

TWO VIEWS ON LIVING ALONE

“It Is Good Not To Marry”

Ed Harrell

“It is good not to marry,” the disciples said to Jesus after hearing his dictum: “And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery” (Matthew 19:9, 10).

The remark was a protest against the seeming harshness and finality of their teacher’s command. His words were too harsh; surely, they were more than men could bear.

This exchange is one of many in which Jesus spoke words that bewildered and troubled those who heard him. Just a few verses after this discussion on divorce, Matthew tells of a young man who “went away sorrowful” because it seemed that Jesus had asked of him the impossible. Jesus had told him to leave his possessions and become a disciple (Matthew 19:16–26); it is clear to us today that he asks nothing less of us. How often do we come to the Lord’s direction with our minds so fixed on our own needs, our own wants, that we will only say—“that is too hard.”

Of course, Jesus did not intend for his disciples to be masochists. We do not court persecution and self-punishment. We should never strive to put hazards in the way of those struggling to go to heaven. Nonetheless, we must come to Jesus with a strong sense of realism. “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man’s foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:34–38).

When the disciples protested that “it is good not to marry” if one could not divorce, insisting that the Lord’s command must thus be defective, his reply acknowledged the unthinkable—under some circumstances “it is good not to marry” (Matthew 19:11–12). Clearly, one of the times when it is good not to marry is when the result will be the establishment of a relationship that perpetuates adultery.

Jesus never intended to diminish the grandeur and the divine purpose of marriage; indeed, in this exchange he exalts the relationship. On the other hand, he clearly states that in some circumstances celibacy is the proper choice.

In 1 Corinthians chapter seven, the Apostle Paul recommended a celibate life to those in imminent danger of persecution. It would be far better to die alone than to see one's wife and children suffer. One can imagine many circumstances when it would be better not to marry—for instance, when no acceptable mate is available, or when one's sense of dedication to the Lord excludes a proper commitment to one's mate and family.

We live in a narcissistic age in which most people deem it unthinkable that every person will not receive his or her every want. How dare anyone tell me that I cannot love whomsoever I wish, live however I desire, and fulfill my every whim. It is unimaginable that someone could tell me that I cannot marry.

In most periods of human history, and in many places in the world today, people understand that life is not merely a journey to fulfill our human desires. Millions of people have lived and died living celibate lives—because of poverty or persecution, because of isolation or physical disability, because of false and misguided ideologies or true spirituality. Many have borne the burden without self-pity and protest, understanding that life offers us many other avenues for service and fulfillment besides marriage and family.

Many Christians today live celibate lives because of circumstances or because of conviction. Some devout Christians who wish to marry never find a mate who is worthy of them, who shares with them the dream of having a Christian home. Others are physically unable to consummate a marriage, though they long to have a family. Others may have a sexual orientation that's condemned in the Scriptures, leaving them with no option but to live a celibate life. All of those who are "eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake," as was the Apostle Paul, win the praise of Jesus Christ (Matthew 19:12).

But the point that Jesus makes in this exchange with his disciples is that celibacy is the only option offered to those who have violated God's law of marriage. Is that hard? Yes, it is hard, but not so arduous as the experiences of others who served God: "And others had trial of cruel mockings, and scourgings, yea, moreover, of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, were tempted, were slain with the sword: the wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented" (Hebrews 11:36, 37).

When we read God's laws concerning marriage and divorce, or when we read God's laws on any other subject, we must not allow our minds to jump, as did his disciples, to the consequences. We must rather hear with open minds, desire to serve with open hearts, and embrace the consequences with a willing spirit.

"Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28–30).¹

¹ Harrell, E. (1999). ["It Is Good Not to Marry."](#) (E. Harrell, Ed.) *Christianity Magazine*, 16(2), 19.

The Power To Abide Alone

by Tommy Peeler

THE TASK OF a prophet of God was often a lonely one. No one knew better than Jeremiah. Jeremiah was called to be God's messenger in a time when his countrymen had wandered far away from God. It was a time when Judah was deeply ensnared in idolatry (Jeremiah 17:1-2).

