

Sturdy Truths for Single Parents



by *Robert D. Jones*

I was only two years old when my dad died an untimely death. My sisters were twelve and fourteen. Mom was stunned. She never remarried. She remained a single mom, raising me and my sisters with no co-parent. Her world was hard, her life difficult, her task burdensome.

If you are a single parent, have been a single parent, or know a single parent, you will likely agree that it may be the hardest job in the world. Seeking to be both dad and mom—breadwinner, cook, chauffeur, comforter, dishwasher, homework helper, disciplinarian, nurse, and role model—can wear down the most hardy man or woman. Single mothers and fathers need sturdy truths from our Savior.

I am not a single parent, but I know several. And I feel for them. While in this brief article I cannot sound the depths of their varied experiences, the following counsel from God's Word can guide and stabilize any a single parent who seeks to know and follow Jesus.

1. View yourself fundamentally as a Christian and not as a single parent.

Single parents often suffer from identity confusion. As Andrew Farmer insightfully notes,

A single parent wrestles every day with a basic identity problem. Am I a single person who has parenting responsibilities? Or am I a parent who basically lives in a

single person's world? It's tough to be both all the time.

Many of the single parents I know seek their fellowship in our singles ministry, but find it challenging to flow in the spontaneous social realm of other singles. Singles often have very little understanding of the pressures of parenting, and may prefer to not even deal with children in their world of singleness. Other single parents seek identity with two-parent families in a parents' world. This can provide a great environment of security and training for the children...but then the couples go home, and instantly the singleness of single parenting once again fills the void.¹

So which identity should the single parent adopt? In one sense, neither. While our marital or parental positions describe our circumstances, they do not form our identity. Whether you are unmarried, a parent, or that challenging hybrid of a single parent (or parenting single?), that is not who you ARE. Who are you? Hear the apostle's words to all who belong to Jesus Christ:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to

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the promise. (Gal. 3:26-29)

Here Paul highlights three common people-dividing categories in his day—Jew versus Greek, slave versus freeman, male versus female—and tells us that in Jesus Christ these divisions no longer exist. Don't miss his point. Paul is not blind to ethnicity or racial heritage, oblivious to master-slave workplace dynamics, or ignorant of the birds and the bees. On the contrary, elsewhere in his letters he directly addresses Jews, Greeks, masters, slaves, men, and women—people marked by the various distinctions that he claims no longer exist.

What's Paul's point? Simply this: Jesus Christ defines us not by our social standing but by our connection to Him. The Gospel does not obliterate your social class or neuter your gender. It relativizes them. It subordinates them so that they no longer define and control us. At the end of the day—the bottom line—we are Christians, sons and daughters of God, heirs of

spouse's death or divorce has robbed you of your identity and likely has shriveled your soul. There are also two kinds of parents. If your parenting—as a single parent now or a married parent before—enriches you, then you can handle parental ups and downs. But if you allowed yourself to be *defined* as a married parent, then your life needs radical redefinition. Let the Gospel redefine you.

The implications for you as a single parent are limitless. It means that Jesus is, and longs to be, your most significant “other,” far more so than any ex-spouse you have had or any wished-for-spouse you have desired.

- Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (Ps. 73:25-26)
- His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through

Jesus Christ defines us not by our social standing but by our connection to Him.

Abraham's promised blessing brought to fruition in our lives through Jesus.

How you view yourself matters immensely. I love Donald Sutherland's line in the 2003 film *The Italian Job*. Sutherland plays John, a successful but aging master thief specializing in high-ticket art and jewel theft. Savoring their \$35,000,000 caper, he laments to his young protégé, Charlie, played by Mark Wahlberg, how he has spent all his life as a thief and never settled down. In a fatherly tone he advises Charlie: “You know, Charlie, there are two kinds of thieves in this world: those who steal to enrich their lives, and those who steal to define their lives.” With a shaking head he adds, “Don't be the latter. It makes you miss out on what's really important in this life.”

In the same way I would suggest that there are two kinds of married people: those whose marriage *enriches* their lives (a good thing), and those whose marriage *defines* their life (a bad thing). If marriage defined you, then your

our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. (2 Pet. 1:3)

It means, providentially, that some of us are Christians who happen to be either gifted with marriage or gifted with singleness. Some of us are Christians who happen to be parents or to be childless. But all of us are Christians, one in Christ, having brand new identities anchored forever in our Lord and not in our social situation.

It means that in God's eyes you as a single Christian parent actually have more in common with married Christians, or non-parent Christians, than with single parents who do not know the Son of God. Common cords connect you to both Jesus and His church body: regeneration, the Holy Spirit's presence, the Bible, sins forgiven now and forever, the call to one-another ministry, God as Father, faith, hope, and love. You are not exiled to a single-parents land, cast off the island of seemingly important married people, marginalized as a

second-class citizen. No, you live right in the middle of God's redemptive drama, at the very center of His work in this world, married to His Son.

