

## CHAPTER ONE

# AN EXCELLENT INVESTMENT

“**Y**ou’re not from around here, are you?” With those words, I knew I had been exposed. My southern drawl had given me away again.

Born and raised in the deep South, I had moved to Philadelphia in response to what I had sensed was God’s leading. But the more I tried to adapt to northern ways, the more I wondered whether it was God’s wisdom or his sense of humor that had been at work in moving me here.

I didn’t know it would be such a big adjustment. It’s not like I’d left the country or anything, but there was a world of difference. Besides the weather being colder, the pace of life is much faster—in Philadelphia, a yellow light at the intersection doesn’t mean “caution,” it means “speed up.” And while it’s a great place to live, I still haven’t mastered the language. None of my best words, like “y’all,” really work here. After a great meal at a friend’s house one evening, I let loose with a southerner’s highest and most genuine after-dinner compliment: “Boy, I’m full as a tick.” They didn’t even offer me dessert.

It’s been 17 years now, and I’m still a hick in the ’hood. Have I adapted? I’d like to think so. Do I feel at home? Not entirely. I’ve learned that no matter how much I try to blend in, I’ll always be a transplant, someone who resides in a culture not ultimately his own. I live in Yankee country, but I’ll never be a Yankee.

So what does my little cross-cultural odyssey have to do with being a single adult?

As I interact with my single friends, they often describe a similar feeling of dislocation. There is a vague but consistent sense that they are single in a married person’s world. Most would not say they feel discriminated against or looked down upon, but simply misunderstood. In the same way that I cannot as a southerner expect my northern community to adjust to my way of doing things, in the cross-cultural interaction between single folk and married, sin-

**Meditate on  
Leviticus 19:33-34.**

If you find someone not like you in your midst, how should you treat him?

gles usually end up doing most of the adapting. Now this would be understandable if we were to consider that, historically, “singles” (as we define them today) made up only about 3 percent of the population.<sup>1</sup> Yet a number of trends, such as a steady 50 percent divorce rate, have been swelling the number of singles in our society at an amazing rate. Many now forecast that single adults will make up half the adult population by the early part of the next century.

An explosion of singleness in the past 50 years has

““ We tend to think of families as a standard from which we have deviated; their lives are the reality, ours the imitation, the variant, the makeshift. Instead of reshaping our own ways of living, we cobble them together loosely, make do, and perhaps unconsciously, wait to be rescued from our islands and received into the real world.<sup>3</sup>

— Barbara Holland

emerged largely from a redesignation of singleness as a respectable lifestyle. In 1957, for example, more than half of the U.S. population viewed singleness as something “sick” and “immoral.” By 1991, just 34 years later, more than half the population had come to feel there was simply no good reason to get married!<sup>2</sup>

Despite what pollsters may tell us about the present-day acceptability of singleness, on a real-life level it is still widely seen as a problem that needs to be solved, escaped from, or avoided. Many, if

not most, single people still see marriage as by far the socially superior state of life. For them, singleness is a place, but marriage is the destination.

I experienced the power of this perception recently while attending my 20th high school reunion. Having seen almost no one from high school since graduation day, I was in for a real eye-opener.

As I walked into the ballroom I was struck by two thoughts: “I don’t recognize *anyone*,” and “I always thought I was much taller than I seem to be now.” Then I remembered; I spent most of high school wearing two-inch platform shoes! Anyway, I soon began to recognize people—after making mental adjustments for extra weight and less hair—and was able to reacquaint myself with some old pals.

You know what stood out most to

**1** List some differences in the ways single people and married people relate to the following life events.

Christmas holidays:

Vacations:

Grocery shopping:

Weekends:

**For Further Study:**

Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. When Paul came to the Corinthians, what kind of reputation did he want to leave with them?

me? I don't mean to sound like a sociology professor, but this is the best way to put it: there was a direct correlation between marital status and level of self-disclosure.

