

"God Wants Me to Do What?" **1 Corinthians 7:8-16**

Introduction

- Are you happy with where you're at? On a scale of 1-10, with "1" being extremely discontent and "10" being extremely content, how content are you?
- Do you remember the Disney movie that came out a few years ago called *The Kid*? [Bruce Willis](#) plays this successful, high-powered image consultant named Russ. One day a kid shows up at his house. Russ eventually realizes this kid is actually the eight-year-old version of himself. His eight-year-old alter ego is begins to explore the house Russ lives in. You might remember the exchange.
- "Chester, Chester. Come here boy," Rusty calls excitedly. "Stop that yelling," says Russ. "Where's Chester?" Rusty asks. "Who is Chester?" "My dog," Rusty replies. "The dog I'm going to get when I grow up. He's the world's greatest dog." "Sorry, no dog here," answers Russ. "No dog! I grow up to be a guy with no dog. Why?" the boy says in disgust. "I don't have time to take care of a dog. I travel all the time for work."
- "I knew it," says Rusty with renewed zeal. "I grow up to fly jets!" "No, I'm not a pilot," Russ answers sadly. "Then what do you do?" "I'm an image consultant," Russ says.
- "Shouldn't there be a lady here," asks Rusty. "You mean my wife? No, I'm not married," replies Russ. "So, you're almost 40, you have no dog, you don't fly jets, and you're not married." The kid flops down on the couch. "I grow up to be a loser."¹
- A 2003 survey asked the question, "How satisfied are you with life?" 57% said very satisfied. 34% said fairly satisfied. 8% said not satisfied.² I just don't buy the numbers. Experience says we are a nation of malcontents much more like the UK where only 32% or like France where only 14% were very satisfied.
- At the earliest ages, we're groomed for discontentment in just about every area of life. Our bodies. Our job. Our house. Our food. Our church. Our marriage. Our school. Our friends. And the world's answer to discontentment is to change it. Fix it. It's in your power. Find the greener grass. It's up to you. Change your circumstances. Take care of self. Make yourself happy. Move. Quit. Divorce. Marry. Sever ties. Buy more. Fill the empty hole. How content are you, really?
- And then there is the way of the cross. What is the Christian response to discontentment? I've thought about this all week and I can't think of a single instance where it is okay for a Christian to be discontent with her circumstances. Philippians 4:11, right? *I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.*

Transition

¹ *The Kid* (Disney, 2000) directed by Jon Turteltaub, written by Audrey Wells; submitted by Brian Boone, Edmonds, Washington.

² Shannon Reilly and Keith Carter, USA Today Snapshots; source: Harris Interactive, April 1-15, 2003.

This morning I want to focus on contentment as it relates to one's marital status. Chapter 7 is the Dr. Phil—Dear Abbey section of Paul's letter. This is biblical relationships 101. Singleness. Marriage. Divorce. Widowhood. They're all there. And Paul's point throughout the entire chapter is the same.

Proposition

- **Be content with your present marital status**

Transition

- Why is discontentment a sin? If we're discontent with our marital status, what does it say about our view of God? What we're really saying is "God you're not big enough for my problem. You're not big enough for my singleness. My marital problems are too large for you. You are insufficient to handle my widowhood." If we're plagued with discontentment, I think, what we're really saying is that we need something—someone—other than God, something in addition to God, to make us happy. Whereas, from the Bible's viewpoint, happiness comes from finding satisfaction in the All-Sufficient One, in spite of our circumstances. Is your view of the sufficiency of God big enough to swallow up the deficiencies of your marital status? I think the reason this is so hard for us, single, married or widowed, is because our practice of finding contentment in God is so underdeveloped it makes true and real biblical contentment in any station of life an almost impossible reality.
- "God, you want me to do what?" In all things be content. Be content with your present marital status. Whatever your marital status is, don't seek to change it. Be content with where you are at. There is no relational circumstance in life where God is insufficient. If you're pushing 40 and still single? Be content. God is sufficient. What if you've got the seven year itch and you're tired of your spouse? Be content. God is sufficient. What if your spouse has died? Be content. God is sufficient. What if you've become single through a divorce? Be content with where you're at. Your happiness does not and should not come from your marital status.

