

THE SUPERIORITY OF CELIBACY OVER MARRIAGE AS A HIGHER WAY OF LIFE

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Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 94; 1 Corinthians 7:32-35; Mark 1:21-28

Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

“I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman or virgin is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband. 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).

This is today’s second reading, and I think that few would deny that this is a very powerful reading indeed. It presents an ideal that few in the modern world would be attracted to or desire for themselves, and yet St. Paul puts this counter-cultural ideal squarely and bluntly before us as the better way, as a higher and superior state of life, higher than Christian marriage, which most people, most Christians, and most Catholics would overwhelmingly prefer for themselves.

St. Paul does not say that marriage is bad. He says it is *good*, but then he adds that celibacy is *better*. “So that he who marries his betrothed does *well*; and he who refrains from marriage will do *better*” (1 Corinthians 7:38).

Since celibacy is better than marriage and is a better way of life, St. Paul wishes that everyone might have this better way of life. But since he knows that not all are called to this better way of life, he allows each one to follow the way that seems best to him. So he says, “If any one thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry – it is no sin. But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. So that he who marries his betrothed does *well*; and he who refrains from marriage will do *better*” (1 Corinthians 7:36-38).

Since celibacy is better than marriage, St. Paul recommends it as his first option or first choice to young people. But he tells them that it is okay to get married if they have strong desires and can’t manage to live up to the ideal of celibacy. He says, “It is well for a man not to touch a woman. But because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband” (1 Corinthians 7:1-2).

Then he goes on to say, "I say this by way of concession, not of command. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another" (1 Corinthians 7:6-7). St. Paul says that his encouraging people to live a normal conjugal life is really more of a concession to human weakness than a command. His real wish is that all might remain celibate, as he himself is. But he knows that he can't impose this on people, so he gives his blessing to marriage.

St. Paul keeps making this same point again and again of his greater preference for celibacy, and only conceding to accept marriage due to their human weakness. He says "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Corinthians 7:8-9).

And again he makes this basic same point, saying, "Are you free from a wife? Do not seek marriage. But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a girl marries she does not sin. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that" (1 Corinthians 7:27-28). In other words, he says, if you are single, don't get married; but if you do, it's not a sin, but it would have been better if you had been able to remain celibate and not have gotten married.

And concerning widows he states again his preference for celibacy over marriage as the better choice: "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If the husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I have the spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 7:39-40). In other words, widows would be better off if they remained unmarried. They would be happier that way, even though they are permitted to marry again.

In today's reading St. Paul explains *why* celibacy is superior to marriage. It is superior because it enables one to live a more dedicated life in relationship with the Lord. We should be totally devoted to the Lord with all our heart and soul, mind and strength. Celibacy enables us to more readily do this.

If one is in love with his wife, his heart will be divided by this love, and his concern will be about his wife and how to please her and how to enjoy her and how to give her enjoyment. A celibate does not have a wife. He does not have a woman with whom he is *in love*, and so he doesn't have this division of heart in his relationship with God. He can be *in love* with God alone with all the love of his heart. He is in love with no one else. He must, of course, love everyone and love his neighbor as himself, but he is *in love* only with God, and with no one else. He tries to reserve himself and protect his heart so that, while he tries to love his neighbor as himself, he doesn't *fall in love* with his neighbor, that is, with any woman.

In explaining why celibacy is superior to marriage, St. Paul says, "I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his

wife” (1 Corinthians 7:32-33). Celibacy frees one from being concerned about worldly affairs, about loving a wife, so that he can only be concerned about God and his relationship with him, and about God’s affairs, about the Lord’s ministry, about preaching the gospel, about how to please the Lord in all that he does.

The celibate lives alone and usually in a healthy celibate community with other celibates of his own sex – that is, in an all-male celibate community. Female celibates will similarly live in an all-female celibate community. This gives them a healthy social life to be able to live their celibacy in a happy and healthy way. An all-male or all-female celibate community is an important support system for living a happy and well-balanced celibate life.

A celibate can keep from becoming worldly and from being concerned with worldly matters, like pleasing a wife. “But the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife” (1 Corinthians 7:33). The result is that “his interests are divided” (1 Corinthians 7:34). Literally, “*he is divided*” (*memeristai*, third person singular). The words “his interests” are not in the Greek text. The married man is *divided* in his heart. The celibate, on the other hand, can be *undivided* in his heart in his relationship with the Lord. *All* the love of his heart can go *directly* and in an *undivided* way to the Lord, while the married man experiences division of heart precisely because of his love for his wife that divides his heart away from an undivided love of the Lord alone. The married man is, as St. Paul says, “divided” (*memeristai*). A celibate can achieve the ideal of an undivided heart in his relationship of love with the Lord. He can have an undivided love of the Lord.

Then for emphasis St. Paul repeats this point again only this time in terms of a virgin or unmarried woman. She can be concerned about “how to be holy in body and spirit” (1 Corinthians 7:34). St. Paul then contrasts this celibate woman, with the married woman who “is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please her husband” (1 Corinthians 7:34).

We live today at a time when the celibate vocation is undergoing and eclipse within the Church. First of all, there are those within the Church herself who are now denying the biblical teaching that celibacy is superior to marriage. Once people start believing this new false teaching, who in their right mind would ever choose celibacy over marriage? There has to be a very good reason for a sane and healthy person to renounce marriage and choose celibacy. And that very good reason is that it is a higher way of life, a higher state of life than marriage, and that it enables one to have an undivided relationship of love with the Lord alone. That celibacy is a higher state in life than marriage is clear biblical teaching to be found in the passages that I have been discussing in this sermon.

But if these New Testament texts are hidden from people, and priests start preaching the opposite of what the Bible teaches about celibacy, people will begin to believe their false teaching, and celibacy will no longer be esteemed. Parents will not teach their children its benefits, and so vocations to the celibate priesthood and religious life will

decline. And this is precisely what we are witnessing today. Celibacy has drastically declined in our own day.

When I was a college seminarian over fifty years ago (around the year 1965), there were hundreds of seminarians studying with me in the college seminary of my religious community. Now my religious community has less than ten seminarians in all stages of formation combined (college and postgraduate major seminary). In 1955 sixty men were ordained priests in my religious community. Now there is usually no one ordained. But in a good year there might be one man ordained.

So it is very important to counter this new false teaching within the Church that celibacy is not a higher state in life than marriage. And it is also necessary to explain, preach, and expound the biblically revealed truth that celibacy is a higher way of life than Christian marriage. It is also very important to preach about and expound the great spiritual advantages of celibacy over marriage, namely that it more readily enables one to be totally concerned with and in love with the Lord alone with an undivided heart, with all the love of one's heart. Celibacy enables one to live in an exclusive nuptial relationship of love with the Lord. And what could be more important in life than that?