Without exception, folks who were married were happy to talk about themselves and what was going on in their lives—and they had lots to say. Yet in talking with people who were single, whether divorced or never married, it seemed they were almost apologetic for their status, and tended to say very little about their personal lives. It was as if these folks felt like second-class citizens at their own reunion.

Writer Barbara Holland, a single woman, laments this sense of inadequacy. “Happily-ever-after has rejected us. The fairy story has spit us out as unworthy, and sometimes we suppose perhaps we are.”<sup>4</sup>

Have you struggled with thoughts of inadequacy and alienation in your season of singleness? Do you feel like a foreigner in the Kingdom of Marriage and Family? Do you wonder whether you have somehow been misplaced in God's plan?

If you wrestle with your singleness, read on. There is a single life for the Christian that is full of purpose, vitality, and adventure. God has not overlooked you. He isn't waiting for you to get your act together before he will direct your steps, and he isn't playing guessing games with your marital future. He has a place and a plan for you in your singleness. He has a vital and significant role for you to play in his purpose. God has supplied you with an identity that both transcends singleness and enables you to embrace and benefit richly from this time, for as long as it might last. This identity is revealed in God's Word.

Let's begin to explore his plan together by examining a biblical view of singleness.

## **The Old Testament Reality**

Before surveying the Christian view of singleness, we must establish a reference point in the Old Testament. Frankly, for the single person, the Old Testament world was not terribly promising. Family in the ancient world was the primary economic and social foundation. To be single and older than about age 20 was to be effectively cut off from society's benefits. It was the prostitutes, slaves, and beggars who were the “singles” of that day. If some today advocate the “live fast, die young, leave a good-looking corpse” philosophy, the ancient world's

**For Further Study:**

Read Hebrews 11:8-12. What obstacles did Abraham have to overcome in order to exercise his faith in God's promise?

approach was more like “marry fast, die young, leave a good-looking family.”

The story of the Old Testament is one of God Almighty expressing his unmerited love to sinners. The Old Testament unfolding of God's plan for a rebellious human race took the form of a promise to a man, Abraham, “to be your God and the God of your descendants after you” (Gen 17:6-7). From this family line would come the ultimate expression of God's love—Jesus the Messiah. So to the already strong social and economic component of the ancient family was added, in the promise of Christ, a vital spiritual component.

Throughout Old Testament Hebrew culture, women were generally married during their teen years. While it was rare for a man in his twenties not to be head of his own household, there are some notable exceptions. Jeremiah (Jer 16:2) and Ezekiel (a widower; Eze 24:8) were two major prophets who apparently remained single throughout most or all of their lives. A quick look at their job descriptions as prophets of doom, however, is sobering for even the most stout-hearted single man. Rahab (the harlot) is also honored in the Bible, but wouldn't exactly provide the best vocational role model for single women (Heb 11:31). Generally, for the typical single individual in Old Testament Hebrew culture, your only hope was marriage, or, if you were male, the alternative hope that you might be gloriously smitten on the front lines of a battle.

## The New Testament Hope

Before discouragement sets in too deeply and we're tempted to scurry off to the bookstore for self-help guides and romance novels, let us consider one important fact: there is a second half to the Bible! It is called the New Testament, and we can't fully understand Old Testament realities without reference to it. You see, the Old

Testament truths are not stand-alone truths. They are preparatory realities for the great work of redemption in the Cross of Jesus Christ. And this work of the Cross is so profound and pervasive that it will radically alter who we are and what life means to us.

“ In the Christian theology of history, the death of Christ is the central point in history; here all the roads of the past converge; hence all the roads of the future diverge.<sup>5</sup>

”

— Stephen Neill

One of the beautiful aspects of the work of Jesus on the Cross is the “ministry of reconciliation” (2Co 5:18-19), whereby sinful man is reconciled to a Holy God. Through his death on the Cross, Jesus overcame our separation from God due to our sin, and brought us into a fellowship with our Creator that is intimate, ongoing, and life-changing. Through the ministry of reconciliation, Christ has also redrawn the lines of social interaction in very benevolent places. With the dawn of the age of redemption in Christ, Old Testament identities—man and woman, Jew and Gentile, married and single—are not abolished, but they are redefined in light of the Cross. All Christians now stand equal before God. All can please God within the context of these fundamental identities. All can enjoy fellowship with God in equal measure and access.