Transition

When it comes to relationships I think that 1 Corinthians 7:8-16 teaches that there are...

Organizational Sentence

- **Three stations in life where God expects us to be content**

Transition

Whatever your marital status in life God wants you to remain as you are and find contentment in Him—regardless of the circumstances.

Background and Setting

- God calls us each to our own unique circumstances. We each have our own story. And whatever that story is, the cross of Jesus Christ means God's grace is sufficient.
- Just for a second, look at chapter 7 as a whole. The entire theme of chapter 7 falls under the banner of this repeated phrase "stay as you are" or as I'm putting it this morning, be content. Remember from two weeks ago, 7:1-7? On account of the rampant sexual immorality in the

Corinthian community what is Paul's advice to husbands and wives? Maintain the sexual part of the relationship. Stay as you are. Be content. In our passage for today.

- Verses 8-9. Paul's advice to the unmarried? Stay unmarried. Stay as you are. Be content.
- In verses 10-11. Paul's advice to the married? Stay married. Don't divorce. Stay as you are. Be content.
- In verses 12-16, to those with unbelieving spouses, what does he say? Remain married. Don't divorce. Stay as you are. Be content.
- Look ahead to verses 25-38. Paul's advice to those who haven't yet married? Remain unmarried. Be content. Stay as you are.
- Look at verses 39-40. What does he say to married women and widows? If you're married honor that bond and stay married. If you're widowed then it's good to stay that way. Remain as you are and find contentment in God regardless of the circumstances.

Transition

Three stations in life where the expectation is contentment. **First station**, verses 8-9. **Be content with not being married.** Don't jump ship. Stay as you are. **Be content with not being married.** *Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. 9 But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.*

Main Points

- Somewhere along the way singleness has gotten a bad rap. Yes, marriage is to be highly valued. But we've gone to the opposite extreme. Marriage is not for everyone. If you're a teen you need to know that from God's perspective remaining unmarried is just as high a calling as marrying and having a family. Remaining unmarried should be a viable and respected future option for you.
- For better or worse, the reality is our culture favors married people. Most churches are so family-centric and marriage-centric the unmarried person is ostracized. Without even realizing it we say stupid things like, "What's a nice girl like you doing unmarried?" "What you need is a good wife." "Found anybody to date yet?" "I'm praying the Lord will lead you to a good guy." "It's too bad he's not married."³
- If you're here today and are not married either by choice or by the death of your spouse or by divorce let me just say I'm sorry for the way we as a church have treated you and neglected you. Did you know there are more than 23 million single adults in the US?⁴ I don't have the numbers on our county but I would almost guarantee the demographics of our church do not properly reflect the number of singles in our community. That's a problem. It means we're not reaching our community as effectively as we could.
- Let's look at the text. *Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am.* The word translated "unmarried" in **verse 8** is a general word that "includes those who have never been married and those who have been married and are now

³ Howard Vanderwell, "Christian Singles," Preaching Today, Tape No. 99.

⁴ 1990 U.S. census, reported in *Single Adult Ministries Journal*, 1/92.

unmarried."⁵ Pretty broad in its scope. Paul's advice to those who happen to fall in this category? Stay unmarried. Be content.