In fact, you are not so much a "Christian SINGLE-PARENT" (the nice adjective, supplementing a core identity noun). You are a "CHRISTIAN who, for the time being, in God's providence, happens to be unmarried and to have one or more children." Single-parenthood is your situation, not your identity. Who you are is God's son or daughter, coupled deeply and forever with Jesus Christ.

2. Properly resolve the various issues relative to how you became a single parent.

How did you become a single parent? How are you dealing with the divine providence that brought you to this place? God stands ready to help resolve these often gnawing problems.

Maybe you were previously married, but then your spouse died and you are now widowed. Along with handling the unique challenges of single parenting, you must also work through your grief. The bereavement process is painful enough even in the best of marriages. And if your prior relationship with your deceased spouse was unhealthy—if you built your life upon your spouse as an idol, or if distance, guilt, bitterness, or unresolved conflict characterized the marriage—then the grieving process can become complicated, prolonged, or stunted.²

Perhaps you and your spouse are separated or were divorced. Along with the sadness of loss itself, akin to the grief dynamics above, you have the baggage of a broken relationship and the present complications of dealing with your ex-spouse. Perhaps there is strife over child custody, shared parenting, and visitation; financial support; decisions concerning the child's welfare, in-law privileges, and so forth. Are you the primary custodial parent? That becomes a factor, as does the degree of involvement your "ex" wants to have in your children's lives. Add dating desires and remarriage prospects to the situation and the compounding pressures can confound even the strongest single parent.

Or maybe you were never married. Perhaps you were raped or seduced, or you willingly engaged in premarital sex that never

led to marriage. The discovery of your pregnancy perhaps startled you, and you faced a monumental decision. You decided to keep your child, boldly bypassing family members, friends, and inner voices that urged abortion. Whether you recognized it or not, you chose God's way of life for your unborn child, since God is the one who forms babies in the womb and God alone has the right to end any human life. Maybe you considered entrusting your baby to qualified, loving adoptive parents, or to a trustworthy agency who would assist in this, but at the end of the day you opted for single motherhood.

Andrew Farmer acknowledges your pressures:

We talk about the need to train children with godly diligence and consistency, yet single parents must often raise their children within a complicated and competing system of authorities and influences—often including the other birth parent, grandparents, counselors, courts, attorneys, schools, media, peers, and social service agencies! Perhaps most challenging, a single parent often lives with the constant awareness that his or her greatest human joy, that wonderful child, is inextricably linked to personal shame, pain, failure, or loss of vast proportions.

In whatever way you became and remain a single parent the Bible pours forth words of grace, power, and hope for you. God speaks to your situation itself and to all the issues that relate to it—guilt, bad memories, anger, bitterness, resentment, loss, grief, fear, and so forth.

The answers, of course, all connect you to Jesus Christ. For example, do you see in the cross of Jesus God's answer for the guilt you may be carrying over your contribution to the marriage meltdown or to your premarital sexual sin? As a single parent you probably feel guilty enough—I've met few single parents who didn't feel they were failing to do a good job as a parent—but to wallow in ongoing guilt about your past is not what Jesus wants for you.

Or maybe you struggle with bitterness toward your ex-spouse, and you see that this is not only controlling your life, but also affecting

the children who are breathing the second-hand smoke of your anger. Can you grasp what it means to live as one who has been forgiven a multi-million dollar sin debt before God, and to release the bitterness you are accumulating toward that other person? (Matt. 18:21-35).

It is vital that you deal with your ongoing baggage; it will affect you and your children now and in the days to come. Jesus is big enough to handle it and help you.

3. Cling to God's special promises to be Husband to the widow and Father to the fatherless.

The Bible abounds with promises to widows and orphans. Farmer summarizes it well:

The overarching hope of the single parent is the Fatherhood of God.... God the Father has a special place in His heart for the widows and the fatherless. His great heart beats with compassion for those who are His and are going it alone.³

God's heart is seen in His promises to care in special ways for widows and fatherless among His people. In one real, albeit metaphorical, sense God is the Husband of the single mom and the Father of the orphan:

- A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families.... (Ps. 68:5-6)
- The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow.... (Ps. 146:9)
- For your Maker is your husband—the LORD Almighty is His name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; He is called the God of all the earth. (Isa. 54:5; also Hos. 14:1-3)

One of the ways God demonstrates His care for the single parent is through His commands, wisdom, rebukes, and warnings throughout Scripture for people to protect widows and fatherless:

- Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become

widows and your children fatherless. (Ex. 22:22-24)

- Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of a widow as a pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I commanded you to do this. (Deut. 24:17-18; see also 24:19-22)
- Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked. (Ps. 82:3-4)
- Do not move an ancient boundary stone or encroach on the fields of the fatherless, for their Defender is strong; He will take up their case against you. (Pr. 23:10-11)
- Israel's leaders have treated father and mother with contempt. They have oppressed the alien and mistreated the fatherless and the widow. (Ezek. 22:7)

The Bible clearly names God as Father. But God Himself and His Son Jesus are not ashamed to also use maternal metaphors for His care for His people. Although these images are not addressed to widowers or motherless believers per se, in an analogous way the principle of God's care for all single parents, including dads and their children, runs through these promises. In one sense—carefully defined, of course—the single dad has biblical warrant to see God as his wife and his children's mother:

- Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O mountains! For the LORD comforts His people and will have compassion on His afflicted ones. But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, the LORD has forgotten me." "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" (Isa. 49:13-15)
- As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem. (Isa. 66:13)
- Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your

children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. (Matt. 23:37)

You don't have to be both father and mother. God is with you.