**2** Besides marital status, can you think of any other Old Testament realities that must be understood in light of the New Testament truth of the Cross of Christ? Write them in the space below.

For the single adult, this radical new reality offers itself boldly in the person of Jesus himself. When we realize a little of what it meant to be single in ancient Hebrew society, how amazing it is that God would come to earth and carry out his entire earthly ministry as a single man! Setting aside the thorny theological questions of marriage and the Godhead, how it must have perplexed the Jews of his day to have this Rabbi, this leader of multitudes, be a single man.

Not only that, but Jesus seemed to have a particular place in his heart for

single men and women, many of whom he counted as his closest friends. It is almost certain that at least a few of his chosen disciples were single during his earthly ministry. Also, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were apparently single siblings who might have been oddities in the community but were close with the Savior. And Jesus' interaction with the multi-divorced Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) was a taboo-buster on several fronts.

(There is also a compelling case to be made for the single status of John the Baptist—although if he was married, one can only admire the fortitude of his wife, for whom locusts, honey, and unfashionable clothes must have lost their novelty at some point.)

In the book of Acts we encounter Paul the Apostle, a man whose single status is clearly established in his first letter to the Corinthian church. If we also make the fair assumption that the Apostle John was a widower in the

**Meditate on  
Colossians 3:1-11.**  
How can we “set our minds on things above”? Why should we?

**For Further Study:**

Read John 4:1-26.

Jesus reached out to a single woman across many barriers. List the important things he told her.

latter years of his ministry, then nearly half the New Testament was either spoken or written by single people!

In addition, while it is clear Peter was married (Mk 1:30; 1Co 9:5), scholars believe that a number of Paul's helpers and fellow leaders (including his "son in the faith" Timothy) may have been single for significant portions of their ministry. Very possibly, the well-commended church at Philippi would not have been started without the involvement of two apparently single women: Lydia (a successful merchant, whose conversion is recounted in Acts 16:14) and an unnamed slave girl/former demoniac-for-profit (who may well have been converted in association with the events of Acts 16:16-18).

The New Testament example of the vital place of singles in God's plan could not be more clear.

## A New Testament Theology of Singleness

Having seen the biblical *example*, what is the biblical *teaching* about singleness? The most significant discussion of singleness in the Bible occurs in Paul's first letter to the

“ A key issue for Christian theology is what emphasis to give to singleness in relation to the state of marriage. Is it to be treated as pathological: something abnormal that requires either a cure or at least the alleviation of pain? Or should we emphasize it as a privilege: the special vocation of the truly devoted follower of Christ? The middle way is to view singleness and marriage as parallel states, each having their own particular joys and sorrows.<sup>6</sup>

— V.M. Sinton

Corinthian church. This church had been established in a wild, pagan party town. Consequently, new believers were coming into the church with all manner of what we might call "creative living arrangements." In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul settles a dispute by addressing at length the relative spirituality of marriage and singleness. You see, while some of the Corinthian Christians had been arguing that any unmarried adult must be some shade of weird, others

were boasting that marriage was for people who weren't really serious about "giving it all for God." Some of this latter group were even married folks whose main motivation was to escape their marriage responsibilities.

Where does Paul come down in this debate? That marriage is not the "superior" state, nor is it a concession to those without the "superior" gift of celibacy. Singleness is neither the highest form of spirituality nor the unfortu-

**For Further Study:**

Read Matthew 19:1-12. Eunuchs (celibates, in effect) were excluded from the community of Israel. In this teaching, how does Jesus affirm those who are not married?

nate status of the unmarried. As Paul graciously responds to these confused folks, he lays out the following fundamental principles.

