

Marriage Advice from Paul (Because of the Gospel)

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, February 19, 2023
PASSAGES	1 Corinthians 7; Ephesians 5; 1 Peter 3
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:20:43 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

The Corinthians wrote to Paul anxious about whether it was even permissible to marry, and his answer refuses to crown either singleness or marriage as the spiritual path. Both are aimed at the same target — undivided devotion to Christ. And when Paul does describe a marriage, in Ephesians 5, the picture he paints is not a contest for the upper hand but a race to the bottom, because that is what Christ's own lordship looked like.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ 1 Corinthians is one side of a conversation. Paul is quoting the Corinthians back to themselves before he answers them, and reading it any other way garbles his meaning.
- ◆ The early church had a wing so committed to purity that it forbade marriage outright. Paul's counsel is the opposite of a purity contest: better to marry than to attempt a radicalism you were never called to and fail at it.
- ◆ Chastity in this letter is asked of the husband exactly as much as the wife — which, in the Greco-Roman world, was the novelty.
- ◆ Paul plainly prefers singleness and commends it. Hope tends to under-spiritualize it; Paul does not.
- ◆ Holiness is not the same thing as purity. Holiness is being set apart for God and belonging to him — which is why an unbelieving spouse and the children are called holy.

- ◆ Whatever condition the call found you in — married, single, circumcised, enslaved — stay there and look up. The do's and don'ts were never the point.
- ◆ Marriage, done Paul's way, is aimed at pleasing the other person. Both of them. At once.
- ◆ How you picture Jesus decides how you read Ephesians 5. A self-obsessed lord makes headship monstrous; a suffering servant makes it a preachment of the gospel in your own living room.

► 1:20:43

Matt opened by admitting how much of 1 Corinthians is still ahead of us — conscience and food sacrificed to idols, money and giving, head coverings, communion, gifts and tongues — and confessing that his original outline had put head coverings on the Sunday of the women's retreat, which he thought would have been "really hilarious trolling." He also had a joke prepared about this message being sponsored by the Men's Ministry. He chose not to use it. Then he said he would be as diplomatic as he could, and read the first verse.

One side of a conversation

► 1:23:28

"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 to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband... Do not deprive one another, except perhaps 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 because of your lack of self-control."

1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-5 ↗

That opening line is a quotation. Paul is repeating the Corinthians' own slogan back to them before he responds to it, and here he makes it unusually obvious. Matt's first application was a guardrail: none of this is about blame. If a spouse is unfaithful, that is not the other spouse's fault. It is about mutual help, with a concern for holiness on both sides — the pursuit of Christ in a marriage, done cooperatively.

The church's purity wing, and Paul's concession

► 1:25:46

Where did a slogan like that come from? Matt pointed to Paul's warning about teachers in later times who forbid marriage. Part of the early church was devoted to a purity so radical that the honest conclusion was: if you are a Christian, do not marry at all. We will all be monks. Paul's answer is that this is a concession, not a command — we do not have to pursue a purity so total that all we do is pray and stand there.

He read a line from Theodoret of Cyrus, the fifth-century bishop born in Antioch: human laws demanded chastity of women and punished them for failing, but never demanded the same of men, "since it was the men who wrote the laws." Paul, Theodoret argued, was the first to make the law of chastity apply to men as well. Matt was careful — he is no expert in ancient law and would not vouch for the history — but the point stands in the text. Chastity is asked of both parties, because the pursuit of Christ is the umbrella category everything else sits under.

Singleness is not the lesser calling

► 1:28:03

“To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”

1 CORINTHIANS 7:8–9 ↗

Paul is normalizing marriage for a church that had made it suspect. But Matt would not let the room stop there, because Paul is also plainly commending singleness, and "I think we under-spiritualize singleness." His test case was the leadership template. We read that an overseer must be the husband of one wife who manages his children well — and if we take that woodenly, Paul could not have served as a deacon in his own churches, being husband to zero wives and managing no children at all. Matt reads those qualifications as default templates rather than checklists. Plenty of people have led the church without a spouse, or after being widowed, or with no children; even the Egyptian monastics revered the leaders of women's communities. Marriage and raising children are a real discipline, and coming out the other side in virtue is impressive — but so, he noted dryly, is being shipwrecked, stoned, left for dead, homeless, hungry and blasphemed. God has more than one training program.

Stay where the call found you

► 1:32:09

On divorce Matt was brief and plain. Paul tells the married not to separate; the church has historically recognized three grounds — adultery, abandonment, abuse — "but we never celebrate it. It's a goal to avoid." Then comes the abandonment case itself:

if an unbelieving spouse consents to stay, stay; if they leave, let them go, for God has called you to peace.

