

You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.
Psalm 16:11



GOD-GIVEN SINGLENES

CORNERSTONE
CHURCH

EQUIPPING
COURSES

GOD-GIVEN SINGLENES

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Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	5
Part 1: WHERE IS YOUR TREASURE?.....	6
Part 2: SINGLENESS IS GOD-GIVEN.....	17
Part 3: SEEKING THE KINGDOM.....	29
Part 4: SEXUAL STUFF.....	37
Part 5: DATING AND ROMANCE.....	49
Part 6: CALLED FOR MARRIAGE OR LIFE-LONG SINGLENESS?....	60
Additional resources.....	70

INTRODUCTION

While there are a ton of resources available to the Church on marriage – and rightly so, given the huge importance of the topic – it appears that our resources on singleness are stark in comparison. Often this has left the impression that the Bible really has nothing much to say about the topic, or at least nothing of serious consequence, and that the only goal you ought to pursue while you’re single is to get married – as if that’s the sub-total of what God wants to do in this season. Our general Church culture doesn’t help either, often making singles feel as if their life can’t really get going until they’re married.

Yet throughout Church history the reality is far different. Many of the biggest influencing voices in the Church have been single. Celibacy was so praised during the middle-ages that it was almost the opposite extreme of what we see today. It was many times seen as more holy and spiritual to be a monk than a married person with a family. There are reasons for this development, some of them including how monasteries gave women freedom to follow their own call, but this study cannot go into all those details. But result was the Reformers in the 1600’s had to do a lot of work to put marriage, and God’s purposes for marriage, back on the map of Christian life and teaching. Unfortunately, in many Christian circles today, and centuries later, it does seem as if we now have an over-emphasis on marriage.

We need to have a balance here. This small study will hopefully bring some balance for you and encourage singles to see that the Bible actually has a lot to say about the topic, and that God has wonderful plans and purposes for this time of our lives.

Part 1

WHERE IS YOUR TREASURE?

Luke 12

32 "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with money bags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. 34 **For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.**

"All men seek for happiness." - Pascal

Psalm 86:4 (NLT)

"Give me happiness, O Lord, for I give myself to you."

Sometimes we can be more spiritual than God. We think that it's not very spiritual of us to feel lonely or want to be happy. We think that as Christians we ought to make sure God is happy, and that if we seek for our own happiness we are being selfish and unspiritual. So we bury our feelings and feel that we are supposed to be 'better than that'.

But why do we need to make God happy? Does he need anything?

Acts 17:24 - 27

God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything,

since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. 26 And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, 27 that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us...

God needs nothing. It is us who need things. **And this is by God's design.** We are the creation and He is the creator. It is not God who needs salvation, but us. He is the one who gives salvation. It is not God who needs happiness but us, and he is the one who gives it. It is not God who needs breath but us, and He is the one who gives it.

The point is to realise firstly that we should never be ashamed that we are looking for happiness, but that we must know that God is the one who gives it; He is the one who gives true joy. We cannot find what we need apart from him. But we often don't look for it from Him. Either we feel we can't, or we feel it shouldn't (because we see God as more interested in our strength than our weakness); or we are ashamed of our needs; or we lose patience with waiting on God and go look elsewhere, which leads us to sin.

Our singleness can often become a challenge that leads us into the age-old human problem of self-righteousness. It all revolves around what we 'deserve'. We feel that:

- a. We 'deserve' to be happy, because we've been so moral up to now.
- b. We 'deserve' to be happy, because we are keeping our emotions under check so well.
- c. We 'deserve' to be happy, because we're lonely, and everybody

'deserves' a partner.

d. We 'deserve' to be happy, because our life has been hard; we had a tough time growing up; our parents didn't love us, or something along those lines.

e. We 'deserve' to be happy, because we are good looking.

f. We 'deserve' to be happy, because we *aren't* good looking, and so are a victim of some kind.

g. We 'deserve' to be happy, because we work hard.

h. We 'deserve' the perfect partner because we've got this or that ministry, or this or that call, or passion for something. This is self-serving.

i. Whatever else comes to mind.

The idea of 'deserving' anything is the principle problem with humankind. It leads to a self-righteous attitude that says, "*I* am the one who saves myself." Because even if we believe in God we think we must work at our relationship with him in such a way that he will give us whatever we feel we 'deserve'. That somehow we will impress him and, in the case of singleness, he will then bring us the perfect partner.

We will even disregard our own emotions for the sake of trying to be a 'strong Christian'. But when we finally crack, when the work gets too hard, when God is not answering, we will then decide to rather just 'do it our own way' and get what we 'deserve' by our own means. That might look different for each of us: maybe we start flirting excessively; become a player; date excessively; turn to pornography to try and quell our sexual needs; or whatever might be the case.

God does not care about what you 'deserve' - he cares about *you*. This is a key fact to remember in our singleness. None of us deserves a

partner, or anything at all, in fact. We cannot think of our future husband and wife as a reward for how good we've been or how hard we have worked, or as a result of having followed all the "Biblical rules" for finding a partner, or followed our church's rules, or however you might think of it. That will be unfair to them anyway - as if they are some sort of prize that God gives to *you* because of *your* brilliance or work or whatever. We aren't looking for trophy wives or husbands!

In other words, the way in which we find a partner is not through hard work but through trust (faith) in Christ to lead us, personally, in our own story. This trust in God may even lead us to the conclusion that we ought to never get married. There may be good reasons for that, which we will cover later. **This trust in God also stops us from looking at everyone else's story and getting jealous, feeling sorry for ourselves, or trying to find some winning formula that gets us the goods.**

Everyone feels a longing for happiness

God created the world and called it good. He created man and woman and called us 'good'. Our longing for happiness stems from the fact that we ought to be living in a good world, and we ought to have minds and bodies and wills that are 'good', but we live in a world where we are not good, and where evil happens. This means that we all long for how it should be and this longing creates unhappiness, because life is just not how it should be.

This longing is part of God's design. It is used by Him to give us all the awareness that something must be done about our world and about us, and that we cannot fix ourselves. He uses it to help us to seek him and 'feel our way toward Him', as Paul put it in Acts 17:27

above. When we come to Christ we have finally understood that Jesus is the one to do something about this world and our sin problem, not ourselves, and that we don't 'deserve' salvation but accept it as a free gift; and that He has begun the process of renewal through His death and resurrection. We put our trust in God, and not ourselves, to make us right first and then (finally) make the world right. We move our trust to our 'make it happen' thinking to 'he has made it happen and is making it happen'.

Seeking for happiness is not a sin

While it's true that our post-modern society has created an emphasis on the 'me' - on how 'I' feel, on who 'I' am, and on 'my' story - it's also true that God does want us to be happy. It is where we go for our longings to be fulfilled that can either be a sin or not. Our longing has been designed by God to show His glory, because He is glorified when He is found to be the ultimate and most fulfilling joy of our hearts. He is shown to be the only person in the universe who can truly satisfy our thirst for joy and happiness. It's only in God where we can find contentment, *and it's only out of that contentment that our relationships can be grounded in real love.*

God wants us in our season of singleness to discover he is the greatest joy and treasure there is. If you find your contentment in God now, and if you get married - as most people do eventually - your marriage can be grounded in Him, meaning it can be a marriage of unconditional, Jesus-kind of love. You would have the right foundation.

God's kind of happiness is not the same as the world gives. God's happiness is true joy. And true joy is not found in the story of 'me' but it is found in the story of Jesus - in other words, we are to focus our

story on His story, our lives around His, and make Him the centre subject of all we do and are about. It is then that we find the happiness God and only God can give. In the words of John Piper, “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.”

What is your treasure?

- Do you treasure your possessions?
- Do you treasure your career?
- Do you treasure romance?
- Do you treasure marriage?

It's perhaps easy for you to understand that your life should not be about your possessions, even if that's difficult to live out. We know, generally speaking, that we can make idols of the things we have. But when it comes to romance and marriage, which carry more value than possessions (even according to the scriptures) the idolatry can become much more subtle.

Sometimes we treasure romance so much that we become intensely lonely. **Loneliness is a normal experience and we all have to learn how to deal with it.** You are not experiencing anything strange or new when you feel lonely, even intensely lonely. But there is a *different* kind of loneliness that occurs when we value romance too highly - one that is unhealthy and can even border on a type of obsession or depression. This is why you can be lonely even if you're in a relationship. That sort of loneliness can even produce fear in our lives: a fear that we are getting on and aren't married yet; that our lives won't amount for much; that we will always be lonely; that our

relationships are never ideal; and so on.