**The sovereign hand of God has placed each of his children in his or her present status.** “As the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk” (v.17, NAS). In this verse, Paul is putting a freeze on a sudden frenzy of marriages, divorces, and remarriages that had broken out among these young Corinthian believers as they tried practically, although unwisely, to walk out their new faith. But on a deeper level, Paul is pointing them to the providence of God—that is, they are exactly where God wants them to be at this time. It’s Paul’s way of saying, “Relax, God is in control.”

**3** In addressing the issue of marriage and singleness in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul is trying to get people to adopt a “wartime mentality” (vv.29-31). How can this wartime mentality be reflected in the following areas?

Career:

Friendships:

Money:

Free time:

**With God’s providential positioning comes supernatural enabling.**

“But each man has his own gift (literally ‘charismata’) from God” (v.7). Are you a charismatic? If you’re single you are. If you get married you’ll still be. Paul says that there is a gift—a “charismata” or supernatural ability—to live the life to which you have been called. You’ll have the gift of singleness as long as you are single. When you get married, you won’t need it anymore. As Elisabeth Elliot has written,

It is within the sphere of the circumstances He chooses for us—single, married, widowed—that we receive Him. It is there and nowhere else that He makes Himself known to us. It is there that we are allowed to serve Him....Single life may be only a stage of a life’s journey, but even a stage is a gift. God may replace it with another gift, but the receiver accepts His gifts with thanksgiving. *This gift for this day.*<sup>7</sup>

**Our view of our present situation should be shaped by eternal perspective.**

“What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short....For this world in its present form is passing away” (1Co 7:29, 31). Paul urges us to live in the ongoing reality that the eternal future is pressing into the temporal now. He is concerned that we live undistractedly

## ONE CHRISTIAN'S UNDIVIDED DEVOTION

*The Apostle Paul encourages single people to live in undivided devotion to the Lord (1Co 7:35). What does this really mean? For the past few years, my brother John has explored one form of undivided devotion. He sensed God calling him to disengage from his life routine and pursue the task of feeding the poor. After much prayer, counsel, and preparation over a period of a couple of years, he took an opportunity with a Christian relief organization to serve in famine relief in Africa. This involved selling his home and business, and moving from Texas to a vastly different world. I'll let him tell you about the advantages of singleness during this period of his life.*

“I have spent the past five years working in central Africa in post-war refugee situations with a Christian relief and development organization. I am single, and began this work when I was thirty-five years old. I worked in Somalia, Kenya, Angola, and the refugee camps along the Rwandan/Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo) border following the Civil War in Rwanda.

“For several reasons, I can't imagine trying to work in this type of calling and not be a single man. First is the issue of safety. These locations are for the most part officially non-family duty stations—the many international organizations working in these areas allow only their staff members access to the area. Families and visitors are not allowed. Most of these areas were still unstable politically and prone to outbreaks of renewed conflict or banditry. Also, in case of evacuation (which happened several times during my service there), all the organizations are concerned with moving the fewest people possible as quickly as possible. It is not a pro-family work environment.

“Another challenge is stability. The work requires frequent travel and change of duty station. I would live in a location three months on average, then move to another location. While I was able to take rest breaks outside the pressure areas, my home was literally where I placed my bags. Most of our accommodations consisted of team housing—everyone on the relief team in the same house. It certainly isn't a way to live if you are trying to build a home life.

“Finally, it is by definition a very stressful life. Where you work, chaos is the only government, and there are not enough hours in the day to even keep up with the needs that continually pile up around you. Relief work demands a level of attention and commitment that makes the things I was used to in the states—leisure, free time, and privacy—luxuries at best. To carry a daily concern for the safety of a wife and the quality of a marriage would have been overwhelming to me.

“I look forward to the next step in God's plan for my life. It is actually exciting to be able to consider the possibility of marriage someday after five years of it being a non-issue. But I am grateful for the opportunity I have had in Africa and for the gift of singleness that has made it possible.”

