

# The Tight Rope: Singleness

Family Circus #4 – Pastor Gary Combs – August 11, 2024 – 1 Corinthians 7

**INTRO:** Good morning church! We are continuing our sermon series called, “Family Circus.” We’re calling it “Family Circus” because although we all hope for the perfect family, what we end up with is more like a crazy, chaotic circus. We’ve been learning over these past weeks that aiming for a perfect family often leads to frustration and failure. But we can aim at having a blessed family, one that lives under God’s blessing! But what about those of us who are single? Where do singles fit into God’s plan for the family? Can singles live under God’s blessing?

**ILL:** Take a look at this “The Family Circus” cartoon by Bil and Jeff Keene: **“I’m havin’ a catch with God. I throw the ball, and He throws it back.”** Here’s Jeffy describing to his sister the way he views life as a single, as one who often plays ball alone... yet, not alone. He never really feels alone with God.



**Need:** When we “church folk” talk about the family we often forget our singles. Our attempts at matchmaking make them uncomfortable. Our couples groups and family gatherings make them feel left out. Our questions that imply they are less than whole as a single, make them feel inadequate or like an odd man out. But the truth is there is nothing “odd” about being single. Elijah, John the Baptist, Paul, and Jesus lived as singles. We all begin life single and many of us will experience singleness again later in life, and ultimately we will face God as singles.

The ranks of single-hood are diverse:

- Those who plan to get married, but have not yet found a mate.
- Those who have decided to remain single for life. This may be a deliberate decision or it may come as a gradual awareness and acceptance that marriage is unlikely.
- Those who are “single again” due to either death or divorce.
- Other reasons for singleness may include: chronic illness, physical handicap, homosexuality...

According to Christian counselor, Dr. Gary Collins, singles are especially challenged by feelings of loneliness, low self esteem, feeling like a social outcast, sexual temptation, pressure to find a mate, feelings of fear or anxiety about the dating scene, single parenting... (Gary Collins, *Christian Counseling*).

**Trans:** What can help singles with the challenges they face? I believe that God’s Word offers the help that we need for living a fulfilled life and a life lived under God’s blessing. The truth is in Christ, we are never alone!

**BODY:** In his 1st letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul instructed singles to look for true fulfillment in Christ Jesus alone. Whether married or single, we can recognize that we are to find our true fulfillment in Christ alone. How can we find true fulfillment in Christ alone. The text gives **four steps** for finding true fulfillment in Christ Jesus.

**Today’s text:** 1 Corinthians 7:6-9; 24-28; 32-40 (ESV) <sup>6</sup> Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. <sup>7</sup> I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. <sup>8</sup> To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. <sup>9</sup> But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion. ... <sup>24</sup> So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God. <sup>25</sup> Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy. <sup>26</sup> I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. <sup>27</sup> Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. <sup>28</sup> 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. ... <sup>32</sup> I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. <sup>33</sup> But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, <sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. <sup>37</sup> But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. <sup>38</sup> So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better. <sup>39</sup> A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. <sup>40</sup> Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

## FINDING TRUE FULFILLMENT IN CHRIST:

### 1. Learn contentment with what God has given you.

**EXP:** (6-8, 24-27) Paul said, “I wish that all were as I myself am” (7). Paul was single and he wished that other singles would consider being like him. For he had learned to be content in all situations. As he told the ...

Philippians 4:12 (NIV) I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation...

He said it’s “good to remain single” (8) and he said it’s “good to remain” married (24-27). Both are good because both singles and married have their “own gift from God” (7).

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“**Good**” (8, 26) - Both singleness and marriage are good. Why? For two reasons:

## - Both singleness and marriage are a gift from God.

“**Gift**” (7) - (χάρισμα, *charisma*) - a gift of grace, an undeserved favor. Whether single or married, many of us aren't thankful for our current situation. We don't accept God's timing and sovereignty. Some view singleness as a curse, not a gift. For that matter, some view marriage as a curse, rather than a gift. Both marriage and singleness are “good” gifts from God.

1 Corinthians 7:7 (NLT) I wish everyone could get along without marrying, just as I do. But we are not all the same. God gives some the gift of marriage, and to others he gives the gift of singleness.

## - Both singleness and marriage portray the gospel of God.

The gospel has removed the stigma of singleness. For in Christ we are no longer alone, but made whole.