Where your treasure is, there your heart is, says Jesus. **If your treasure is romance and marriage and a perfect partner or whatever other ideal image you have conjured up over the years, you will be deeply unhappy, even if you are in a relationship, because what you treasure is not yours... and, in fact, may just be unrealistic.**

Our culture has, in many ways, idolised romance and having a girlfriend/boyfriend/spouse and the feelings involved around falling in love and, of course, sex. It's easy to fall into this trap. But it only creates unhappiness. Many people divorce because they think they have married the wrong person, when in fact their expectations were unrealistic. Romantic love is not everything. If it is everything to you, you will never be content.

Commanded to find happiness

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

*"Rejoice **in the Lord** always; again I will say, Rejoice."* (Philippians 4:4)

"For the fruit of the Spirit is... joy." (Galatians 5:22).

It is not that God does not want us to be happy, but the very opposite is true. No one accuses someone of sinning if they came to the Lord because they were seeking for peace and joy and love. We would say, *"Welcome! This is the only place you will find it!"* Jesus invited all that are hungry and thirsty and weary to come to Him to be satisfied and find rest (Matthew 11). He didn't say that they ought to make sure they

are well fed and looking good, and feeling good, and work on themselves before they can come to Him. God isn't interested in the winners who have it altogether but is interested in those who realise they don't have it together! So there's nothing self-centred about looking for happiness in God and in fact he commands we do. But he commands we find it in him, because nothing else will make us happy.

God does not invite us in to finding happiness in Him alone, and making Him our treasure, because He is being selfish and doesn't want us to 'experience' the happiness of romance or success or whatever else you might pursue. Rather, it's that romance or these other things cannot ultimately fulfil us or make us happy. But happiness in God can make *for* happy romance when the time comes.

The goal is therefore God

Philippians 3:8,9

"Everything else is worthless when compared with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I may have Christ and become one with Him."

This is our starting, central, and finishing point when it comes to living in our singleness. Our single happiness is God. We need to shift our goals to His goals, realising that marriage may become a part of our lives but is not *the* goal and heartbeat of our lives. This helps to put marriage in perspective, in the right place, releasing the pressure of having to get married before we turn a certain age or whatever.

Eternal life is ours now, not just when we die. In John 17:3 Jesus defines eternal life as *knowing God*. This is for us *now*. We can experience

God's joy now and in greater measure as we continue our Christian lives, in anticipation for the final day when Christ's glory will be revealed. (1 Peter 4:13.)

We can consider marriage as worthless when compared to the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord. It's not that marriage is 'worthless' or 'garbage' but we should be considering the pursuit of marriage a 'worthless' endeavour or goal when **compared** to the priceless gain of knowing Christ. Just like we can do with everything else.

This sets us free from looking to marriage for our happiness but rather looking to making marriage happy. This doesn't mean that now we should feel guilty that we would like to get married; what it means is we understand that marriage isn't the highest form of satisfaction or intimacy in this life.

Therefore, if God has a plan for us that does not involve marriage, we can have faith that He will supply us all the joy and intimacy we would need so that it will never become a stumbling block to us. This does not mean the Christian life is without suffering. It is. Jesus told us to expect suffering - and even suffering under temptation. But it means in the midst of all that, we know where true joy lies. And If we do get married, marriage doesn't get in the way of how we pursue or love God and His purposes. It simply adds a different dimension to it.

Promise and faith

Psalm 16:11

"You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever."

It's not that we *should* find our joy and fulfilment in God, it's that we *can*. When it is a 'should' we can be guilty of making God's promises into a kind of work that we must do to become spiritual and a 'good Christian'.

But the problem with finding our joy in God is that we cannot make it happen, only He can.

This is why the Christian life is one of faith. We *trust* God for it. We *look* to God. We can't conjure up our feelings or make ourselves content in God. Rather we have to look at the scriptures speaking about us to find delight in God as *promises*, and trust in Him to fulfil those promises.

However, what we can do is recognise the idolatry in our lives – or ask the Spirit to reveal it to us – and daily find ways to help our faith to thrive. This does not mean every lonely feeling is an indication of idolatry of romance in our lives. It doesn't mean loneliness isn't normal or that we should never experience it. What it means is that we constantly consider what the *pursuit* of our lives truly is.

We won't change overnight. Like with all things in the Christian life, we walk this day-by-day, immersing ourselves in the story of Jesus day-by-day, putting our trust in Him as things and feelings and disappointments and struggles and victories come our way.

Pursuit of God makes our relationships better

Obviously, if we're going around constantly asking 'is this the one?' or 'Who is it, Lord?' we may have made marriage and romance more of a

big deal in our lives than it ought to be.

This constant focus on marriage and romance also makes many of our relationships too intense. **If we need someone else to make us feel happy - to take away our loneliness - we will put too much pressure on them.** We stop being able to just enjoy ourselves around the opposite sex, and they can't just enjoy themselves around us, because there is always a hidden motive or desire.

Therefore, the starting key for a happy single life is to find the happiness you need in God.

The second key is a question. What if God designed singleness for your happiness? How would you think about it? Would it change the way you view it?

Part 2:

SINGLENESS IS GOD-GIVEN

Genesis 5:12

“Male and female he created them, and he blessed them.”

Genesis 1:27

*“So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.”*

When God created us, he created us with our own identity. Every individual is created in his image. You are you. He did not create us with a missing identity that needs to be completed by someone else.

There is no such thing as a soulmate

In what's become a famous line from the movie Jerry Maguire, the main character (Jerry) has had a fallout with his wife, Dorothy. He busts into a room and goes on about how he misses her and says, *“I love you. You - complete me.”*

She responds by saying, *“Shut up. Just shut up. You had me at hello.”*

It's a brilliant romantic scene and is great as far as it goes, but sometimes this idea of being 'completed' by someone else can be taken in the wrong direction. While God made husband and wife to be 'one flesh' (Mark 10:6-8) and it's true that they are to grow towards each other in such a way that they are practically inseparable, it is not

true that we have no identity until we find someone to *complete* us. **God never made each of us only a half-person who requires another half to make us whole, but he made us a whole person who marries another whole person, and the two wholes become one.**

While you're single, let Jesus make you whole again. Because marriage isn't going to do that for you.

The Bible makes no indication whatsoever that there is anything like a soulmate, a 'other half', a mysterious someone out there who is perfect for you. The idea of a 'soulmate' comes from Greek philosophy where it was believed that mankind originally had four arms, four legs, and a single head with two faces. The God Zeus split humans in half as punishment for humanity's pride, and to double the number of humans who would give tribute to the gods. Therefore, humans long for their 'other half' to 'complete' them. As the legend goes: *"When the two find each other, there is an unspoken understanding of one another, that they feel unified and would lie with each other in unity and would know no greater joy than that."* Sound familiar to how our culture often speaks of these things?

You do not 'need' a partner to be whole

Therefore, God created us 'male' and 'female' and we do not need our identity from someone else, except Christ himself. **We are all made in His image. You do not need someone else to complete His image in you - it is perfect as it is.** We do not 'need' anyone to make us whole, we can be whole when we find our contentment in Christ, when we let Christ heal up our wounds and consequences of our sins.

This speaks into a number of issues:

- a.** We do not need to flitter in and out of relationships, searching for the perfect 'soulmate' and constantly talking and worrying about 'compatibility'. Our reasons for 'compatibility' have less to do with character, personality, or likes and dislikes, and more to do with calling and where you believe God is taking you. (More on this later.)
- b.** We do not need someone else to make us happy but can, truly, be content where we are right now.
- c.** We don't need someone else to make us feel better about ourselves, to help us with our self-esteem, to make us feel like we have value. We can have all the self-esteem we need right now, if we look to make Christ our happiness.
- d.** We will not live unproductive, lonely, uncolourful, horrible, narrow lives if we remain single for life (celibacy).
- e.** If we are struggling with same-sex attraction, we *can* choose to be celibate. We are not slaves to loneliness and do not need someone else to complete us. We will not finally be 'who we are' by having a partner. You don't need anyone to help you with your self-esteem or your value or identity: you are made in God's image, just as you are, just like everyone else.
- f.** A lack of romantic interest from others towards you does not mean there is something wrong with you, or that you're gay, or that you have a personality disorder, or asexual, or have some or other intrinsic problem at the deepest level. Sure, maybe you can cut your hair or look after your appearance or sort out some sort of character issues or find a way to relate to others a lot easier, but you have issues just

like everyone else and are not somehow 'worse' than others or 'strange' or 'weird' whatever lie you've come to believe.

What God created us for

God did not create us *for* marriage, although he did create marriage.

But did not God say it is not good for the man to be alone? (Genesis 2:18). Yes. But that's not all the scripture says. Paul was a single man and note what he says about singleness:

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."*

Singleness is a gift and marriage is a gift. They are both gifts from God.