— John Farmer

**Meditate on 2 Timothy 2:1.** How can you be strong in the grace of your singleness?

in joyful anticipation of the approaching kingdom. And he issues a call to all those who desire to make a difference. Both singles and marrieds can apply. Paul's advocacy of singleness ("I wish that all men were even as myself," v7.) is rooted in a holy practicality that sees the goal and the best way of getting there.

**What concerns us defines us.**

I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An

“ I am not single because I am too spiritually unstable to possibly deserve a husband, nor because I am too spiritually mature to possibly need one. I am single because God is so abundantly good to me, because this is his best for me.<sup>8</sup> ”

— Paige Benton

unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own

good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way *in undivided devotion to the Lord* (1Co 7:32-35).

This “undivided devotion to the Lord” is the essence of biblical identity for the single adult. It is rooted in the sovereignty of a God who places people in appropriate situations for the best possible reasons. It is steeped in the love of a God who uses even the most difficult of situations for the greatest possible benefit. It is sustained by the wisdom of a God whose timing is perfect and whose guidance is sure.

You may not live under the present threat of inevitable persecution for your faith. (Or maybe you do.) Nevertheless, we all live in “times that are short.” If you are a Christian, don't despise the state to which you have been called. Live in the gift of your singleness for as long as you have the gift. And whether or not God ever ordains the prospect of marriage for your life, bring faith for the present and hope for the future, because there is much to be done. Who better to set a hand to the task than you?

## Real Solutions for Real Life

### For Further Study:

Read 2 Corinthians 11:16-33. List the hardships that tested Paul's undivided devotion to the Lord.

This book seeks to apply the truth and the heart of Scripture to the single life in a way that is practical, but not simplistic. Much of today's popular advice to singles is both simplistic and ineffective. It basically tells people just to cope with singleness as cheerfully as possible. And coping *can* seem like an answer to a lot of problems. Coping techniques come in many forms, such as throwing ourselves into careers, or going from one relationship to another looking for Mister/Miss Right. One more example: If your best time is spent in front of the TV or PC, you are probably coping. Coping, you see, is anything we do to pass the time while we wait for life to "really begin."

But there are big problems with coping. A man once told me, "If the only tool you have in your tool box is a hammer, all your problems will look like nails." Coping can be that kind of tool.

Like a hammer, coping is convenient and requires little training to use. My hammer may help unstick a door, but it won't do a very good job fixing the hard drive on my computer. In fact, I've realized that when I get my hammer out to solve a problem, it's probably because I'm out of real solutions. The same with coping. It's reactive, not creative. It just doesn't deal with the issues of life in useful ways.

Coping won't do. Neither will fantasy, avoidance, nostalgia, diversion, or any other of a host of "one size fits all" tools we might find stashed in the bottom of our life-

“ Singleness has been a noble and courageous path...ever since Jesus and the Apostle Paul chose it 'because of the kingdom of heaven'....The courage comes when you sense God calling you to singleness (for this chapter of your life) and you accept the call with zeal and creative planning for His glory.<sup>9</sup>

— John Piper

management tool boxes. We need better tools—solid, versatile, and fit for use by everyone from the novice to the craftsman. This book attempts to provide some of those tools.

The idea of "richness" in the title of this book has to do with substance, a weight and permanence to life that is not devalued by cultural or personal fluctuations. It

has to do with abundance, an overflow that elevates life above the poverty of weakness and loss. It has to do with wherewithal, or purchasing power. The rich single life is not inconsequential; it registers in the marketplace of human existence. It is the precise opposite of coping.

**Meditate on**

**Galatians 6:7-10.** How can you “sow to please the Spirit” as a single adult?

The rich single life is one of investment and return. It requires active wisdom and wise activity to maintain and develop. But as Jesus promises in numerous parables, those who make the right investment will do much more than merely survive. If we plant well, we will harvest. If we manage well, we will be rewarded. If we invest well, we will prosper. This vision is for all believers; it will be applied in this book for single people in particular.