“If marriage shows us the shape of the gospel, singleness shows us its sufficiency.” — Sam Allberry, *7 Myths about Singleness*

Marriage shows the shape of the gospel in portraying the mystery of Christ as Husband and the Church as His Bride. And the single person who is content in Christ shows the sufficiency of the gospel to the world!

Colossians 2:10 (NLT) So you also are complete through your union with Christ

“**No command**” (25) - Singleness is not commanded in Scripture, neither in the OT, nor by the Lord Jesus. But Paul is giving his advice that the unmarried have an advantage in focusing on Jesus alone.

## **ARG:** Consider the Philippians passage again. From where does Paul's contentment and strength come?

Philippians 4:11-13 (NKJV) <sup>11</sup> ... I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: <sup>12</sup> I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. <sup>13</sup> I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

**ILL:** In Shelley Pulliam's, *Life Lessons for Single Moms*, she warns, “Don't ‘if only’ your life away!” She writes: “It's tempting to think, “If only I were married, I'd be happy.” If only I had kids... If only my kids would behave... If only I had a different job... If only I lived in a different place... If only I owned my own home... If only I made more money... We “if only” our life away. We're always one step away from what will make us happy. Contentment isn't about getting rid of your desires or pretending that you don't want to get married. It doesn't remove the pain of divorce or the sting of “having never been chosen.” Contentment and your desires and hurts can coexist. To be truly content, we have to be able to see the value in our pain. God is at work. He doesn't waste our experiences. He's using them for a higher purpose that we can't always discern. We just have to have the faith to accept that and – eventually – to rejoice in that.”

**APP:** True contentment is only found in the person of Jesus Christ. Marriage is good, but true contentment is found not in a human relationship, but in a spiritual relationship with God through Jesus.

## **2. Offer your body with its desires to God.**

**EXP:** (9, 36-38) Look at v.9 “But if they cannot **exercise self-control**, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be **afame with passion**.” Then look at v.36 “**not behaving properly**” and “**passions are strong**.” Then notice v.37 “firmly established in his heart... having his **desire under control**.”

“**Aflame with passion**” (9) - (πυρόω, *purōō*) - Figuratively “to be inflamed” (with anger, lust):— to burn.

“**Desire under control**” (9) - Lit., “to have power over one's own will.” Will power.

**Is desire sin? Where did desire come from?** God created us with hormones. It was God who created our sex drives. He gave us our desire. For this reason, we must look to God for instruction on the proper use of this powerful drive.

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Yet, like Corinth, our culture has the false view that controlling sexual lust is not only unrealistic, but impossible. But we are more than our appetites. We were made in God's image. You can overcome sexual lusts by undivided devotion to God. God will either lead you to a mate that will fulfill your sexual longing or He will gift you with the grace to offer your sexuality as a gift to Him.

**ARG:** Trust God with your body. Offer it wholly to Him.

Romans 12:1-2 (NIV) ... offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

**Find your delight, your purpose and passion, in the Lord and He will fulfill your desires.**

Psalm 37:4 (NIV) Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.

**ILL:** **5 Lies That Make Sexual Purity More Difficult** - Juli Slattery

- 1) **Single Christians aren't sexual** (or at least they aren't supposed to be). Our sexuality prompts longings and desires that point to an intimacy beyond what even the best marriage can sustain.
- 2) **Purity is only a problem for singles.** Single or married, yielding your sexuality under the lordship of Christ will always be a battle.
- 3) **Sexual purity is about whether or not you have sex.** Exposing yourself to porn, erotica, sexual chat rooms and the like is as though you're feeding your mind and heart spiritual poison.
- 4) **Your temptations define you.** What do you battle? Memories from the past? Urges to act out sexually? Same sex attraction? No matter what thoughts come into your mind, they do not have to define you. You may not be able to control what enters your mind, but you can control what stays there.
- 5) **God's call to holiness will be "fair."** "God would never give someone sexual desires that He doesn't intend to fulfill. That's just unfair!" This kind of thinking pervades modern Christianity. Yet Christ's command is to "deny yourself," "lose your life" and "take up your cross and follow me" — even unto death! The call to holiness isn't supposed to be easy or fair.