James 1:17 NIV

"Every good perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights who does not change like shifting shadows."

God only gives good gifts. So then, singleness is a good gift from God.

1 Timothy 6:17 NIV

"God... richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."

"Everything" means "everything"! Your singleness is given to you for your enjoyment.

In marriage, God gives you grace for marriage. In singleness, God gives you grace for singleness. He gives you what you need now. You don't need marriage. You don't need singleness (when you get married). **The gift you have right now is good enough and is given to you for your enjoyment.**

None of this means marriage isn't good or that it's wrong to want to be married. It simply means that you don't need it right now and can enjoy where you're at. **God created us for His Kingdom. Remember, Jesus was a single man.** Genesis 1 and 2 shows us that God created us to work and have 'dominion' over the earth - a call for us all before we speak about marriage. There is no scripture in the Bible that commands us to pursue marriage, but there are plenty of scriptures that command us to seek His Kingdom, His righteousness; to seek for holiness; to fulfil God's call and mission on this earth; and so on.

Your singleness is designed to assist you in fulfilling your call in God right now, just as marriage will be later. **In fact, if you can figure out your call while you're single, you will have more wisdom in knowing who to marry - because you will be looking for someone who might have a similar call.** You do not get married and make your spouse your objective and call in life. Your spouse is not your call. Your children are not your call. This does not mean to say that fathering and mothering is not a call, or being a wife or husband is not a call, only that you have other calls outside of these as well, which you can figure out now while single. When you get married you go on a journey together, walking side-by-side in God's call for you as individuals and as a couple, which will include children and so on.

How singleness works

With this in mind, let's look more closely on why singleness is a good gift and how you can use it more effectively:

1. Your witness of Christ is unique

1 Corinthians 7:30

"Happiness or sadness or wealth should not keep anyone from doing God's work."

Marriage or singleness, loneliness or happiness, should not keep you from doing God's work. And, indeed, it need not! The Kingdom doesn't require these things but requires your heart. You don't need to be married to be effective!

Being joyous and grateful and totally secure in Christ as a single person, as a whole person with a secure identity, is truly a great testimony to the world. While the world makes out as if you need someone to complete you, living a content life now in Christ, is a brilliant witness. For most people happiness in singleness is truly a miracle. And it is. We can show off God's worth in it.

2. You can celebrate true sexuality

We do not need sex to make us happy or to enjoy life. This is impossible for the world but "with God all things are possible." (Mark 10:27). It's demonstrably true that people who sleep around are not the happiest individuals in life - in fact, often they are the very opposite! Their relationships become fickle and manipulative, and they struggle to just enjoy the opposite sex without hidden agendas, making every

relationship a mess.

Our sexuality as a man or woman does not require actual sex to be validated. You are not 'more of a man' or a 'real woman' just because you have slept with someone. Our sexuality is found in how God created mankind – either as 'man' or 'woman'. We don't need to be confused or wonder if we really *are* a man or a woman. We don't need to wonder if we are a man in our minds but a woman in appearance, or visa versa. This is because God created us whole beings with intrinsic value, not as halves or whatever else. You are fine the way you are.

Living as a whole, confident, man or woman – and being happy with who we are created to be – is a huge testimony to the world that is constantly confused about sexuality and trying to find identity and value and looking everywhere for happiness; always wanting to change and work on the self to be someone else. As singles, we are uniquely placed to celebrate sexuality without it needing to be validated by any outside source, but validated simply because God created male and female good. There is nothing wrong with male or female, it is perfect as it is.

However, this does not mean we should become idealistic about sex.

We do have sex drives. God made us that way. He made us to be attracted to each other. Just because we can find fulfilment in God does not mean we should be super-spiritual about sex. We have bodies with all sorts of chemical processes and we have imaginations. We find certain people more attractive than others. This is all real and it's all good. **In fact, our sex drives are useful in that they help us to know we should probably get married and that we shouldn't be lazy about finding someone to marry.** They help to put the necessary

'urgency' on it, otherwise we might just never bother. More about this in the 'sex' (part 4) and 'dating' (part 5) sections.

3. You can celebrate true friendship

1 Timothy 5:1b;2

"[treat] younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity."

God provides us with many friends and a family of our own in His Church. Being single is not a life lived in loneliness, but a life lived in rich blessings of friendship, love and commitment to a family God has given to us. Of course this does get difficult as we get older, but that doesn't mean we cannot serve our married friends in our friendships in unique ways. We serve brothers and sisters in absolute purity and with gladness. This baffles the world. We love our brothers and sisters unconditionally. Once again, the world doesn't understand this but knows that it's amazing.

Friendships are fun, but the world takes this away and insists it must always be more. The world finds it incredibly hard, or downright impossible, to keep things pure in relationships. This is why the world these days even tries to insist that a good male-male friendship must have sexual undertones, that perhaps we're all homosexual in some way. (This is becoming a more prevalent view these days.)

However, as Christians, we can serve our brothers and sisters in a love that is pure and unselfish. This is an awesome testimony to others of the unconditional love of Christ. If we trust in God we can love our brothers and sisters not because they are potential partners, or

because they are attractive, or because we get attention from them or they make us feel good. We love our brothers and sisters in complete purity - serving them out of love, regardless of who they are or what they've done for us.

Being able to love without hidden agendas is liberating, and it creates healthy relationships that can more naturally move toward a romantic relationship if you are falling in love. More about this in part 5 on dating.

4. You can serve in a unique way

1 Corinthians 7:32 - 35

"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."

It goes without saying that single people just have more time for Kingdom stuff - whether it's serving at your church, going on trips, pioneering a church plant, social justice, or wherever you feel you are called. (Generally speaking. There are some cases where this may not be the case; financial constraints; sickness in the family; ill health; your spouse has died, etc.). You can also take more risks for the Kingdom.

You can go to dangerous countries and face persecution without needing to worry about your kids etc.

What this means is that your effectiveness for the Kingdom is felt in different ways compared to married people's effectiveness. Generally speaking, you can live with less, or give your money more, and be a different kind of witness, serving in ways married people perhaps cannot.

5. You can devote more time to your personal spiritual needs

You can actually devote much more time than married people to prayer and study. Even just your head space can be a little clearer – you don't need to be thinking about the day-to-day concerns of family life (is dinner for the kids sorted? Do we need to take the kids to their sports practice? Etc.). This is why Paul said, “those who marry will have worldly troubles” (1 Corinthians 7:28c) and also reiterated this in detail in 1 Corinthians 7:32-35 above. The point is not that marriage or singleness are better than the other, but they are *different* to each other.

Of course you should look after yourself and your home etc., but your head space isn't as cluttered. You can form those habits that help you with your faith now, which will be great habits to have taking you into marriage, if you get married.

The single life therefore gives glory to God

In these ways, God is uniquely glorified through the single life. God is able to strengthen us and supply us everything we need as we go through this adventure. The single life is a good gift, because we can

be such a great witness and we can serve the Church in such unique ways.

None of the points above were designed to make marriage look like a negative thing, or encourage singles to be complacent about actually pursuing a spouse. They were designed for us to see the positive aspects of our singleness and use them effectively.

So singleness brings wonderful purpose in this life. It's a life of love, lived out uniquely for our King.

If singleness is so good, why get married?

Because you might fall in love. And, quite frankly, you might not be able to manage your sexual needs forever. This is why Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 7:9 that, "it is better to marry than to burn with passion." He reiterates this in verse 36: "if [your] passions are strong, and it has to be... then marry." (Paraphrased.)¹

It is also true that we must assess God's call and be realistic about it. You may feel a strong call towards motherhood or fatherhood, for example, and that's fine. This is why in all this we must remember Paul's advice: *"Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him."*

¹ 1 Corinthians 7 is a very interesting passage to read, but it can generate some confusion, as sometimes it appears Paul is insisting singleness is better than marriage. For example, verse 38 says: *"So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better."* It is important to note the context. Paul speaks of a 'present crisis' in verse 26. It appears he may be speaking about persecution. In other words, his advice is it is better not to marry under heavy persecution because marriage will make persecution even more difficult. However, if you are struggling with self-control, then it is better to marry.

Part 3:

SEEKING THE KINGDOM

Matthew 6:33

"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

This is the life of freedom – seeking Christ first. Seeking His Kingdom is firstly an aspect of faith, trusting in Jesus and resting on His work, on his death and resurrection, that establishes the Kingdom.

Putting Christ and His Kingdom first sets us free in our relationships because it gives us vision and purpose for our lives that our future partners can be a part of. They are our future *partners* – you do things together; fulfil a mission together; do what God has called you to do together. If, while you're single, you're able to get your focus set on the Kingdom then you will find it easier to know who you should marry and when and why, because you'll know what you're on about.