Those who worshipped in the Jerusalem temple did so out of superstition rather than faith, and plainly divorced their "religion" from their everyday life (Jeremiah 7:1-15). The priests had no relationship with the Lord (Jeremiah 2:8), and false prophets abounded everywhere (Jeremiah 14:14). It was a treacherous time for a true prophet (Jeremiah 26:20-23).

To say that Jeremiah was not very popular is an understatement. Because of his preaching, Jeremiah was excluded from the temple (Jeremiah 36:5), beaten, placed in stocks (Jeremiah 20:2), put in a cistern (Jeremiah 38:6), and almost killed (Jeremiah 26:7-19). He was constantly at odds with the religious leaders of the nation. God told Jeremiah, when he began his work, that he would have to stand against kings, princes, and priests (Jeremiah 1:18). Even the people of his own village of Anathoth were conspiring in a plot to take Jeremiah's life (Jeremiah 11:18-23). If all of this were not bad enough, even members of Jeremiah's family were among his opponents (Jeremiah 12:6). Jeremiah said, "Because of Thy hand upon me, I sat alone" (Jeremiah 15:17). Due to his work as a prophet, Jeremiah was ostracized from many in the land. Jeremiah was a lonely man.

If anyone ever could have used a good wife, that man would seem to have been Jeremiah. However, God had a different plan: "The word of the Lord also came to me saying, 'You shall not take a wife for yourself nor have sons or daughters in this place'" (Jeremiah 16:1-2). Among the Hebrews, being childless was regarded as a curse (Genesis 30:1; Hosea 9:11, 14) and virginity was regarded as a cause for mourning (Judges 11:37). It was very uncommon for a young man in Judah to remain single, and the command of the Lord seems to indicate that this was a decision that would not have been made had the Lord not so ordered. The Lord was trying to teach the people, through this event in Jeremiah's life, that a terrible judgment was to fall on the people for their rejection of God's will (Jeremiah 16:3-4). However, this lesson to Judah came at great personal cost to Jeremiah.

Was it unfair for God to ask Jeremiah to live without marriage? Of course not. God, being Jeremiah's Creator, had the right to tell Jeremiah to do anything He wanted. (see Jeremiah 18:1-6 for the application of this principle to the people as a whole). God, being omniscient, knows far more than we do what is in our best interests.

God is the one who created the woman for the man (Genesis 2:21–25) and continues to give prudent women to men as wives (Proverbs 19:14). God also has the right to withhold this gift when it glorifies Him. Jeremiah thought living without a wife in obedience to God was better than living with a wife in disobedience. Through it all, Jeremiah enjoyed a greater fellowship than even a wife could provide. God assured Jeremiah from the very beginning of His work with the words, “I am with you” (Jeremiah 1:8, 19). Man’s greatest need is not for an intimate relationship with a member of the opposite sex, but for an intimate relationship with his Maker. It is certainly better to be out of fellowship with all earthly friends than to be out of fellowship with God (Matthew 10:37; Luke 14:26).

In Matthew 19:12, Jesus spoke of some “who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” What does that mean? This refers to people whose all-consuming passion for God’s glory leads them to forfeit the blessings of marriage and family. This person will have opportunity for a much more “undistracted devotion to the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:32–35). Such people should be admired and appreciated, not ridiculed. Jesus was the most influential man that ever lived, and Paul “turned the world upside down,” but neither of them was married. “The world would be a poorer place were it not for those who accepted the challenge to travel alone for the sake of Christ” (Barclay, *Matthew*, Vol. 2, p. 208).

I am sure that several who read these words face the prospect of living the rest of their lives alone. Maybe you lost your mate in death, maybe you never married, or you may have no right biblically to marry again. Whatever the reason, the road may seem lonely and difficult. My prayer is that you find strength from the example of men like Jeremiah and Paul and, most of all, from walking with the Lord. As Paul said, “I can do all things through Him who strengtheneth me” (Philippians 4:13).

God’s promises of blessing are always much greater than the demands He makes of us. The apostles left everything to follow Jesus (Luke 18:28). Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life” (Luke 18:29–30). A lonely, earthly journey is a small sacrifice for an eternity with God.

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² Peeler, T. (1989). [The Power to Abide Alone](#). (P. Earnhart, Ed.) *Christianity Magazine*, 6(8), 22.