**APP:** Don't give in to sexual temptation. Offer your body, your desires to God. His plan is better than yours.

## 3. Find your life purpose in undivided devotion to God.

**EXP:** (32-35) Look at v.35, circle "undivided devotion to the Lord." Paul makes the point that this is simpler for the single, for they are able to be more focused on "how to please the Lord" (32), while the married man is "anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife" (33).

**"Worldly things" (33)** - (σάρξ, *sarx*) - the flesh, denotes mere human nature, the earthly nature of man apart from divine influence. They shall have anxiety, care; solicitude, trials.

**"good order"** - seemly, honorable. **"undivided"** - Without distraction. **"devotion"** - Lit., "Constantly attending towards, waiting for instruction..." "This triad of terms probably gives us the most accurate understanding of Paul's vision of the gift of singleness in operation. He envisions those who are above reproach in their sexual conduct, undistracted by spouse and family, and ready and waiting at the service of their Lord" (Barry Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*, p. 210).

**ARG:** Following Christ means self-denial and focused following and undivided devotion.

Luke 9:23 (NIV) Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

**ILL:** A recently divorced woman came to me one Sunday smiling and saying, "I'm not bragging, but I want you to see this tithing envelope that I'm turning in today. My ex-husband managed the finances when we were married and I was always upset that we didn't tithe. But now, I'm single and I'm a joyful tither. Praise God!"

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**John Stott** (Pastor of All Souls Church, scholar, author, evangelical statesman died in 2011 after living single for 90 years) saw this “gift” as a gradual awareness, saying, “In spite of rumors to the contrary, I have never taken a solemn vow or heroic decision to remain single! On the contrary, during my 20s and 30s, like most people, I was expecting to marry one day. In fact, during this period I twice began to develop a relationship with a lady who I thought might be God's choice of life-partner for me. But when the time came to make a decision, I can best explain it by saying that I lacked an assurance from God that he meant me to go forward. So I drew back. And when that had happened twice, I naturally began to believe that God meant me to remain single. Looking back, with the benefit of hindsight, I think I know why. I could never have traveled or written as extensively as I have done if I had had the responsibilities of a wife and family.”

**APP:** Stott spoke of the many people he disciplined and how they began to call him, “Uncle John.” This reminds us of the reality of our spiritual family. You can have a family whether single or married. Remember, how Paul called Timothy his son? Remember John calling them his “dear children?” (1 John 2:1). We can find our purpose and our family through living a life of undivided devotion to God.

## 4. Trust your companionship needs to God's provision and will.

**EXP:** (39-40) If we are single, we are “free” (39) to marry. But we are also “free” to stay single and Paul thinks that is a “happier” (40) choice. But be sure that we put God's will first. The person we marry must be “in the Lord.” Indeed, whatever choice we make let it be “in the Lord.”

**ARG:** **Don't be “unequally yoked” in marriage. They must be “in the Lord.”** (However, read 1 Cor. 7:12-16)  
2 Corinthians 6:14 (ESV) Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?

**Recognize God's provision for our companionship** (marriage is not a substitute for fellowship).

Acts 2:42 (ESV) And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

**ILL:** Two things I think God honored in my pursuit of Robin: 1) I prayed for God's wisdom and protection as I sought a wife. 2) I guarded my heart until I learned more about her. I had a list of questions for Robin after our first date. I wanted to know her Christian testimony. I asked her view of marital roles. I asked about children. I asked about her career goals. I asked what she would do if her husband became a missionary to Africa. I wanted to know her heart before I lost mine.

**APP:** Guard your heart before you lose your head when it comes to dating. You are free to stay single or marry in Christ, but choose that which keeps you focused on following Jesus.

**CONCLUSION:** **To the never-married:** Instead of focusing on finding the perfect mate, focus on finding fulfillment in Christ. **To the divorced:** Don't be tempted to fill the relational hole with another person. Too many marry on the rebound. Find wholeness and healing in Christ. **To the widow/widower:** Take time to grieve and heal. **To the married:** Don't make your spouse your source. Christ is your source. Also, don't make singles feel left out. Encourage them to follow Christ. Singleness is not a second class status. It is God's good gift when rightly understood. Whether you are single or married, the only way to find true fulfillment is through knowing and following Christ! Will you...

- 1) Learn to find contentment in Christ alone?
- 2) Offer control of your sexual desires to God's control and plan?
- 3) Understand that purpose is found through undivided devotion to God?
- 4) Trust your need for companionship to God's provision and will?

Let's pray.