

Questions & Answers on Singleness (Part 5)

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Question: So, with the various admonitions from Timothy about a man - let's say a single man, who wants to possibly in the future maybe enter a pastor role of some sort, or maybe God may be calling him to that. How does that play into being married? I know that it says in Titus, he would be husband of one wife, and those various things. Is it like a requirement? What are your thoughts on that?

Ryan: Well, since you have two elders, I'll tell you my thoughts, and if they need to correct me next week, they can.

(from the room) We'll just do it tonight.

Ryan: Oh, you'll just do it tonight? That's fine. It's probably more biblical. I take the qualifications in Titus and 1 Timothy to be speaking to normative situations. So to the situations people are normally in. So normally, men are married with children. And when they are married with children, they ought to be a one-woman-man and they ought to be good fathers. And the reason I understand it that way is because first of all, the Scriptures speak to normative situations. We talked about this earlier tonight. The applications in Ephesians 5 are to husbands and wives, and to slaves and owners, and to parents and children because that's where most people were living. So, the reason I say that is because if a man has two children and they die, he is not disqualified from the pastorate. If a man has a wife and she dies, he's no longer a one-woman-man, in one sense, right? So I don't think we want to create a situation where you've got Paul saying singleness is in some ways better for ministry, but you can never have a single pastor, or a situation where - and I've seen this happen, where people get so rigid so that if maybe a man is not able to have children - well, his children aren't faithful, so he can't be a minister. So I would say that generally, the men who are going to ascend to the office of overseer, are going to be married men. And when they do, they ought to be faithfully married men - men who are the husband of one wife. I take that phrase to mean that they're faithful to their wives. But I don't think it means that a man who wants to be a pastor, better get a wife quick so that he can get into the ministry. Or that we could never consider a man without a wife for the ministry. Charles? Dick?

(from the room) We both came to the same conclusion.

Ryan: Oh, that's right. That would have given me much more comfort if I'd remembered that. So that's good. Does that answer your question? Ok, good.

Question: How do the principles of biblical womanhood that you gave yesterday apply to single women?

Ryan: Well, I think, first of all, you'd realize that in creation, this is what man and woman were made for. They were made these ways, but ultimately, what we were made for doesn't point forward to our marriages. Ultimately it points toward a relationship in Jesus Christ. The relationship between Adam and Eve ultimately points forward to - not marriage. Believe it or not, but the married people in this room are not the fulfillment of Genesis 2. The fulfillment of Genesis 2 comes in the Lord Jesus Christ and His church. That's who that points to. And so Ephesians 5 says that therefore a man shall leave his father and mother, and he shall cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. And he says this is a great mystery. I am speaking of Christ and the church. And so in many ways, we can see immediately, they're not all perfect, but in terms of being an intimate companion, a woman can be an intimate companion to the ultimate Man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And then on top of that, in terms of the sexuality stuff I think changes, in that, the intimacy that sexuality points to, we can have with Jesus, but we're certainly not in any kind of bizarre relationship with the Lord. But I think those initial things of femininity are first of all in our relationship with the Lord. But then, here on earth, I think there are aspects where women who are maybe not married could certainly display aspects of that. So in terms of being a nurturer or a mother, Paul says in the end of Romans, he gives greetings to Rufus' mother, who is also a mother to me. So in the church, we're in a company of mothers and sisters. So, I think I may have mentioned the other day, but we have a wonderful woman at our church, who is quite literally a counselor and a mentor and a mother to so many in the church, and yet she is married, but she has no children. So that's one context.

And there are single ladies who are companions - not intimate companions the same way a wife would be, but certainly companions in terms of friendship to brothers in the church. Not obviously in an isolated way, but loving and encouraging in those ways. So I think you would take those feminine gifts and really transpose them into the key of whatever opportunities in front of you that there are. So whether that's caring for the sick - you may not be able to care for your parents, but you may be able to care for sick in the church. There may be opportunities to care for brothers, to be a motherly figure in other people's lives, to younger children. So I can't delineate all the different opportunities, but I think those are some of the ways. And we see evidence in the Scriptures that that was happening. That we're not so boxed in that if we're not married, we can't do any of this stuff. Is that helpful? Ok, good.