The worth of the Kingdom

Matthew 13: 44-46 (NIV)

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it."

There are many parables Jesus used to explain the Kingdom, but these two are great for our purposes here. Let's see what we can see here:

1. The kingdom of heaven is a treasure, or expensive pearl

Note that the man who found the treasure went, in his joy, and bought the field. There is a delight in this kingdom, a joy hidden in it, that we can experience and have. There is also a sense of relief - when you truly find the Kingdom, you realise you've found what you were looking for, and are ready to pay anything for it - perhaps even marriage or romance or sex. It is a treasure worth selling everything else off for.

2. But it is hidden

It's a treasure in a field, or a pearl that's not easily found. In other words, the Kingdom is not a common thing. It's not lost either - it's just hidden from us. To find it we need to dig deep and get dirty. We have to really look and expect to find it. This is a thing of faith: God promises that this Kingdom is worth everything, so therefore, if it doesn't seem that way right now, then put some effort into finding out exactly why Jesus says what He says.

3. It really is worth everything

Jesus isn't idealistic. He knows that we need things for the body, for our emotions, and so on. That's why he speaks of 'these things' in Matthew 6:33. But he also says that when you seek the Kingdom first, your perspective changes. What we find there satisfies our deepest longings. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." (Matthew 5:6.) You *will* be filled!

4. The Kingdom is God himself

When we are born again we get the Holy Spirit, God Himself, living in

us. The Kingdom comes to live in our hearts.

John 17:3 defines eternal life as knowing God. In Luke 17:20,21 note what Jesus says: *“Now at one point the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God was coming, so he answered, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is in your midst.’”* (NET).

The Kingdom of God refers to wherever God reigns. Where the Kingdom is, there is the King, Jesus. He embodies the Kingdom, shows its characteristics. Where Jesus is, there is the Kingdom. If you know Jesus, you know the Kingdom; if you know the Kingdom, you know Jesus.

The Kingdom is the transformation of everything

The Kingdom is not, strictly speaking, a place, like heaven, or an idea or a hope, like seeing society transform. Yet it brings heaven to earth (God’s reign to earth) and transforms people and, thus, society.

This is because where the Kingdom of God is is where the Spirit of God is, and where the Spirit of God is is where God's presence is, and where God's presence is there is joy and peace and hope and faith and love and so on.

1. It transforms how we love

What the Kingdom does is transform our hearts and thus how we love. It means we love properly – in a Jesus kind of way. To seek “his righteousness” is not to seek a moral law or idea or philosophy or formula, but it is to seek His kind of righteousness: encapsulated by his love, a love characterised by laying down His life. “Greater love has no

one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13.)

Seeking God’s Kingdom, pursuing it before marriage, means we no longer love with hidden agendas. No more awkwardness, weird intensity, or ‘whatever’ kinds of attitudes. We love without baggage, awkwardness, putting up walls, leading people on, pointless flirting, freaking out when we discover someone likes us but we never thought of them that way, or with skewed intentions. It can still be a bit messy, but it’s better than it would otherwise be! We forgive easier, look to understand where people are at, and love with abandonment – finding our security in Christ. This brings maturity to how we handle our relationships and how we approach dating.

Because God loves you, you are free to love others; and to love yourself unconditionally. So no more worrying about if there is something wrong with you and why you are still single; no more insecurity about who you are. Rather, love yourself! Because God’s love is fully reliable. We are free to love others because we have a secure love in God. Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

2. It transforms our purpose in life

People generally want to marry people who have a focus and purpose for their lives that goes beyond just the person they marry. If our wives or husbands are our world, our world will be very small indeed! Imagine the pressure you put someone else under by making them your world? This all might sound romantic and ideal, but in reality insular relationships like this end up only in disaster and can be, quite frankly, *weird*. There is a word for this: obsession. Or stalkerish. No one

really wants someone to obsess over them, how strange!

When someone is your world and they hurt you (which they will, even if you're married!) your world comes crumbling down. Love moves to hate very quickly. Or it stays obsessive and possessive and constricting. But if you are on an adventure with someone, doing something together, the relationship is healthier and much more fun!

Seeking God's Kingdom first brings purpose to our lives and makes it easier to find a partner for our adventure. Marriage becomes a decision we make based on the Kingdom and its proclamation in this world. That doesn't mean marriage is a decision without emotions or falling in love, it just means that we are living in freedom from worrying about it. So our goal is Kingdom, not marriage.

This allows for marriage to be free from unrealistic expectations and, thus, love is free to be love. Marriage is not a goal but a blessing, not an expectation but a surprise.

3. It transforms our enjoyment of life

How many people after getting married have said, "Now what?" People have affairs because they get bored. Often that's because they have lost sight of the Kingdom, or never really got it in the first place.

The reason for this is because many of us since we were small thought this was the ultimate goal of life. Get married, have kids, and all that. While those are good things, and wonderful things, and things God uses to give Him Glory, those are not the sole purpose of life. Our sole purpose while single is not to aim for marriage. Family is the central core of society, and we should continue to pray that God moves the

family back into the centre of our society, but that doesn't mean everything else doesn't count.

Everything else does eventually fall into place once we get this as our focus. This frees us up to enjoy our lives now and get busy with what God wants us to do now. We don't have to wait until marriage before life begins! Who said that? Then, truly, we give God the space to move and supply the 'these things' that the Bible is referring to. He will gladly supply the desires of our heart, because our number one desire is to find His Kingdom and His Righteousness. If this is our chief desire, God will indeed move and take care of the rest. Because we will love properly, we will hear Him clearly. Anxiety is gone and we are free to allow God to move and act. We let Him write our story for a change.

And in the case of relationships, we are no longer tense around people and start finally just being ourselves - freeing us up to fall in love and allow God to bring that person who will love us for who we really are. After all, we are no longer hiding who we are - we are secure and confident in who we are (which is the very thing that we need to be attractive to anyone!). If God has marriage planned for us, He is designing us to complement someone else. By seeking the Kingdom, we allow God to shape us into that person who He wants us to be. We will also know how to hear what God is actually saying and not what we want Him to be saying. Psalm 19:7(b) tells us that, "*The commands of the Lord are clear, giving insight to life.*" But unless we are seeking to understand His ways and know His commands, they will not be clear to us.

It's a strange thing that once we give everything up it somehow comes back to us - with a freedom and a joy that was never there before. Or

in a way or a form we didn't expect. Because Christ is now at the centre of it, not ourselves.

Hello contentment

Matthew 16:26, NIV

"What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?"

What good would it be if you gain the perfect spouse but forfeit your soul? You will never be happy.

We can't let our lives be ruled by idealism and perfectionism, always unhappy because things aren't perfect and we can't find the ideal person – or, the person we think is ideal for us just doesn't like us. Our fears and our perfectionism all link in to cause us to lose out on the joy God wants to give us now and to stop seeing how wonderful the gift of singleness really is.

If you are struggling with loneliness, it has a lot to do with your fear. You are afraid, perhaps, about what others think; if you'll always be lonely; if you will always struggle; if life will never have meaning; and so on. But bring your fears to the cross and let them die there.

Paul says in Galatians 6:14: *"Because of that cross, my interest in this world died long ago, and the world's interest in me is also long dead."* Because of Christ we need no longer be cowering, fearful slaves (Romans 6:15) but are now free to live! *"Do not fear anything except the Lord Almighty. He alone is the Holy One. If you fear Him, you need fear nothing else."* (Isaiah 8:13.) Loneliness may be a passing feeling, but it is not here to stay. Put your trust in Christ and seek the Kingdom

first, and all these things will be added to you.

Part 4:

SEXUAL STUFF

Our battles with sex and attraction are not the biggest battle in life. Sometimes it feels that way, but the scriptures don't treat it that way. Sexual sin is not worse than any other sin. But it affects our bodies and emotions and psychology more than other sins, which is, of course, problematic.

Sex, the body, nakedness, desire is not evil

It seems obvious that since God created sex, it in itself is not evil. God created us to desire for someone of the opposite sex, and even to desire for sex itself. This is a good thing. As we noted in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says it is better to marry than to burn with passion. If you find yourself struggling in this area, it's a good sign that you should probably get a move on and get married!

Some people think that Christians are ashamed of the body or find it disgusting, hence our stance against pornography and the like. This is not true. It's because we hold the body in such high esteem - believing that God himself lives in us - that we believe it should not be shamed.

