

Dear Singles: Here's How to Plan for and Pursue Marriage

By Steve Burchett



Singleness is obscure in the New Testament. There are two places that teach about it as a chosen way of life for some (Matthew 19:10-12, plus various verses in First Corinthians 7), but that's just about it. Have you ever noticed in Paul's letters, when he lists categories of people, he includes wives, husbands, children, fathers, slaves, and masters (cf. Ephesians 5:22-6:9; Colossians 3:18-4:1), but there is no category of single adults? Why? My best guess is he was writing

to the norm, and the shift from childhood to adulthood was thought of as moving from unmarried to married.

Here's my conclusion: if you are single, you should expect to get married. This has been God's normal pattern for men and women from the beginning (cf. Genesis 2:18). But not only should you anticipate marriage, you should plan for and even pursue it. How?

First, grow personally. Be honest — many of you have obsessed over the kind of man or woman you want to marry. You have standards; expectations; preferences. You've thought this out carefully. That's commendable, but the priority must be the kind of person *you are*. Your relationship with Christ and growth as a believer is critical for your future marriage. So, for starters, do you have the basics of Bible reading and prayer happening in your life? These disciplines probably won't become easier once you are married!

Second, love and lean on your church family. You may not know God's will about a future spouse, but his will is clear about your place in the church: you are a critical part of the body (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:12-26). And it is ideal for potential marriage relationships to be forged in the context of a local church where the man and woman are happy, eager, supportive, growing participants. There are some potential dilemmas to work through in our day such as long distance relationships, or meeting a potential spouse online. But at some point, and for some length of time, the relationship needs to be experienced face-to-face within a community of believers if at all possible. Then the couple that is headed for marriage will especially be able to lean on other wise believers with whom they are experiencing body life, including that church's pastor(s).

Third, anticipate realistically. Know what you are getting into. You've perhaps learned much already from your parents (often good, but not always). Make sure you observe other couples in the church. If a relationship begins and is headed toward marriage, pre-marital counseling is valuable. I won't officiate a wedding if the couple hasn't been through it. In our church, we

even recommend pre-engagement counseling because, once a couple is engaged, it's nearly impossible to slow the train down even if there is trouble on the tracks.

Fourth, choose wisely. There should be no debate that a believer should (and will want to) marry another believer. But not all believers are ready for marriage, and compatibility matters. There are a number of places in the Bible that describe godly husbands or wives (for example, Ephesians 5:22-33). How foolish to pursue a spouse whom you honestly do not think will fulfill those responsibilities once married. And it is critical to work through theological views and consider what is essential to agree about. For example, it might be more difficult than you realize for a convinced Presbyterian and a convinced Baptist to experience harmony, especially when kids come along. At the same time, beware of worldly expectations such as, "He can't be kind of awkward," or, "She has to have an amazing body." Sure, physical attraction counts, but it is not everything — not even close! It's even possible to expect *too much* spiritual maturity. No one is transformed into the image of Christ fully yet. If you find a potential spouse who is humble and loves Christ and the church and just wants to honor the Lord, and this person embraces biblical manhood or womanhood, what more could you want?

Fifth, prepare financially. Once again, knowing what the Bible says about finances and resources is not something to start studying in year one of marriage. Money will be one of the main sources of tension in any marriage. It is a fundamental topic in pre-marital counseling. Debt also must be considered carefully (both current and future). And I agree with one of my fellow pastors who says that the man needs to have a "provider" mindset and a legitimate plan for how this is going to happen in the marriage from day one.

Sixth, strive for purity. Smartphones have not made this easier. Do you spend too much time on your phone? Work on discipline in that area now. And if you have lust problems, get help now, before you are married! Once you are in a relationship, how much physicality is appropriate before marriage? I don't have the space to answer thoroughly, but I have observed that once kissing starts, it's nearly impossible for it not to move further than you would have wanted, and there are *always* regrets. Waiting until the wedding day will seem old-fashioned to some, but the rewards will be worth it.

Seventh, respect familial authority. I'm thinking here primarily about younger people. You might accuse me of being "old school," but here's what I've seen work well: once a young man and young lady are ready for the relationship to move beyond the "just friends" stage to something with marriage as the aim, the young man should talk to her father (and mother if possible), and get permission. Some young people might be thinking, "Can't we just grow up and be on our own?" But the right kind of authority brings safety and wisdom and perspective.

Eighth, wait patiently. As you wait on a spouse, don't waste your singleness. You might find yourself asking, "Why am I single, Lord? Is there something wrong with me?" But you *could* ask, "Why am I single, Lord? What kingdom-advancing, Christ-honoring thing do you want me to be about while I wait on you to provide a spouse?"

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