Question: What is your opinion - I know one of your points was to seek a spouse in the context of a biblical community. What are your thoughts on long-distance relationships? What are your thoughts on that?

Ryan: Oh, they're great when they're great. So what I mean is all the other things would have to be applied. So first of all, this is why you can't make all kinds of rules that people can't fit. We see in the New Testament that life was not stable. Priscilla and Aquila were married and I think we find them in five cities in the course of the New Testament. Once leaving Rome because of persecution; once facing persecution together. Paul said they risked their necks for my sake.

And so life was very transient at times in the New Testament. 1 Corinthians 7 - they're under some present distress. Which I think really the whole age is one of difficulty. So if you've got two people who are in good churches; or who if there really is only one good church involved, that good church is trying to love them and care for them, you can certainly do a relationship long distance. We've done pre-marriage counseling at Immanuel over Skype because the girl's in Florida and the guy is in Louisville. And so I just think you would use wisdom to make sure there's godly authority and counsel involved, and both the man and the woman are getting to know one another. About four months before I married my wife, I threatened to leave to another city because I didn't think I could make it four more months without being married to her. But, I did. So I think sometimes long distance can be wise. Does that answer your question? Maybe just in general, just lots of flexibility for mostly following the Spirit under biblical principles. Not trying to create perfect circumstances. Go ahead, sister.

Question: I think sometimes it might be easy for single people - I know for me, like to just totally cut off the idea of marriage, and just not even think about it. Like it's forbidden to even think about. And so I guess my question is, what's right, especially for girls or young women, with their thought life and their prayer life without dwelling too much on it and holding on to it as an idol?

Ryan: Yeah, that's a great question. Well, I think Paul's language that if a person doesn't have this gift of self-control, they ought to be married. And then Proverbs 18 would certainly indicate that seeking is ok. So I think prayers along the lines of Lord, please give me a spouse, can be perfectly appropriate. But sometimes our hearts can race ahead into discontent. And so if we know that's the case for us, I think we would really want to be first wrestling and saying, Lord, I will be content with whatever You give me. I am seeking Christ and to know Him more. And then just making sure that we're first asking for contentment in Christ, and only out of that, then asking, Lord, would You please give me a spouse? But I don't think it would be sinful. I think you're really going to have to go through those situations as you see fit.

And what I mean by that is this: If you find that the thought of marriage just begins to consume your prayer life to the point where you can't pray for the nations, or you can't pray for a brother or sister, but all you can ever think about is marriage, you may be at a place where you have to say Lord, I'm going to leave that one with You. You have to take care of that one because I can't seem to handle that right now without it really overriding and becoming an idol in my life. But if the Lord would give you grace to say Lord, I am content to live and die for You in any circumstance, but I would love a spouse. Your Heavenly Father does not despise that kind of request and desire from His children. The only thing I would just add to that is the important part though is to seek Christ and contentment in Christ first, because one person pointed out, contented single people become contented married people. And discontented single people become discontented married people. Marriage does not change the contentment issue. It actually exasperates it. If you enter into marriage discontent, now there's someone to blame. Before it was just this vague feeling of discontent or maybe disgruntlement with God, but when

we have a spouse, there can really be a sense of which if you'd change or if you were different I would be content. And of course, that's a lie. Does that get at what you were asking?

Question: One thing, I wondered if you might comment on it. It seems like when you say, like if you don't have self-control, you should marry. Some people get the idea, well, that means that I don't have the self-control; I'm defeated by lust; I give in to sin, and I can't help it because I'm not married. And maybe a little more on that, and then also the idea that marriage does not cure lack of self-control in that sense.