Some religious teaching says that all things that are pleasurable are sinful and all things that are not pleasurable are not. This is also not a Christian view. It is based on an ancient heresy known as gnosticism, which claimed that all things material are evil and all things spiritual are good. However, Christianity teaches that God created the world and created man and woman and called it all 'good'. The material world

is good, as far as God is concerned, and this includes the body; our desires; nakedness; sex; and so on. God did command we 'go forth and multiply' and, well, practically speaking, that means sex. He created pleasure and experiences pleasure himself. (See Matthew 11:25,26; Ephesians 1:5,9; Matthew 12:18; Matthew 17:5).

"Everything comes from Him; everything exists by His power and is intended for His glory." (Romans 11:36.) Pleasure exists because

- (a) God created it (everything exists by His power).
- (b) He created it to give glory to Him.
- (c) We experience pleasure because we are created in (or as) His own image.

We are far too easily pleased

"If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." - C.S. Lewis²

² C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965), 1-2

We are far too easily pleased with less pleasures such as pornography, one-night stands, fantasy, or any other misuse of sex. Sex itself is a lesser pleasure to knowing God. Sex in marriage is a better pleasure than outside of it. Often our problem is we don't aim for the best things but will settle for whatever. But God's way is the way of true pleasure, as Psalm 16:11 says: *"You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever."*

Putting our sexual desires in the rightful place

It's now time to put all the background thinking aside and address the real practical issues. You have a sex drive. What are you supposed to do with it now, when you're single?

1. Can I look?

Matthew 5:27 - 30

"27 'You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell."

As with all of Jesus' teaching, he expounds on the Old Testament Law by uncovering the original intent of it (the "Spirit" of the Law - i.e. the Holy Spirit's words in the Law). Sometimes this means he alters it and gives it a new meaning.

In this case, Jesus brings together the seventh and tenth commandments. They are: 'you shall not commit adultery' and 'you shall not covet your neighbour's wife'. He does this to show how adultery and covetousness are linked.

It's interesting that he speaks about *adultery*. He could have said that whoever looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed 'fornication' with her in his heart, but he focuses on adultery. Why? Because he is actually talking about marriage. Right after this he continues to talk about divorce. The context is marriage.

In other words, Jesus is **not** saying that **all** looking is sinful. He is saying that a particular **kind** of intention *behind* a look is sinful - namely, the intention of divorcing your wife for no good reason except for the fact that you're bored, tired of her, over her problems, and you now want someone else's. That's precisely what they were doing in those days and it's precisely what people still do today.

Jesus is condemning a heart that sets itself upon a person who doesn't belong to it. In other words, a married man who sets his heart upon another woman (married or unmarried). In those days divorce was actually quite easy - if your wife didn't please you then you could easily divorce her and marry that other girl you've been looking at with sexual intent. You could do all this legally and think yourself a pretty holy person because it was all done within the law. But the problem is that it completely misses the *heart* of God in the law. What Jesus is saying is that the moment you set your heart upon having someone else's wife you sinned already - you can get around the law as much as you want but your heart is still sinful. You're as guilty as the person

who did everything illegally and bedded her while he (or her) were married to someone else.

With this context in mind what else can we see? **Jesus isn't condemning sexual desire!** He is not saying you are not allowed to be attracted to anyone! God created us with a particular sexual drive so that we would get married. Your struggles with sexual desire are saying that, perhaps, you're not called to a life of celibacy. You should make an effort to get a move on and get yourself married - especially if you're a guy.

Obviously, sex is not the sole reason why someone should get married, but it plays a part and we shouldn't be super-spiritual about that. Sexual desire is good. If you find someone attractive, that's good and normal. As Martin Luther says:

"For when should people marry, if they would not have desire and love for one another? Yes, that is the reason why God has given this eager desire to bride and bridegroom, otherwise every one would flee from and avoid marriage."

If this offends you then you may see sexual desire too narrowly. It does include (even for men) the desire for intimacy, closeness, partnership and friendship. But men also do just desire sex for the sake of sex and Jesus doesn't condemn that either.

However, fantasizing about being in bed with someone who is not your spouse - whether they are single or not - is not being condoned here. God's main definition of sinful desire begins with our heart and

intention. The Bible isn't saying that sex or fantasy outside of marriage is good but it is saying that, when you're single, the desire for someone (who is not married already) is perfectly fine.

The question is: are you going to do something about it? If not, then move on! Because one day that person is going to be someone else's spouse! Stop desiring after them if you're not going to marry them. Why bother? Choosing to fantasize about them is a pointless endeavour and has more to do with your covetousness than it does with reality. They are not your wife or husband and you have no realistic intention, or ability, to make them so! If you desire them that much but don't want to marry them (or can't) then move on. Get over it because it's not going to go anywhere!

This is not to say that thinking about sex itself is wrong or evil, but it all boils down to what you're going to do about it and where it's leading you. Our thoughts should line up with how we should live. Our imagination has a way of making us want to really do whatever we imagine - in other words, you will find yourself less able to restrain yourself. Also, you couldn't fantasize about having a bunch of partners and claim you are not lusting because you're just 'thinking about sex'. You're not just thinking about sex and that's obvious. Our thought life must line up to God's word as much as our real lives do.

What is foolish is to go home and indulge in porn and say 'you're just looking'. You're doing far more than that and you probably know it. Pornography is designed to make us see sex in ways that are unrealistic and unhealthy. We need to cover this as porn has become a common problem:

1. It affects our psychology. Studies are now showing that some people have become so accustomed to pornography that they no longer find themselves attracted to real people. Their bodies are only stimulated by pixels on a screen.

2. It affects our bodies. While it's not clear (yet) what it does to a woman's body, it is being shown that pornography is a leading cause of erectile dysfunction in younger men (this is due to an over-use of dopamine and other chemicals that it stimulates).

3. Pornography is prone to inciting and encouraging violent, unhealthy and unrealistic views of sex. The more you use it, the more depraved it gets (you find you need more depraved kinds of porn) – heading towards more violent porn, child porn, BDSM, etc.

4. Pornography is a kind of prostitution. It is run by producers who realistically function as pimps. It frequently takes advantage of young women who are in desperate situations. Like with prostitution, producers (or pimps) get the girls addicted to drugs as a way of paying them.

5. Pornography has become notorious for being an unjust industry, where girls are promised payment and not paid; where girls are told they will do one kind of scene but are manipulated into doing another; and so on. **It has been found to be a major contributor to human trafficking.**

6. Studies are beginning to show how pornography affects the way in which a person relates to others. It frequently creates recluses – people who don't want to be around others, have a low self-esteem,

and are ashamed of themselves. It can have serious affects on your social life and family life.

It's safe to say that pornography simply never goes in the way of love outlined by Jesus but only encourages the exact opposite. This is not to say that nakedness is evil or there is anything wrong, strictly speaking, with art that portrays nudity. But the lines are often so fine and difficult. If you're an artist or you love art, you will need to follow your own conscience with regards to that.

Therefore, as Martin Luther says:

"You may look, indeed, at any woman or man; but only be careful that there be no lusting. For to this end God has ordained that every one should have his own wife or her own husband, so that every one may properly gratify both lust and desire. If you do not go beyond this you have his sanction, and he adds his blessing to it, and is satisfied with it, as his ordinance and creature. But if you go beyond this, and are not satisfied with what God has given you, but go lusting and gaping after others, then you have already gone too far, and have confounded the two, so that the looking is spoiled by the lusting... So you understand when looking at a woman is sin, or is not sin, namely, that one is not to look at another as every one is to look at his wife."³

³ Martin Luther's Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. Translated by Charles A. Hay, D. D. Public domain. Available at <http://www.godrules.net/library/luther/37lutherO.htm>, last accessed May 2014.

We must be mature in these matters. While we're single, we must learn to be mature, and not follow the world's immaturity or easy ways out.

2. So no sex until marriage?

Sex is reserved for husband and wife and in that realm alone. As singles, we are to honour marriage and the marriage bed (Hebrews 13:4). As Jesus said in **Mark 10:6-9** -

"But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and 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."

Do you find it difficult, in our culture, to uphold that sex is between a husband and wife alone? Does it sound impossible? Then, get married. We have already covered the fact that talk about 'being compatible' and worry around 'the one' is not Biblical - in other words, talk of having sex first to see if you are 'right for each other' is nonsense. Married couples will tell you that the sex gets better, because sex is something you learn to get better at. There's really no such thing as 'compatibility' when it comes to sex and love. **While love happens to us (we fall in love) it is also a choice we have to make.** The two go hand-in-hand.

Proverbs 5:15

"Drink water from your own well - share your love only with your wife. Why spill the water of your springs in public, having sex with just anyone? You should reserve it for yourselves. Don't share it with strangers. Let your wife be a fountain of blessing for you.

Rejoice in the wife of your youth. She is a loving doe, a graceful deer. Let her breasts satisfy you always. May you always be captivated by her love. Why be captivated, my son, with an immoral woman, or embrace the breasts of an adulterous woman?"