- It's interesting, a number of ancient sources suggest "that in higher ranks in Roman society 'a widow was expected to remarry within a year, a divorcee within six months.'"⁶ So even though the pressure to marry young was great and the pressure to remarry was great, Paul suggests an alternative. Stay as you are. What God wants from us regardless of our marital status is contentment. Don't go out of your way to change your status. God may bring you a spouse. Be content with not being married.
- What about [verse 9](#)? *But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.* The traditional interpretation goes like this. If you're unmarried, single, widowed, divorced and you are unable to control your sex drive, if you burn with passion, you should get married because it's better to be married than to burn with passion, which is how the NIV translates it.
- However, I just don't think that's what this verse means. Otherwise marriage becomes little more than a remedy for a strong sex drive.⁷ Marriage becomes nothing more than sanctioned, legalized lust.⁸ And what of the Holy Spirit who is supposed to empower us for living a godly life in Christ Jesus? Isn't one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit self-control? Isn't the Holy Spirit sufficient? I just don't buy this interpretation.
- Instead, what I think Paul is saying, and this is reflected in the way the NAS handles the verse, is that you should proceed with marriage if you haven't or aren't exercising self-control in the area of your sex drive. Literally, "if they aren't controlling themselves, they should marry." In other words, if you're unmarried stay that way. But for those who have already been consumed by their desire and are sinning go ahead and marry.⁹
- Before Miriam and I moved to Chicago to attend seminary I led the singles ministry at our church for numerous years. I have known people; I still know people who find that being unmarried is the toughest, loneliest thing in the world. If that's the spot you're in I just want to tell you I respect you. But I also have a question. Is God sufficient? Is he bigger than your singleness? Or has your discontentment with your status and your desire to be married displaced your desire for God? Has your discontentment with your status kept you from seeking his Kingdom first? Marriage is not the answer. Marriage fixes nothing. Marriage doesn't make you whole. It's not a cure all. I know more discontented married people than I know single people. The answer is not marriage. The answer is God because it is only by through the grace that comes through the cross of Jesus Christ that words like *I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances* make any sense. Throw yourself on the mercy and grace of the cross and you will find that there is One who is sufficient.

Transition

Singleness is not a lower calling. It's not a higher calling; it is a calling, just like marriage. Look at verses 10-11. I want to switch gears and talk to those who are married. If you are married. Stay married to the spouse you have. Don't divorce. **Be content with the spouse God has**

⁵ NIDNT, vol. 3, p. 537.

⁶ Thisleton, p. 515 quoting Rouselle.

⁷ Thisleton, p. 516.

⁸ Fee, p. 306.

⁹ Fee, p. 289.

given you. *To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. 11 But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.*

- Story goes Ralph and Janice were celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary, and Pastor Jones decided to take advantage of their longevity by using their story as a sermon illustration. He asked Ralph to come on stage and share some insight into how he managed to live with the same woman all those years. Ralph turned to the congregation and said, "Well, I treated her with respect and spent money on her—but mostly I took her traveling on special occasions." The pastor asked, "Trips to where?" "For our 25th anniversary," Ralph answered, "I took her to Beijing, China." The crowd nodded and murmured in appreciation. When things quieted down, the pastor winked and said: "What a terrific example you are to husbands, Ralph. So, tell us where you're going now for your 50th anniversary?" Ralph replied, "I'm going to go back and get her."¹⁰
- Marriage is hard—for everyone. The grass isn't greener on the other side. As someone once said, it still needs to be mowed and you still gotta deal with the dog piles. I don't care what your circumstances are. And I know that some of the marriages in this room today are on the rocks. There has been heartache upon heartache. Things haven't changed in years. Despite your circumstances God says if you're married—divorce is not an option. Period. No ifs ands or buts. No divorce. It is the Lord's command. Matthew 5:27-32, Matthew 19:3-12 and Mark 10:1-12. Do not divorce your spouse. If you have an exit strategy planned. Nix it.
- Again, in case any of you are unclear, God's design for marriage is one man and one woman for life. Genesis 2. Marriage makes two into one flesh. Marriage is an insoluble bond broken only by death. However that doesn't mean divorce will never occur. The reality is it does occur. And if you're here and you're been divorced you're right where you need to be. Divorce is a sin. Yes. But it is not the unforgivable sin. The cross of Jesus Christ is bigger than any sin including divorce. Sin places us all on equal footing at the cross. We are all equally in need of the forgiveness and mercy the blood of Christ supplies.
- But, if divorce should occur, you need to hear it straight from the horse's mouth, the status of the marriage bond doesn't change. "The marriage bonds remain intact regardless of what steps spouses might take to end a marriage."¹¹ Therefore, if you've divorced, ask for forgiveness and stay as you are. Don't remarry. Learn to be content in that particular station in life. Does this passage forbid all remarriage? No. Paul's not attempting to formulate an entire theology of divorce and remarriage with these two verses. His concern is for those who are already married and in preventing divorce. Stay as you are he pleads. Be content with the spouse God has given you. The question is not "can my marriage be salvaged?" The question is "why am I not content with the marriage and spouse God has given me?" The question is not "how can I get out of this relationship?" The question is "how can I honor and glorify God through the difficulties of this relationship?" The question is not "how do I handle the circumstances of a difficult marriage?" The question is, "how is God sufficient to make up for the deficiencies in my relationship with my spouse?"
- **Lance Armstrong** seven time winner of the Tour de France writes in his book Every Second Counts about the difficulties of marriage. "All I knew was that in trying to do everything,