► 1:33:52

The strange promise inside that passage — that the unbelieving spouse and the children are made holy — needed a definition, and Matt gave the sharpest one of the morning. Holiness is not purity. A sheep on a hillside with no defect is pure; it becomes holy when it is dedicated and given to the Lord. Holiness conveys the sense of God's presence, of being set apart for him and belonging to him. Which is why the people among whom the Lord dwells are holy — and why you do not have to chase a departing spouse down.

► 1:35:17

From there Paul generalizes: let each person lead the life the Lord has assigned. Some men at the time attempted a surgery to reverse circumcision in order to fit in; Paul's verdict is that neither state counts for anything, only keeping the commandments of God — which he parallels elsewhere with being a new creation. Human religion zeroes in on the do's and don'ts. Paul keeps turning the room's face upward. The same logic runs through the bondservant paragraph: take your freedom if you can get it, and know that the freed man and the wealthy convert alike end up as bondservants of Christ.

The present distress

► 1:39:20

Twice Paul hangs his counsel on "the present distress." Matt gave the historical reconstruction. Greco-Roman cities appointed a curator of provisions — usually a wealthy volunteer with connections — only in times of famine, and Corinth appears to have had one around AD 51, roughly when Paul was there. Add the church's urgent expectation that Christ was returning imminently, and the shape of the advice makes sense: this is a hard season, marriage is an enormous commitment, so if you can stay focused, stay focused. Their sense that everything was about to change was not wrong, either — Rome besieged Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in the year 70.

“This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none... and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.”

1 CORINTHIANS 7:29-31 ↗

Matt read that carefully — it is not permission to ignore your wife. It is a call to focus, written by people who expected the Lord any day. And the motive survives the century: "one of the inspirations for pursuing purity in Christ is the return of Christ. That remains true today."

Undivided devotion, and who you are trying to please

► 1:41:40

"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... 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."

1 CORINTHIANS 7:32-35 ↗

Here Matt slowed down, because a definition is buried in the pastoral aside. If you are married, Paul assumes your anxiety is aimed at pleasing your spouse — and treats that as correct. "I think oftentimes we approach marriage as, I like her, I like the way she makes me feel, I like what she does for me. Paul's way of thinking about marriage is pretty different. Your focus should be on pleasing her." The rest of the chapter is Paul reassuring an anxious church that the engaged may marry and have not sinned. "You can tell that the Corinthian church is anxious — are we allowed to get married, is this okay, is this okay. And he's saying, yeah, it's fine, you're gonna do fine. I still think being single is better, but you're fine."

► 1:44:15

Then Matt stepped back to say how strange both sides of this look from here. Paul finds abstinence an advantage; the Corinthians treated chastity as a top priority even inside a marriage. "Yet in our world both of those options are weird. Sex without commitment is seen as like a fundamental right, so the idea that chastity within a traditional marriage is itself a concession sounds nuts." These are not two settings on one dial, he said — they are completely opposite approaches to the purpose and value and dignity of human life. And he put the fence back up where Paul put it: we are not meant to judge the world, only what happens in the church. So the radical desire to please the Lord with our purity is a question the church asks of itself, and of nobody else.

► 1:44:57

The chapter ends with the widow: bound to her husband as long as he lives, free to marry whom she wishes if he dies, only in the Lord — though in Paul's judgment she is happier as she is, "and I think that I too have the Spirit of God." Matt heard that last line as Paul saying this is not random-guy advice; he is an apostle, and this is a proper

judgment. The reasoning is the same one running under the whole chapter: with everything happening in Corinth and the Lord's return in view, she may be much happier with one less thing to worry about. Matt liked the transparency of labelling a judgment as a judgment: this is a pastoral letter, not Moses coming down the mountain.

► 1:45:35

Then he summed the chapter up himself, in this order. Singleness is great, and singleness is not less — you are not less of a Christian and not less qualified to serve Christ if you are single or have no children; in Paul's mind you could be single-mindedly devoted to him with your whole heart and all your energy. But if you pursue that and burn with passion and fail, then marry, and there is nothing wrong with that either. Anticipating the coming of the Lord is a live factor in how you decide to live. And the correct view of marriage is the one focused on pleasing your spouse.

A race to the bottom

► 1:47:24

Then the turn that held the whole message together. There is a parallel between how a single person pursues pleasing Christ and how spouses pursue pleasing each other — so the way you picture Christ decides everything downstream. "When we seek to please Jesus, we are not serving someone whose feet in heaven are kicked up," Matt said, "as if we were bringing him snacks and he's just watching TV." You hate serving someone like that. We are pleasing one who is utterly humble and has already out-served us. Heavenly couch-potato lord, or ever-present suffering servant — that choice changes how Ephesians 5 sounds.

► 1:48:48

He read the submission verses without softening them, noted they are often quietly left out of weddings, and then read what follows.

"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her... In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church."