If there was any question that God is pro-sex, then these verses should answer that! Note the imagery used. Sex is like water. It is refreshing, satisfying, pure, and living. "Let your wife be a fountain of blessing for you." Sex is a blessing, not an ensnarement or addiction. Don't turn it into one. It is romantic - being captivated by each other, and by each other alone. Don't turn it into something else. Don't share it with others. Keep it mysterious, keep it lovely, keep it exciting.

Proverbs 5 continues:

"For the Lord sees clearly what a man does, examining every path he takes. An evil man is held captive by his own sins, they are ropes that catch and hold him. He will die for lack of self-control, he will be lost because of his incredible folly." (Proverbs 5:21.)

Don't be lied to about this. Anything outside of that one sexual relationship between husband and wife is foolish. You will become captive to your sins, ensnared. A lack of self-control brings disease, heartbreak, psychological problems, emotional issues, and the list goes on. Don't listen to the world's excuses: they have been proved wrong time and time again.

By celebrating God's intentions for sex and marriage, even though we are single, we become unique witnesses of His Kingdom to others. So

part of our work as single people is to honour marriage, make purity desirable, and showcase God's glory through pure relationships - treating all as brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, in God's love. Marriage is a covenant, it showcases God's story between his church and Jesus. (Ephesians 5:25.) We celebrate sex by not letting sin take us captive but by letting God take us captive, and being captivated by our spouse when we get married.

What do we if we fall?

As with everything else in the Christian life, we must hold to the gospel of Jesus Christ that proclaims our sins are forgiven because he paid the price for them on the cross; and that we have been made new in him. This means we do not 'try harder' when we fall but we cast ourselves onto Him; we rest in Him; we look to Him; we rely on His Spirit. There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). His plan is to sanctify us completely (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

We must live in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is where we draw our strength from. Do not think that we must be pure to know God. The truth is the opposite - we must know God to be pure. Don't think that you need to be pure before you can pray - the truth is, you must pray to become pure. The Lord never asked us to be strong and able, He has told us (and instructed, commanded, urged and willed) for us to go to Him and let Him live through us.

Stop trying to do this without the Lord, as if He is giving you points for something. God isn't interested in being impressed with your willpower. All He wants is you, and for you to rely on His work, past, present, and future.

This is why we are part of a local church which reminds us of these things, and is where we can learn to live in God's forgiveness and walk by His Spirit of truth. We also, therefore, surround ourselves with help; are open about our struggles; get close to our leaders to help us; and remember, we are all sinners forgiven because of God's grace.

Part 5:

DATING AND ROMANCE

There is no Biblical formula for dating. It's simply not there.

Many have tried to find a 'tried and tested' formula or set of principles from the Bible to go by. But these always break down eventually. For example, in the scriptures, we see plenty of arranged marriages in the Old Testament, leading some to conclude that God 'arranges' things for us. Some have noted that Adam fell asleep while God took out his rib, created Eve, and then presented her to him. Therefore, they claim, we should relax and let God bring our partner to us.

But how does He do that? Does He strike you with lightning and write 'the one's' name in the sky? If that's what you're waiting for you're probably going to be waiting forever. Does He wake you up one day in the middle of the night and say 'you need to marry so and so'? For some, maybe; for most, no. Does He expect us to date one after the other until we find the right one? Well, that comes with a lot of problems.

Some say that God wants the guys to pursue the girl they like. For after all, we are to love our wives as Christ loves the Church; and Christ pursued us even when we wanted nothing to do with Him.

There is merit to all these ideas, but we cannot really put together a hard-and-fast rule book from the Bible for dating, especially when these scriptures are also dealing with other issues. So there is simply

no prescription for dating in itself in the scriptures.

Instead, what we have to do is:

- a. Take all we know and learn about Christ-like relationships (purity, honour, love, communication, service, community etc.) and apply them to our dating / romantic lives.
- b. Take all we know about ourselves (our weaknesses, our hang-ups) and put the right boundaries in place.
- c. Take all we know about our context (our culture, small-town, big city, rural, urban, what our family expects) and figure out, with our local church community, what to do.

So how much must we leave up to God and how much must we be involved? This is the age-old question for plenty of things in life. So what follows are thoughts and ideas to get you thinking and hopefully help you garner wisdom for your own context.

Spotting the extremes

There are generally two extremes in the Church when it comes to this topic.

- a. Either we see dating like the world does - a casual fling; a just-looking-around-with-no-commitment kind of thing; and so forth, or
- b. we have an intense view of dating, that it is basically courtship, which puts things under tremendous strain and just plain awkwardness.

The former view of dating is obviously problematic and much of the material we've uncovered hints at why it's just not a good idea, and does not honour our relationships. But the latter view is the one that

gets most Christians in difficulties because it can often come with a veneer of holiness, and there is usually a lot of good intention behind it. Some churches place so much emphasis in 'knowing the right one' - that God will tell you straight-up who it is - that they don't allow much space for dating in the community, creating a scenario where all relationships are at a level of either 'friendship' or 'courting' with the view of marriage, and therefore there is just a lot of unhealthy, strained relationships.

This is not to say that God doesn't tell some people clearly and obviously who they must marry, or that he doesn't make miracles happen. He does, but it's not usually the norm.

What is dating and courtship, really?

Dating is not really about holding hands and kissing or talking about your relationship. **It's more like a relationship where it's obvious that you're both wondering what it would be like if you were to become more than friends.** In other words, **it's a step towards what we might call courtship and a step forwards from just being friends.**

Our culture has elevated dating to such a degree that people think it's okay to have sex on the first, second, or third date. So the world is 'dating' the way married couples 'date'. But sometimes Christians are 'dating' the way engaged couples date - as if we're supposed to know the end of it at the beginning! And Christians sometimes 'go out' with each other the way courting couples 'go out,' as if we're supposed to be fully committed until death-do-us-part before we've spent any significant exclusive time with another person!

Perhaps you have a different view of what 'dating' or 'courtship' means.

What we call it doesn't matter. The point is just to get at the principle. If dating is made too intense we can get hurt easily (and perhaps will avoid it in the future); if dating isn't seen seriously enough we can also get hurt easily (and will perhaps avoid it in the future). **So we've got to let it be that step in the middle where we're not sure where it's going but we're going to risk a bit and find out.**

When the relationship is ready

If dating is too intense and serious we throw our hearts and emotions into a relationship that simply wasn't at the level to sustain the pressure. That's when something that could of worked can fall apart quickly and easily. But if you like the girl and she likes you, you have to do something about it. You have to at least try it out and see if you fall in love. You have to take the risk.

Some Christian girls who tend to subscribe to the good-old fashioned idea that the man must initiate are frustrated because so many Christian guys are just too scared to take a risk, or seem too lazy to bother (waiting for God to present 'the one'). So they will go to the guys who will initiate, who probably have different values to what they do. Some girls even feel that they are simply not attractive enough to Christian guys because today's Christian guy is sometimes just not clear about what they want, or wants to wait for God to 'tell him'. In other words, the guys sometimes play it to safe. Christian guys need to think of these things and be prepared to make a fool of themselves.

An overly-intense view of dating also results in people not learning how to relate to the opposite sex properly. This is unnatural. If they are interested in anyone, they simply don't know enough about them to understand how they can initiate a serious relationship. Or any form of

relationship. This is why there needs to be some kind of step forward.

The point is this: **Guys, if you like the girl, make a move!** Be prepared to look like an idiot. That's mainly your job. **Girls, if you like the guy, make it obvious.** Guys don't do very well with coded responses and special smiles. Don't be too obvious, obviously, but do try and be a little more clear about your intentions. Make the guys feel a little more comfortable to make a fool of themselves.

The other point is this: **don't mess around. Don't play with people's hearts. Don't waste your time. Don't flirt with everyone and see who bites.** Be friends, be open to possibilities, have fun in each other's company, let all your friends be a part of the process, but don't lead people on because it makes you feel good, feeds your ego, or whatever else.

Failed attempts

Another thing to take note of is whether there is a pattern of failed attempts with dating. If it seems that you keep trying and yet keep flittering in and out of relationships, there always seem to be relational breakdowns, or when you get into a relationship you disappear in to some other world, there may be something that needs to be sorted out. This doesn't mean there is something wrong with you, only that your thinking around what dating and romance is about might need some adjustment and, quite frankly, maturing. You need to be mature about this and take stock of what it means and come back to it when you're ready.

