

## ONE IS A WHOLE NUMBER

Scriptures: I Corinthians 7:17-24; 25-31

According to the website for the U. S. Census Bureau, in 2006 single persons comprised 42% of the U. S. population 18 and older. Over 4 out of 10 American adults are single. The Census Bureau also reports that 27% of all U. S. households consist of a single person living alone, compared to 17% in 1970.

Is this a good thing or a bad thing? In an article a few years back in the *Spokesman-Review*, David Riesman, a Harvard social scientist, said that the growth in the number of singles indicates a more self-absorbed and lonely society overly dependent on faxes, phones and computerized communication. The article suggests that the growth of the single population in this country means our society is increasingly alienated.

But the apostle Paul disagrees. Near the beginning of I Corinthians 7 Paul says, "I wish that all were as I myself am," meaning single. In our second scripture reading on the back of the bulletin, verse 28, Paul says, "But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin." Now there is a ringing endorsement of marriage. "Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that." I have never had anyone choose this scripture to be read at their wedding.

Some have suggested that Paul must have had a bad experience with marriage. They say this because before he became a Christian Paul was a devout Jewish Pharisee, and marriage was virtually required of any devout Jewish Pharisee. The theory is that Paul's wife must have died, or maybe she left him when he became a Christian. But there is no evidence for this, and it misses the point. The apostle Paul is not out to denigrate marriage. His point is that you do not have to be married to serve God. One is a whole number.

Turn to the back of the bulletin and let's look more closely at our scripture readings from I Corinthians 7. In verse 17 Paul says, "However that may be [meaning whether you are married or single], let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you." Let me clarify: Paul is not saying that being married or single is your calling in life. Being married or single is the circumstance in which God called you. Look at verse 18: "Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision." Circumcision, meaning being a Jew or a Gentile, is not something to which you are called. It is part of the condition of your life at the time you are called. Your call is to serve Jesus. Paul makes that plain in verse 19: "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything." Whether you are circumcised or uncircumcised, whether you are a Jew or a Gentile does not matter. What matters is serving God. That is your calling.

In the next paragraph Paul applies the same idea to being a slave. Being a slave is not your calling. If you are a slave, you do not have to remain a slave if you get the chance to be free.

You will notice I put an asterisk after verse 21. In the New Revised Standard translation of verse 21 it sounds like a slave should remain a slave even if he or she gets the chance to be free. But that is not what the verse means. At the end of the first scripture lesson I have inserted my own little explanatory note. In Greek this verse says literally, “But if also it is possible to become free, how much more make use (of it).” The question is make use of what? Make use of your chance for freedom? Or make use of your present condition of slavery? The answer, I think, is both. If you get the chance to be free, go for it, Paul says. But in the meantime while you are a slave, make use of that opportunity also to serve Jesus.

The point is if you are a slave, you do not have to wait until you are free in order to serve Jesus. You can serve Jesus even as a slave, because you are not really a slave of any human. You were bought and paid for by Jesus when he gave his life for you. So even if some human master thinks you are a slave, you in fact belong to Jesus, and you can serve Jesus whether you are a slave or not.

All of which sets up the main point of the chapter. In this chapter, Paul is not mainly concerned about circumcision or slavery. Those are just illustrations. The chapter is mainly about marriage. But Paul uses circumcision and slavery to set up the point he wants to make about marriage, namely, you do not have to wait until you are married to serve Jesus. You can serve Jesus right now as a single person. And if you are married, you do not have to wait until you get rid of your husband or wife before you can serve Jesus. You do not have to leave them or wait for them to drop dead before you can serve Jesus. You can serve Jesus right now.

This does not mean you should never change your situation. I already noted that verse 21 allows the possibility that a slave could become free. Verse 28 says that if you are single it is okay to get married. It is not wrong to change your situation. If you are single it is not wrong to get married. Earlier in chapter 7 Paul notes a few cases where if you are married it is okay to become single. That is a longer more complicated discussion than we have time for right now. But it is not necessarily wrong to change your circumstances. In verse 24 when Paul says, “In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God,” he does not mean you have to stay in whatever condition you are in. He means you are called to remain with God—to continue serving God—in whatever condition you face.

Now look again at verses 29-31. Paul says,

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

Is Paul saying that we should not care about life in this world, that we should not care about our spouses? Of course not. So what does he mean? He means that your ultimate meaning in life, your ultimate fulfillment does not depend on these things. Your meaning in life does not depend on having a spouse, or even whether your spouse likes you. Your fulfillment in life does not depend on what you buy or how many possessions you have. Your future life in the

kingdom of God does not depend on how successful you are or how happy or sad you are at the moment. All of these circumstances will eventually change. But the kingdom of God will remain, and that is the kingdom Jesus brings to you. That is the kingdom you can serve right now even while you wait for its coming.

To illustrate how this might work, I have invited three single people in our church to come and let me interview them as part of this sermon. Jose Orellana is a recent college graduate just beginning a career in teaching, Susan Ford is a career woman working for the *Spokesman-Review* starting to look ahead to retirement, and Jean Baxter is a retired nurse and widow in our congregation. I have asked all three to come and allow me to interview them about how they are serving Jesus at this stage and in these circumstances of their lives.

(Interviews)

1. What opportunities to serve Jesus do you have in your life right now, and are any of these opportunities different for you as a single person than if you were married?
2. What are some challenges you face in your life right now as a single person?

There are challenges and opportunities at each stage of our lives, whether you are married or single, whether you are young or old, whether you are retired or just starting out. Your calling is to serve Jesus in the midst of whatever challenges and opportunities you face until he comes.

- Ken Onstot  
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