Ryan: Thank you. So look at 1 Corinthians 7 a little bit more carefully. I'm glad you asked, because I felt once I was done with that point I hadn't made it especially clear. So, I'm thankful for this. I find this an extremely nuanced question to answer and I think it's probably best answered - I will answer it, but I think it's best answered in personal counsel with individuals to find out exactly what level they're struggling or those kinds of things. So I just maybe preface it with that. But there's a certain degree of sensitivity to where exactly a person is at that would require answering this the best. But, I think that the first place we would start is: there's never an excuse for sin. There's never a good reason to sin. So there could never be a sense in which: Well, I struggle with self-control, therefore it's ok that I sin because I'm not married. But there is also a sense in which a person can be determined to live holy and yet the fight against lust basically consumes them. It takes all day every day to get victory. And in that case, I would say that person needs to stay holy, but they really ought to be pursuing marriage. Because they have an inordinate difficulty that marriage would help. So we're not saying that there's an excuse.

But at the same time, it does seem to be that there sometimes can be some degrees of stumbling that would really encourage marriage. If they can't exercise self-control, they should marry. And then later on, look at v. 36. "If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly towards his betrothed..." So there's some degree of not behaving properly towards his betrothed. "...if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes. Let him marry; it is no sin." And this is what I find the most difficult to say. I think there is a sense in which marriage should cure lust, and there isn't a sense in which marriage should cure lust. And I think I'm saying that based on the text. So if he is not treating her properly, he should get married. If they have trouble with self-control, they ought to get married. There does seem to be a sense in which this will help. And I think 1 Corinthians 7:1-5 does make this abundantly clear. "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman, but because of the temptation of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband." So there is a sense in which temptation to sexual immorality can be helped greatly by coming together in marriage. It's probably important to say, fighting sexual temptation is never the only purpose for marriage. Procreation, godly companionship, reflecting Christ and the church are always there, but nonetheless, in this context, Paul wants to highlight that there is an element in which a marriage will help in the fight against lust. "A husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights; and likewise, the wife should give to her husband." So there should be a regular coming together of them giving each other to each other. "For the wife does

not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except by agreement for a limited time that you may devote yourselves to prayer. But then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you for your lack of self-control." So there is a sense which if they keep coming together, there is greater hope that they will overcome temptation. If they don't keep coming together, Satan will tempt them and take them down.

I think this is verified by Proverbs 5. If you look at Proverbs 5, you get a very similar theme that the intoxication of sexual joy in marriage is a help to overcoming sinful sexual desires outside of marriage. So, Proverbs 5. Notice the word "intoxicated." We'll start in v. 18. "Let your fountain..." That's, of course, your wife. "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth. A lovely deer, a graceful doe, let her breasts fill you at all times with delight. Be intoxicated always in her love. Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman?" And so there's two intoxications being held out in front of us. One: stay intoxicated with your wife. Two: don't be intoxicated with a forbidden woman.

I do think there's a sense in which a person with - and this is a hard distinction to make, and this is where I really think you need personal counsel; but I do think there's a sense in which people with normal sexual temptations who will occasionally stumble, will be helped greatly by marriage. A guy who is trying to be holy, but oh man, last month he fell. I don't think that guy should be told, oh marriage won't help you at all. I think the thrust of these passages is that it will help you. It will help you to fight temptation if you come together regularly. Now at the same time, you get some guys as one person put it, that they simply have developed a woman-hating mentality, they are consumed with pornography, they are absolutely in bondage to it, and the last thing they should think is that getting married is going to make that better. That is not going to happen. A bondage is not going to all of a sudden be broken through a marriage. But, I do think there's enough in the text to say that some of the difficulties that come with living in a fallen world, will be greatly helped by being in marriage. I counsel people regularly - we'll take the example of a husband, though it can happen both ways - a husband ought to fight the billboards, the commercials, the allurements, the shops, the Internet pop-ups; they ought to fight that all day, but one of the ways they ought to fight that is by coming home and saying to their bride, I have fought sexual temptation. The only person I will be with is you. I refuse to be intoxicated anywhere else but with you. But we cannot not come together, because if we do, we're risking Satanic temptation overcoming us in our lives. That seems to be to get some of the balances in the text.