Practical tips for dating

So, we're saying dating is okay, so long as there is no pattern of

relational breakdowns. Here are some practical tips to put it all together:

1. Keep it accountable, with friends and leaders. Listen to them.
2. Keep it pure, obviously.
3. Keep it relaxed and have fun together, doing fun things together, and also with friends.
4. Listen to what God is saying.
5. Get to know what Christ-like love looks like from the scriptures and live that out.
6. Be realistic about where you are in life.
7. Be realistic about cultural expectations (having to pay *lobolo*, that sort of thing).
8. Date within community (involve your local church community) and, even if it's embarrassing sometimes, let the community speak into the relationship.
9. Don't force it.
10. Don't be super-spiritual about it (like, if it rains tomorrow, she must be the one. Or, if only every single person in the church is happy about it, then I'll believe he is the one.).
11. Don't create unrealistic expectations (don't make a list of the 'perfect' partner, stick it on your wall, and trust God for all of the list to be ticked! Don't expect them to be perfect and always make you laugh! Be real and let them be real!).
12. Don't disappear from the local church community, isolate yourselves, and live in your own romantic bubble.
13. Decide your boundaries and values ahead of time – make sure you are convicted about purity, accountability, no sex before marriage, etc. *before* you date, so that in the 'heat of the moment' you have convictions to fall back on. Otherwise, when things get hot, it's easy to

just give in if you haven't decided ahead of time you won't.

14. Keep communication lines open between the two of you, and between friends, family, leaders, community.

15. Keep communication with God going - pray!

16. Don't be superficial. "We're just friends." No you're not, and you're irritating everyone when you say it.

17. Do stuff together that's romantic, keep it pure and fun.

18. Do stuff together that's **not** romantic. Go on a church trip together. Paint someone's house together. Find work to do together.

19. Don't spend the night at your boyfriend / girlfriend's place. Sure, we all think we're 'strong enough'. But we also have moments of weakness. Just don't tempt yourself or let your thoughts run where they shouldn't.

20. Don't compare yourself with others or compare your story to others.

21. Give God space to do what he has to do.

22. Give your heart space to grow.

23. Don't lead each other on. You also can't give yourself space forever. There will come a time when you must decide how serious things are getting and move it forward.

24. Don't be emotionally unfaithful. For example, you're dating one guy but you have a 'best guy friend' who you tell everything to, cry on his shoulder, tell your secrets to, and are close to. This doesn't mean to say you cannot have guy friends, but in this case you only lead your 'guy friend' on to think he is 'in there' when, in fact, he isn't; while probably making your actual boyfriend jealous. Both of them will be confused. Maybe you are too? You are stringing both of them on emotionally, creating expectations and relational problems (even between the two of them) and altogether being unfaithful.

There is a lot here, and perhaps you can think of more. As you can see, we're just trying to take Biblical principles about relationships and figure out how to be wise in our situations.

How the Church provides practical opportunities

The local church, being a family-like community, provides opportunities for friendships to flourish a lot easier and develop into serious relationships if that's where it's going. This is because you get involved with doing things together – going on a trip, helping out with events or coffee on Sunday mornings, ministering together, playing the music, and so on. It gives everyone an opportunity to know each other more than in, say, a working environment. In other words, take advantage of the myriad of opportunities in a local church – get integrated and functioning. It's there you get to see everyone's good and bad side, rather than in a date. For example, going on a mission trip together as a group of friends means you spend a lot of time together getting to know each other, and getting irritated with each other, and seeing what everyone is like when they're grumpy due to a lack of sleep!

So practically, be friends if possible, and then be prepared to risk it in a healthy way and 'go out' now and again exclusively with someone you like, and see what happens.

What about love at first sight?

For some people there is such a thing as love at first sight, but usually only one person feels that way and the other needs a bit of time. What we need is to create enough space to find out. Let the romance grow

and when the relationship is ready, and let the courting and that part of the romance begin at the right time. Give the relationship space and give God space. This isn't about doing everything "the right way" this is about doing everything maturely and with honesty and integrity and with love and wisdom, under God's loving care and direction. Listen to the Spirit in your relationships.

Don't look at everyone else's story

The point of all this is to realise that none of it is a formula. All of this is just some thoughts to help you along. **There are millions of stories out there as to how people got together:** Good friends as kids, moved away, met up in a mall years later and fell in love. God told her in a dream. God gently nudged him in the right direction. There simply is no telling what God is going to do - and that is the point! The idea of falling in love usually means that it was a surprise, it was unplanned, and sometimes even took some time before the couple even realised that they were in love.

As a side note, it's perhaps a little more healthy to see 'falling in love' as a process of two people rather than just one! Sometimes a girl has 'fallen in love' with a guy who doesn't really even know her name, and God tells her to wait for him. Sometimes that happens. But not always. The general way most people fall in love is it takes time, communication, family, and community, and a lot of awkwardness!

Romantic fantasizing

Premature romance is what happens when we let our thoughts run too far ahead of the relationship. Sometimes we like someone and dream about what it would be like to go out with them, to have them tell us they love us, or that sort of thing. That can cause a kind of unhealthy

awkwardness and intensity that seems to take the fun out of falling in love away. We've got to watch our romantic feelings and let them grow in proportion to the relationship. Hence Song of Songs (8:4) says:

"I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases."

Allow romance to grow as the relationship grows. Allow romance to mature as the relationship matures. Make decisions when the right time and situation calls for it. Seek God's wisdom and trust Him.

Idolising romance

You cannot serve two masters. (Matthew 6:24.) But whom the son sets free is free indeed. (John 8:36.) While sex can be a problem for some people, other people have a problem with romance itself - they are obsessed with romantic feelings, ideas, ideals, and the mystery of it all.

Don't let romance rule you. You will go nowhere and it will always avoid you. When you love money you never have enough; when you love love you never have enough.

The idol of romance takes away the fun, joy, surprise and freedom that can come with falling in love. Let love awaken when it desires. (As Song of Songs 8:4 says above.) Let God and *time* do the awakening. Let's not force it or long so dearly for that awakening that it rules every part of us. Some of us need to chill and some of us need to get a move on. You will need to think deeply about where you are on that scale.

As a practical idea, if you're struggling with this, maybe you should take a look at what you're reading and watching. Be strict if you must.

Romance novels are not exactly the best, and most of them are actually pornographic. But let God deal with this - let His Spirit lead you - live by His Spirit and not by law. Pray that God will give you a good, godly, well rounded and patient view of romance and that He would write your love story for you. Make Him your treasure. Consider it rubbish when compared to knowing Christ Jesus your Lord. (Philippians 3:8.) He will sustain you with joy far better than what any romance could. Let the divine romance be your first romance!

Ask God to surprise you. You don't know what He might do.

Should you date someone who is not Christian?

If you want to create some serious issues for your life and faith, then go ahead, date someone who isn't a Christian. But if you want to make things easier for yourself, then wisdom says: Only date Christians!

The scriptures are clear that God honours all marriages. However, the scriptures are also clear that it is a bad, bad idea to marry someone outside the Christian faith. *"Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?"* (2 Corinthians 6:14.) Most of the time, people do not become Christians just because you're dating them. It is usually better to avoid this.

Part 6:

CALLED FOR MARRIAGE OR LIFE-LONG SINGLENES?

By now we should have come to three conclusions.

Firstly, that God's will for us all is to find our most delight and joy and desire in Him completely, firstly, and only. We've seen that everything that God gives us is for His Glory, and that His Glory is our joy.

Secondly, we've found that singleness and marriage are good gifts from God and both are designed to give God glory; and therefore both equally as desirable.

Thirdly, we should be getting the sense that God's reveals His Will for us all in many different or surprising ways.

But what is God's perfect will for you? How do you know? What must you do? What must you leave up to God? Can you miss His perfect will? What if you mess up His plan and end up marrying the wrong person? Is that possible? What if God is calling you to remain single for life? Is there such a calling?

All these questions we will attempt to answer in this last chapter, mainly through this verse:

Matthew 19

"Some Pharisees came to Him to test Him. They asked, "Is it

lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said 'for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

"Jesus replied "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

The disciples said to Him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."

Jesus replied, "not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given.

For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."

Let us examine this scripture more closely:

1. "Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

Marriage is God's idea. We didn't come up with this! On a more personal level, *God orchestrates our marriages.* Actively, not passively. He is involved. But so are you.

Where does God's choice end and ours begin? We are not fatalists. Christianity does not teach that every choice we make isn't a real choice but was, in fact, God's choice. We also do not believe that God leaves us to our own. We believe that he is actively working in our lives, shaping our futures personally, but not setting them in stone.