¹⁰ www.preachingtoday.com, Brett Kays, Flat Rock, Michigan

¹¹ Garland, p. 283.

we'd forgotten to do the most important thing. We forgot to be married. People warn you that marriage is hard work, but you don't listen. You talk about the pretty bridesmaids' dresses, but you don't talk about what happens next; about how difficult it will be to stay or to rebuild. What nobody tells you is that there will be more than just some hard days. There will be some hard weeks and perhaps even some hard years."¹²

- He's right. But it's impossible to make it through the hard years without Christ. If you're marriage is on the rocks run to Christ and don't give up. Yes there may be hard years. Maybe even hard decades. [C.S. Lewis](#) speaks of seasons in marriage. Far too many people, he says, give up during the barren, wintry season of marriage and they miss the spring. Don't give up. May all of us who are married learn what it means through the grace of Christ *to be content whatever the circumstances* of our marriage.

Transition

Remember, three stations in life where God expects us to be content. When we're unmarried. When we're married. And now the [third station](#). If you are married to an unbelieving spouse, verses 12-16—the same rule applies. Stay married. Be content. **Because of the benefits to your spouse and children, be content, even if your spouse doesn't follow Christ.** Listen. *To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13 And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 15 But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. 16 How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*

- I think the point of these verses is fairly straightforward and clear. If you're in a mixed marriage—meaning you're a Christian and you're married to a non-Christian—then the advice given to those who are married, the advice from verses 10-11, still stands. Stay married. Stay as you are. Be content. Don't divorce your unbelieving spouse. Don't take the take initiative and end the marriage. If your spouse is not a Christian that does not constitute grounds to jettison the marriage.¹³ On the other hand if your unbelieving partner wants to leave up the marriage, don't forbid it. But if they want to stay in the marriage, then by all means, stay married and be content with the spouse God has provided to you. Why?
- There are several benefits an unbelieving spouse receives if their spouse is a Christian. Most importantly, they are *sanctified* through the believing spouse as it says in [verse 14](#). That doesn't mean they are saved. Each person must individually respond to Christ's offer of forgiveness on the cross. But it does mean the unbelieving spouse is set apart for a special purpose. Somehow, Paul says, the Christian partner in a marriage brings their non-Christian partner into this sphere of holiness so that the blessings of Christ come to the entire marriage and not just the person who's saved. [Anthony Thisleton](#) puts it this way. “The lifestyle of the Christian partner cannot but effect the ethos and to some extent the values and lifestyle of

¹² Lance Armstrong with Sally Jenkins, [Every Second Counts](#) (Doubleday, 2003), p. 221; submitted by Kevin Reid, East Hills, NSW, Australia to [preachingtoday.com](#)

¹³ Garland, p. 279.

the home, whether this be the husband or the wife. The spouse's example, witness, prayer, and living out of the gospel make the spouse and the children in this sense holy."¹⁴

- And the result is that, as [verse 16](#) hints at, by staying in the relationship, you may bring about the salvation of your spouse. Therefore, Paul says, stay as you are. Honor the marriage bond. Live in peace. Don't inject discord and turmoil into a relationship. Instead, live in peace. "Why make an unwarranted change in your marriage circumstances and lose the opportunity to convert your spouse?"¹⁵ Your marriage may be God's best instrument for bringing your unbelieving spouse to salvation.

Conclusion

- What is the Christian response to discontentment in one's marital status? Philippians 4:11, right? *I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.*

¹⁴ Thisleton, p. 530.

¹⁵ Garland, p. 294.