So, having the struggle - just to sum up - with self-control and not being married, doesn't excuse you and let you be into sin, but it does point you in the direction you ought to pursue marriage to help this. And then we should expect, based on the Word of God in 1 Cor 7 and Prov 5 that it actually will be a help. But, we ought not to think that it will be a cure all. As if a marriage will all of a sudden make everything perfect, and especially in the case of someone with this deep bondage. We ought not to expect marriage to help at all. Because that person is really in the grip of sin. Do you want to add anything to that? Charles: Just going along with that, we see the

general principle like in Roman Catholicism where you had monks and nuns. That's a denial of the way God created man and it leads to further immorality. So you can see clearly that there's a general principle involved there.

Question: As parents of teenagers, my husband and I often pray for God's will to be revealed to both our children as well as ourselves. But, I wondered if you could speak to matchmaking. It's sometimes awkward if there's a parental relationship and you realize there's ulterior motives there; even with young children sometimes, we've run into people saying, well, someday, I want our children to get together. And when you're praying for God's will, what would be a godly response when people are trying to match-make and they don't seem to be concerned about God's will, but more about their will?

Ryan: Right. Well, you said one thing at the start of your question I want to respond to too. One of the things I would encourage parents to do is not just pray that their kids have a godly spouse, but to pray that many children will have the gift of self-control for singleness. Because Paul wanted more of those. And I preached these sermons at Immanuel and one of the guys walked up to me and said my dad - that's all he prays for me is that I get a spouse. And that doesn't seem to quite get the balance. So I think the prayer ought to be more like, Lord, if you've given them the gift of self-control, help them to use it to the glory of God. And if they're going to be married, give them a godly spouse. It's hard to rule out matchmaking as inherently sinful. There are arranged marriages in the Scriptures. And there are multiple cultures where arranged marriages work. And I know they're foreign to North America, but I think it's hard to call them sinful. But they aren't sport. You know, they aren't entertainment, where I pair my 3 year old with your 3 year old just for fun. And so I think in that case, there really would need to be a concern for the good of the child. I think I've married people every which way you can get married. I've married people when they should have been married a lot earlier. I've married people when they were dating. I've married people when they'd courted. And I've married people when they were betrothed to one another by their parents. I've seen all of those happen. And fortunately, in the situation of betrothal, which was a lot like an arranged marriage, the parents were deeply concerned with the character of their kids; with the kind of personality their kids had, with the compatibility of their children, and when the parents presented the children and talked to the children about the possibility of marrying each other, those kids were just thrilled with their parents' choice. So not really something I'm familiar with or plan to practice, but not something that you can outlaw biblically or culturally in some cultures. But none of this is sport. Dating that's like sport is foolish. And parents playing around with their children's choices like it's sport is just pure folly as well. Does that answer your question?

Question: You spoke a lot about the role of a father in a single woman's life, and like how he should protect her. What if, like me, the only father she knows is God. And I mean, obviously, He helps her a lot, but she doesn't have an earthly father to whom she can look.

Ryan: Well, that's why I tried to make the point rather than: you should seek to be married in the context of your parents; I tried to say you should seek to be married in the context of parents,

pastors, friends, and godly community. Jesus one time was told that His mother and brothers were outside and He said these are My mothers and brothers. You know, My disciples are My real family. And when we leave father and mother and brother and sister for the Lord, we receive a hundredfold mother and brother and sister and persecutions with eternal life. So, really our ultimate family is the family of God. So, I think, one, you would rely directly on your Heavenly Father in prayer, but your Heavenly Father has told you that in an abundance of counselors there is wisdom. And in an abundance of counselors there is safety. And so you would want to be seeking out godly men and women in the church; older women are to teach younger women to do what is good. So you want to be seeking out older women in the church to be a guide and a mother to you. And you want to be seeking out godly small group leaders or oaks of righteousness in the church or pastors in the church to really counsel you and mentor you and help you make those kind of decisions. And in those things, we're promised two things proverbially: In the abundance of counselors, there's safety. And in an abundance of counselors, there's victory. So I think those don't replace your Heavenly Father, those are the gift of your Heavenly Father to you to guide you through the difficulties of life. Does that answer your question?

