

Over the past 7 weeks we have been studying Paul's letters to the Christian church in Corinth. We have learned that this was a church in conflict over several issues and they wrote to Paul asking for his advice to the issues that they were facing. Paul had founded the church but had moved on to other places. The Corinthian Christians trusted his advice to the issues before them so that is why they wrote to him. First and Second Corinthians in the Bible are Paul's letters in response to specific questions they ask.

This week and next week we are going to be looking at Paul's words that he writes concerning specific issues with marriage and singleness. And let me say that I have been trying to learn all that I can about marriage, the history of marriage, and why Paul may have said what he said about marriage and singleness.

This morning I am going to attempt to lay out a sermon in three parts. I am going to begin by sharing my own personal bias concerning marriage and the role of the government upon my function as a pastor who performs weddings. I am then going to share what I have learned about the history of marriage. And then I am going to attempt to share what I think is the good news that Paul shares concerning marriage and singleness.

If I do my job well, then this message should give folks plenty to talk about. That would be a plug to join the class that meets in the fellowship hall after worship that will talk about the issues which this sermon will raise.

First, I need to be honest about a problem I have with the way marriage is carried out in the United States. If you and your partner decide that you want to be legally married, you will make an appointment with the register of deeds here in York County. You will then complete paperwork and receive what we call a marriage certificate. On this certificate will be a blank space for the wedding officiant to sign.

In York County, SC, the person that can sign that document and legally marry you can be a Notary Public. Anyone here who is a notary public can sign that document that you are legally married. You can head over the UPS station or your local bank and arrange for the person behind the counter to sign off that you and your partner are married.

The state of SC also recognizes pastors as marriage officiants. That means that you can come ask me to perform a wedding ceremony and hand me that wedding document and I am required to sign that document and return it to the Register of Deeds. If I forget to sign that document or don't mail it in within 10 days, I will be fined \$200.

I never agreed to be an agent of York County, the state of South Carolina, or the United States government. However, I am required by law to sign that document if it is presented to me and I officiate at their wedding ceremony.

That bothers me that the government has forced me to be an agent of the state and to carry out a function of the state that I don't think is their responsibility. I hear a lot of talk right now about how the Federal government should be smaller and should limit itself to necessary functions. We in South Carolina talk a lot about states' rights and how local people should be the ones making local decisions.

I personally don't think it is the role of the government to interfere with what I think should be a church decision and a personal decision about who should and should not be married. But that is not the way it works here in the US. In the US, we have a history of the state and federal government deciding who should and should not be married.

That leads me into the second portion of this message. The history of marriage. I have been doing a lot of reading about marriage and the way it has been defined.

For most of Western history, marriage was not a mere personal matter concerning only husband and wife, but rather the business of their two families which brought them together. Most marriages, therefore, were arranged. In ancient Israel, the status of women was low—they were regarded as the property of their fathers or husbands and could do nothing without the consent of father or husband. Hence, the tradition of the father “giving” his daughter in marriage.

The main purpose of marriage during the time of the Old Testament was procreation and the passing on of a man's name. Every healthy person was expected to marry. Single men and women were looked down upon. A man could have several wives and concubines. We see this in the Old Testament. Jacob married two sisters, Leah and Rachel, and Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines.

Divorce was not encouraged, but permitted if a man found some "uncleanness" in his wife. In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, we read that a man could simply write his wife a bill of divorce and send her out of his house. However, it was virtually impossible for a wife to divorce her husband.

When we move into the New Testament, the definition of marriage began to change. Divorces were increasingly frowned upon and there was a general trend toward monogamy.

In our national history here in the US, the federal government saw the benefit of monogamous marriage and passed laws deciding who could and who could not get married. Laws banning white people from marrying black people and Asians were passed in the 1800s. The rise of the Mormons in Utah led to the government passing laws against polygamy. Laws were passed in the early 1900s which gave economic benefit to married people over single people.

So the historical understanding of marriage in our society has not been about love and compatibility. The history of marriage has been about control and influence.

But it is into this cultural understanding of marriage that Paul writes to in his letter to the Corinthians. Next week we are going to look deeper into his advice to married couples but this week I want to focus on what he says to single people.

Remember, single people were considered second class citizens in many ways. If you were not married, you did not have access to power and influence. Marriage was used as a way for families to pass on their name and how that was done.

But Paul says some very challenging words therefore to his culture. He tells single people that they are valuable just as they are. They do not need to be married. They do not need to enter into these cultural formulas to find completeness. They are, as a single person, a whole and valued person.

Paul says it is better to be celibate than it is to be married and sexually active. He says that celibacy is a gift which he possesses but he recognizes that not everyone has this gift. If you can't control your sexual desire, Paul says, it is better to go ahead and get married.

Paul believed that Christ was going to come any day and that it was better to focus on one's relationship with Christ than it was to focus on a relationship with another human being. Paul did not believe in challenging the social hierarchies because he believed that Christ's followers didn't have time for that.

So what would Paul say to folks today that are single? I think he would say that it is ok to be single. You do not need to search for relationships which may not be the place for you. You do not need to enter into relationships because our culture says that you must be married to be important. You do not need to be married even though our government gives tax breaks to those of us who are married.

Divorced people and widowed people are still special in the eyes of God. That specialness is not taken away when one becomes single again.

To the young people that are here today. You do not, and I repeat, you do not need to be dating someone to affirm that you are a special person. You do not need to enter into a relationship to feel better about yourself. You do not need to sleep with someone to be someone of value. Do not enter carelessly into relationships. It is better to be single and spiritual rather than in a relationship and broken from God.

Later on in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes words about love. This text is usually read at weddings to guide newly married couples. And this text is appropriate to read at weddings. But it was not written to a couple. It was written to a group of Christians in how they are to relate to one another.

I am going to read a portion of the 13th chapter now. But I read it now and ask that you ask yourself what this text says to the way we are to treat other people in our lives who are not spouses.

These are words to describe how we treat people we date or have as friends or have as acquaintances.

Read I Cor 13: 4-13. AMEN.

-Coontz, Stephanie, "The Future of Marriage," Cato Unbound, and found at <http://www.cato-unbound.org/2008/01/14/stephanie-coontz/the-future-of-marriage/>

-Magnus Hirshfeld Archive for Sexology, "History of Marriage in Western Culture, and found at http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/ATLAS_EN/html/history_of_marriage_in_western.html

-Cott, Nancy, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation*, Harvard University Press, 2000

-Text: I Corinthians 7 and 13

-Given: February 27, 2011 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)