your own life and within your group?**
- 2. Read and discuss the following article: <https://www.emotionallyhealthy.org/lead-out-of-your-singleness/>. What did you learn and how can you apply it?**

Love your neighbor *outside* the group better:

1. Who would like to share how they sought to befriend or build relationship with their neighbors where they live, work, study, or play this past week?
2. Are there some needs that can provide us an opportunity to love our neighbor outside the group?
3. Here is a neighboring idea(s) for us to consider for the week(s) ahead:

Consider inviting a single neighbor to participate in one of your or your family's holiday traditions

Love your neighbor *inside* the group better:

1. Are there some needs in our group that can provide us an opportunity to love our neighbor within the group?
2. What might we do about that need to help?

Prayer [Loving God and Neighbors better]:

Close the NG meeting with a time of group prayer. Encourage each participant to pray, but don't force anyone to pray. Encourage the group to keep their prayers brief so that each person can pray.

Leader Notes:

- 1. Seek to involve as many group participants as possible.** A good group discussion time allows people to get to know the passage and one another better.
- 2. Feel free to pre-select the discussion questions that you want to focus on** in case there isn't enough time to answer them all.
- 3. Feel free to use an icebreaker question or activity** to get to know one another better.
- 4. Every time you meet consider asking:**
 - a. What about this passage is particularly exciting, challenging, or confusing?** If a leader is uncertain about a question of doctrine or theology don't hesitate to follow-up with your coach during the week. Then revisit the issue(s) when the group gathers next time.
 - b. How would each of us like to apply the truths we learned to our life?** This question may be answered simply by completing the study guide. Nevertheless, it will generally be beneficial for leaders to encourage each participant to conclude the study by considering how he or she desires to apply the lessons learned.