Question: Ryan, Proverbs 18 talks about he who finds a wife, finds a good thing. What is the female version of that? How do you see that?

Ryan: Right. I do think it's right. This is an area where we don't have explicit biblical teaching, but it does seem to me that the pattern of a man leading in marriage would call for a man initiating the relationships leading up to marriage. So to be honest, I'm just inferring that. But it seems to make sense. It seems to be difficult to imagine - Ruth expected - that a woman would lead in the dating and the courtship, and then all of a sudden, the day they got married, they'd switch roles. And so I think it's wise for men to lead.

Now, having said that, what is the place of a woman? Well, I think, first of all, it's no sin for a woman to put herself in the places where she's most likely to get married. We were actually counseling with a young lady at our church recently, and she said well, I couldn't go to the singles' hymn sing because I was babysitting. And I said, well, you could cancel babysitting occasionally and go to the singles' hymn sing. I mean, you could make sure you're in those places where you're most likely to meet a man or a woman. And if you're never putting yourself in those situations and wondering why God never brings anyone into your path - yes, God can get you wherever you are, but there is a course of wisdom that might say go and be with the singles and go and be with those who might also be married. So I think that's wise. I personally don't see any sin in a woman telling godly men and women in her life - older men and women - that she's interested in being married. I've seen situations where a woman might tell a godly older couple that she's interested in being married, if there's someone they want to introduce her to, that she would be open to that. I think it's a lot different than the sort of grade six version where you're just whispering about the fact that you want to be dating somebody. It's more a matter of just letting those who are godly over you know that you would love to be married.

So I think there can be wisdom in making yourself available. I also think you're most likely to meet the right kind of guys in discipleship. When a person loves the gathering of the saints together; when they love the study of God's Word; and they love the service of God's people. You'll be meeting the best kinds of men in that kind of context. And men ought to be attracted to the girls who show up at those things. If you're sitting there going well, there's the Bible study girls, but I want... Those are the girls! Those are the girls you want are the ones who love the Word of God. I got to know my wife a little bit from afar before I married her, but one of the things she was notorious for was I knew she was up in the girls' dorm memorizing the book of James, and I heard that whenever she counseled anyone, she used the Bible. That's the one for me. That sounds great. I think just going hard after Jesus in every area is the place - first of all, it's just the best place for you if you stay single for 50 years. But it's also the best place to meet the best people. Does that answer your question? Questioner: Yeah, that's good. I just wondered on the proactivity of the woman. Ryan: Probably primarily putting herself in the right places as much as possible trusting the Lord.

Question: You may have run into this, but just over the past several years, I guess, I've seen Christians who have met their spouses online. Do you have any thoughts on those types of situations?

Ryan: I don't think it's inherently sinful. I would be hard pressed to rule it out, but I would be very eager to know that the whole process was done seeking godly counsel, and then, that if there was any contact, then there was plenty of personal knowledge from parents and pastors and counselors. So, I think it's sort of like the one, like if it's long distance - there may be different situations that are different, but once the differences are assessed, then let's get these things under the means of grace. Let's get these things analyzed by the means of grace. So, I would say, not my preference. But if I'm honest, I've seen it happen twice and it worked both times. So, it's hard to say never and strictly forbidden. But I would want that guy, once he's identified on the computer, I'd want him in my living room really quick for a good, thorough talking to. And to really begin to do a biblical assessment process at that point. See you tomorrow, Lord willing.