In other words, your choices are real. They are not an illusion. God's choices are real, too. He has a will and purpose for you. You live in a relationship with Him - **he has influence over your future and so do you.** This means:

a. You cannot miss God's 'Plan A' or his 'perfect partner' for your life. As we covered in the beginning, there is no such thing as a 'soul-mate' or someone out there who will 'complete' you. There are simply relationships that may require more work, and some that may require less. But love always succeeds. If you really loved someone but blew it, you haven't blown it for life.

b. God may orchestrate people to come across your path who would make great spouses, but you've still got to make a choice. He might speak to you clearly that this is someone you should marry, as he provides wisdom, but if you make a mess of that relationship it's not that you've missed God's perfect plan for your life! There is always grace.

c. In situations where you really did not have a choice (cultural arranged marriages), God still has a plan. These kinds of situations are outside the scope of this study, but it is worth considering our different cultures and applying Biblical principles to them all.

An example

*Think about how many couples get married before they get saved. They simply fell in love, made a decision to get married, and never consulted God about it at all. Well, did they marry the wrong person? Or was it that they were destined to be married since before time? The answer is neither. God always honours marriage, whether he was invited to be involved with it or not, meaning that **God has joined together every married couple Himself.** Therefore, you don't need to stress. Just work with God, make choices and decisions, and trust Him that if you're doing you best to hear Him then He is really going to speak to you.*

2. "Not everyone can accept this..."

Let's go back to Matthew 19:11, which says *"Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given."* (Remember, Jesus is talking about marrying one person only for life.)

Jesus is saying that not everyone can accept the responsibilities of marriage. In other words, **if you can't accept that you shouldn't divorce, don't marry.** This is precisely the conclusion the disciples came to. That's why they say in verse 10, *"If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."*

This is an interesting response from the disciples. It's as if they had already accepted (like much of our world today) that divorce was

normal. So to counter the problem of divorce they say 'it is better not to marry.' A large part of the world is beginning to accept this view. They are seeing the advantages and freedoms of staying single and so therefore are staying single and just perpetually dating or just living together. However, it doesn't work.

For Christians, though, Jesus saying this is staggering. We can't enjoy the benefits of marriage outside of marriage. (However, we can enjoy the benefits of being single and chaste.) So it's interesting to note that only those 'to whom it has been given' can accept that they should not divorce.

What this is saying, then, is that not everyone has received the ability or the power to accept this word. In other words, not everyone has been given the gift of marriage. Some will be celibate for life and that is also a gift.

To accept this is 'given' to you. Verse 12 continues:

"For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."

For those who don't know, a 'eunuch' was a castrated man who could not have children, but was hired to look after a ruler's harem. In other words, it's a picture of someone who will remain celibate for life. Jesus uses the illustration to show that both choices and non-choices have been involved. Those who have the 'ability' to accept marriage, or accept being a 'eunuch', should choose to accept it.

If this is getting too technical, just hang in there - it'll all make sense in a moment. Let's take a look at all three 'eunuchs' mentioned here.

a) Some are Eunuchs because they were born that way

This can be taken in several ways. In those days, and in certain countries today, someone may have been born into a family where they were promised to the King as a servant from birth. They didn't have a choice. However, this translates into our time and context, as it means i) *some people are born with no desire for marriage* or (ii) *some have no choice but not to marry.*

It's important to note there is nothing strange or odd with you if you don't want to marry, ever. The world does not understand it, but that's because the world has no idea about different calls in God. If God has given this call to you, embrace it, and go with it. It'll work out well in the end.

b) Others were made that way by men

This could refer to some born in a time of war or similar circumstance. They may decide that not to marry is just more wise. Or perhaps you must remain celibate due to a religious tradition (if you are Catholic, perhaps). Perhaps you had an accident, such as a car crash, and are paralysed and it would be better to remain single. Perhaps there are aspects of your culture that need to be considered. The point is to note there is grace for those who have to choose to be celibate due to some situation outside their control.

c) Others have renounced marriage for the Kingdom of Heaven

This seems more like a choice - where a person makes a choice to

renounce marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven. In other words, they saw that it was best (for them) not to get married because their involvement in the Kingdom called for it. Perhaps they are called to very difficult countries, or into very difficult callings (lots of traveling, time away from home etc.), or they have sickness in the family and all the responsibilities fall on their shoulders, or they are living under extreme poverty, or something of that sort.

Persecution is a good reason not to marry as marriage could add many complications to our stand for Christ. Or perhaps they just felt that they shouldn't marry and want to dedicate their entire lives to the family of the Church completely. This is a really admirable, honourable, and wonderful thing to do. Not that marriage isn't. But we should encourage those people who make this choice that they are indeed well appreciated.

This can also refer to people who are struggling with intense same-sex attraction, to the point they are not attracted to the opposite sex at all. (Same-sex attraction can take place in degrees. The world calls people attracted to both sexes 'bi-sexual'. We simply call them 'human'.) In this case, you will be in a situation where you must choose to be celibate, renouncing marriage for 'the sake of the Kingdom', so you can live out God's Word to its fullest.

There is great reward in making this choice, as (hopefully) this study has begun to uncover. Such people ought to be commended and praised. It is a difficult thing and we don't want to pretend it's easy. But God's grace is always sufficient and offers a better way. You do not need anyone to complete you, you are whole as you are, and God will always provide you a family in other ways. There is nothing to fear.

God has amazing plans for you. See the last scripture quoted in this booklet for more encouragement along these lines.

We see Jesus ends it off with *'the one who can accept this should accept it'*. It lines up with what he was saying earlier that only those who can accept this are the one's who it has been given to accept (vs 11). In that sense it was referring to marriage, now he is referring to singleness (or, to celibacy). If you feel God is calling you to celibacy, or if you struggle with same-sex attraction, the encouragement is that **you have the ability to accept this and make the decision to remain celibate**. God has given you, and is giving you, all you need to do this - including his joy and presence in a unique way.

All this lines up precisely to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:7 - *"I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that."* So to accept marriage is a gift. To accept singleness is a gift. And yet both are also your choice.

The Great Gardener

There is a major difference between God having a 'blueprint' for your life or having a 'purpose' or 'call' for you. God's encouragement to you is to put your trust and faith in Him, and work with Him in working out your situations. Secondly, make mature, wise decisions guided by His Word and His Spirit.

Trust God and give Him the space to move. Let God show you the gift He has given you at the right time, when it's the right time. You don't need to keep asking Him if it's singleness or marriage, but rather you can start just getting to know God instead. **Stop longing so dearly for the gift you don't have, but enjoy the gift you do**. Stop comparing

your gift with someone else's gift!

Tomorrow may be the time when he gives you the gift of marriage. Wait for His time. He could reveal it to you in any way, at any time. Chances are you will probably just 'know' as they say. And then, make a decision and a commitment. Be mature in decisions and listen to God's guidance.

And whatever His choice is, accept that with a grateful heart and full of Joy for Him - your one desire and greatest treasure anyway.

Let God be God and shape you and thus shape your future. It may be that he wants you to be mature and ready for marriage, but you're not letting him do that because you're so desperate for marriage. It may be that he wants you to be mature in accepting your singleness, but you're getting in the way and can't see the life he has for you! Put your idealism aside and let God write your story with you.

In Romans 1 it says that we can see God and his invisible qualities through nature. He is more like a gardener than a civil engineer. Nature is random and organised at the same time. God has a plan and purpose for you but he wants you to make decisions as well and walk with you; then he makes a decision and you walk with him. God wants to be our Father, not our Oracle. He's not here to tell us the future. He doesn't deal in fate. He deals in relationship - hour after hour, day by day, month by month, year by year. He walks with us and shapes things as we go, opening it up a little bit every step of the way.

Relationship means we go through life together, including mistakes and hard times. Sometimes God wants us to make a decision for ourselves,

so that if we make the wrong one we can learn from it and be taught through it. And He can be there with us going through it. He wants us to trust Him and risk with Him. We then love and appreciate and enjoy Him more through it all.

Let God grow you. Follow His leading. Let God grow your life. He is the great gardener. (John 15:1.)

And if through all your life God decides in His wisdom and goodness and love not to bring you into marriage he still promises more to you. He promises His very glory. He has a special place for single people in His heart. Yes, with Christ, there is always hope and love.

Isaiah 56:3

"And my blessings are also for the eunuchs. They are as much mine as anyone else. For I say this to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbath days holy, who choose to do what pleases me and commit their lives to me: I will give them-in my house, within my walls- a memorial and a name far greater than the honour they would have received by having sons and daughters. For the name I give them is an everlasting one. It will never disappear!"

Additional resources

If you would like to study this topic further, we recommend the following books:

ON SINGLENESS

Ryan Peter, *Your Single Happiness*.

Available freely at ryanpeterwrites.com

ON HOMOSEXUALITY AND SAME-SEX ATTRACTION

Sam Allbery, *Is God Anti-gay?*

ISBN 978-1908762313