## **An Investment Strategy for the Rich Single Life**

To take this analogy one step further, let's assert that the “investment goal” for the single adult is to get rich, in the best sense of the word. In order to achieve our invest-

“ Prize the advantages you enjoy; know the value of them. Esteem them as highly while you have them, as others do after they have lost them. Pray constantly and fervently for this very thing, that God would teach you to set a due value upon them. And let it be a matter of daily thanksgiving to God, that he has made you a partaker of these benefits. Indeed, the more full and explicit you are herein, the more sensible you will be of the cause you have to be thankful; the more lively conviction you will have of the greatness of the blessing.<sup>10</sup> ”

— John Wesley,  
from a tract written for single people

ment goal we need a vehicle (banking terminology for things such as CDs, stocks, mutual funds, and the like). The spiritual “investment vehicle” for the single adult is what Paul set out in 1Corinthians 7:35—Undivided Devotion to the Lord. It is a high-risk (in a worldly sense), high-yield tool backed by the eternal decrees and purposes of God himself.

The only thing lacking then is strategy—ways to manage and invest this vehicle of Undivided Devotion for the best possible return. I would like to submit the

following mix of investment strategies for your consideration. Each of these eight strategies corresponds to the theme of one of the eight remaining chapters in this book. The strategies are biblically sound and can provide the right mix of short-term protection and long-term growth for any single person's spiritual portfolio.

### **STRATEGIES**

**Chapter Two:** The rich single life gains identity from recognizing the extent to which God has gone to fill the gap between who we are and what we can be.

**Chapter Three:** The rich single life mines the essence of our identity and season of life for the hidden treasures of opportunity.

**Chapter Four:** The rich single life develops a faith that roots below the topsoil of culture and circumstance, yielding the fruit of good decisions and a hunger to obey God.

**Chapter Five:** The rich single life resonates with the impact of a whole-hearted devotion to God and his agenda for our lives.

**Chapter Six:** The rich single life exhibits a love for others that produces meaningful friendships radiating the deep glow of fellowship.

**Chapter Seven:** The rich single life is prepared and willing to pursue a relationship toward marriage in submission to God's timing, wisdom, and Word.

**Chapter Eight:** The rich single life embraces a biblical vision for marriage with sober but faith-filled anticipation.

**Chapter Nine:** The rich single life confronts the universal challenge of loneliness with biblical hope.

Before we proceed, let's keep in mind this sound perspective from Randy Alcorn: "Let me assume the role of 'eternal financial counselor' and offer this advice: choose your investments carefully; compare their rates of interest; consider their ultimate trustworthiness; and especially compare how they will be working for you a few million years from now."<sup>11</sup> ■

#### **GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. At what point in life do you think someone becomes a "single adult"?
2. Have you ever been a minority in a cross-cultural situation? What feelings did it produce?
3. If you went to your high school reunion, what would be the first thing you wanted people to know about you? What would be the second?
4. In addition to the testimony from the mission field (see p.8), what are some other situations where being single might be better than being married?
5. What are some ways you have seen God's sovereign hand at work in your life?

6. What are some ways you have experienced the gift of singleness?
7. Are there any ways you tend to think or act which may be attempts just to cope with your singleness? Describe them.
8. What investments of yourself can you be making right now to give you a greater return on your singleness?

**RECOMMENDED  
READING FOR THE  
SAVVY INVESTOR**

*Knowing God* by J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973)

*Desiring God* by John Piper (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1996)

*A Singular Devotion: 366 Portraits of Singles Who Have Changed the World* by Harold Ivan Smith (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell, 1990)

**NOTES**

1. Douglas L. Fagerstrom, ed., *Singles Ministry Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1988), p. 26.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
3. Barbara Holland, *One's Company: Reflections on Living Alone* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1992), p. 251.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
5. Quoted by John R.W. Stott, in *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 45.
6. V.M. Sinton, *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 790.
7. Elisabeth Elliot, *Let Me Be a Woman* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1976), p. 40.
8. Paige Benton, *Re:generation Quarterly*.
9. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), p. xxiii.
10. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume XI (Albany, OR: The SAGE Digital Library, 1995), p. 540.
11. Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1989), p. 134.