EPHESIANS 5:25-30 ↗

► 1:50:18

Two asides before the hard part. Matt did give a reason for the pairing itself — it is natural that the husband is the one associated with the head, "maybe among other reasons because Christ himself is

male and God revealed himself as Father." And he named the standing argument that headship and submission were largely cultural, then deliberately set it down: "we don't need to go through that argument, we will later." Paul's focus is the strong parallel to Jesus, and that is where Matt wanted the room to stay.

► 1:51:38

The worry people bring to this text is abuse, and Matt argued the parallel to Jesus removes it before the conversation starts. Christ's lordship looked like taking a towel and washing feet, sleepless nights of prayer, and a humiliating death. To the woman who washed his feet he did not bark that she ought to be doing more; he protected her reputation and forgave her sins. And Jesus flatly forbade lording authority over people the way the Gentiles do, which takes a bossing spouse off the table entirely.

What is left is what Matt called a race to the bottom. She submits to her husband in this allegory of Christ and the church; he serves her in a humiliating fashion. From the outside you see two people racing downward rather than clamoring for the top — and "clamoring for the top is quite ugly and horrible to watch, and probably worse to be a part of."

► 1:53:24

Headship itself he flagged for a later message; what he wanted now were the ways it is proper to honor one another. So he pressed the point with Peter, and the pressing was pointed.

"Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered."

1 PETER 3:7 ↗

Matt reads "weaker vessel" as a quiet reference to the possibility of domestic violence. God wants husbands not merely to avoid harming their wives but to honor them — and if they do not, the very one they pray to will hinder their prayers. "We get stuck on submission, but we forget that we are also told to honor our wives." Then, to the men: do you like being honored? Then honor your wife.

Mostly about him

► 1:54:03

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.”

EPHESIANS 5:31-33 ↗

Paul says it himself: this is primarily a mystery pointing to Christ and his church. Matt's argument for why God would build that allegory into a household is simple and worth keeping. Many believers across history could not read, and knowing God was never meant to be merely academic anyway. A living, breathing picture of God in your own home teaches what a page cannot. "If you are a child and you're looking at your parents and you see your father taking care of your mother, you see a preachment of the gospel even before you learn how to read." Which is also why it would not be a very good preachment if one of them were ruling the other. This is not a race to dominate and establish the upper hand. It is the other race — difficult, profound, and not mostly about us.

► 1:56:03

And this is not moralizing. Paul was not telling the Greeks to be good, patriotic, upstanding Greeks. He kept coming back to Christ, and to the way our identity has been eclipsed into his — the grace of God in Christ forges who we are far more than personal preference or character flaws do, until we are "so dominated by Christ's death and resurrection that even the way we live in our home becomes a play about it." Because you have already been included, washed, cleaned and served by a God who became a suffering servant, you can serve another person without being addicted to serving yourself. Married, single, engaged, widowed, divorced, young, old: the same bridegroom, the same freedom, the same reason. "This is mostly about him."

► 1:58:01

Matt closed by asking the Lord to reveal himself to the room as our bridegroom, and to help us walk in the truth of the gospel in our homes — "maybe especially in our homes."

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- [1 Corinthians 7:1–5](#)
- [1 Timothy 4:1–3](#)
- [1 Corinthians 7:6–7](#)
- [1 Corinthians 7:8–9](#)
- [1 Timothy 3:2–5](#)
- [1 Corinthians 7:10–11](#)
- [1 Corinthians 7:12–16](#)
- [1 Corinthians 7:17–19](#)
- [Galatians 6:15](#)
- [1 Corinthians 7:20–23](#)
- [1 Corinthians 7:25–28](#)
- [1 Corinthians 7:29–31](#)
- [1 Corinthians 7:32–35](#)
- [1 Corinthians 7:36–38](#)
- [1 Corinthians 5:12–13](#)
- [1 Corinthians 7:39–40](#)
- [Ephesians 5:22–24](#)
- [Ephesians 5:25–30](#)
- [John 13:4–5](#)
- [Luke 7:44–48](#)
- [Matthew 20:25–26](#)
- [1 Peter 3:7](#)
- [Ephesians 5:31–33](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Matt said we tend to treat marriage as the spiritual path and singleness as the odd one out, while the Corinthians had it exactly backwards. Which assumption did you absorb, and where did you absorb it from?
2. If Paul himself would not clear the leadership template as we usually read it, what does that change about who your group expects God to raise up?
3. Holiness is belonging to God; purity is being without defect. Where have you been working on the second while assuming the first?
4. Picture the Jesus you actually serve on an average Tuesday. Is he the one with his feet up waiting to be served, or the one with the towel — and how does that picture show up in how you treat the people in your house?
5. A race to the bottom needs someone to move first. What is one specific way you will serve your spouse, housemate or family this week without waiting to be met halfway?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J82bq1HWkPo&t=4843s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.