How important is this? Amid abandonment by his wife, Scott came to realize that his growing relationship with God turned his struggles into blessings. "Without a doubt, the only thing that has held me together has been the promises of God. God's power has given me everything I need for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3). His energy powerfully works in me (Col. 1:29). Life is no longer about the difficulties that come my way, but more importantly how God is trying to conform me into the image of His Son."

How do single parents draw near to God? Amy points to her Bible. "Reading Psalms and Proverbs during my most difficult times was very helpful. Being in Bible studies regularly, even more than usual, has sustained me. God convinced me that deepening my relationship with Him was a necessity for survival."

Why is this so important? Sandy answers,

The most difficult challenge that I face as a single parent is making parenting decisions without having someone who loves my child as much as I do to help me make these decisions. I am forever wishing I had someone with my child's best interest at heart to discuss matters with. I have cried more tears since my divorce over trying to make the best decisions regarding my daughter. With teenagers, a multitude of decisions need to be made on a daily basis.

Thankfully, Sandy brings those tears to God and seeks His help for these daily decisions. God assuredly has your child's best interest in His heart, even more than you do.

4. Believe and practice the basic biblical counsel given to all parents, including single parents.

If single parenting is indeed a very hard job, then you certainly need clear guidance. And thankfully the Bible speaks to you, from cover-to-cover. "Good," you reply, "I've been

looking for some help. Give me some verses that single out single moms and dads and tell us what we are supposed to do with our kids."

Sorry. The Bible doesn't always answer questions in the way we ask them, or give us truth in the categories or format we want. In point of fact there are no "ten commandments" in Scripture that exclusively address single parents.

What should we make of the apparent absence of biblical commands addressed specifically to single parents? Let's begin with a more fundamental question: Were there any single parents in the faith communities for which the Old Testament and New Testament writers? Surely yes. Then why were they excluded from biblical counsel on how to parent? The answer: They were not excluded. When God through the Scripture spoke to His readers He spoke to married parents and single parents without distinction. In other words, the general commands given to all parents pertain to single parents. You are not a special, exceptional subcategory.

What are God's directives given to parents? While various Christian authors summarize biblical parenting duties in various ways, most include the following components:

- Provide physical and emotional care
- Provide verbal instruction
- Provide physical discipline
- Model dependency on Christ that grows into His likeness
- Pray for and with your children

Of course you will not be able to give as much time, energy, skill, and creativity to these five tasks as two parents could. And God does not expect double effort from you. You cannot do, and must not try to do, the work of two adults. But what you do seek to do, in dependence on God's help, should be these five ministries toward your kids.

Further, while you may receive help from others—your parents, friends, church family, and so forth—you remain the God-appointed, God-authorized parent of your children. Do not concede this authority, responsibility, and opportunity to others. There is no biblical doctrine of "grandmother's rights." In God's providence you, not your mother, are single-

parenting the children God has entrusted to you.

5. Pay special attention to how your children handle your single parent situation. Counsel them without consigning them to “victim” identity and mentality.

It is wise for you to give due concern not just on how single parenting affects you, but also your children. In whatever way you became a single parent, in the same way your children have lost a parent. You are not the only one needing help to respond and adjust wisely. Your child’s other parent has died (if you were widowed), or has left the home (if you were divorced), or may be unknown to your child (if you have not revealed the biological parent’s identity). Do you know how your children are handling the event that left them with just one residential parent?⁴

At the same time, you must reject a pair of

believer in Christ, but his father apparently was not. What future did this hold for this young man? Listen to his spiritual “father,” the apostle Paul, describe what God brought about despite a non-Christian dad:

- I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. (2 Tim. 1:5)
- But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Tim. 3:14-15)

God used a godly mother, a godly grandmother, and a godly mentor to teach and model the

Adoption is a mirror image of what God does for His people. Adoption redeems the broken lives of children, just as God adopts us and redeems our brokenness and sinfulness.

lies. First, do not lose sight of your child’s responsibility to love, trust, and obey God despite unpleasant circumstances. A broken home does not excuse unbelief, rebellion, ingratitude, or idolatry. Teenage rebellion is, at the end of the day, rebellion. And rebellion is sin.⁵

Second, reject hopeless notions that “doom” your children to future problems simply because they lack two married parents, or because of the negative influence their other parent may exert. Your children are not “victims” or “products of broken homes.” They are people—people in God’s image—who can know Jesus, follow Jesus, and live meaningful lives that please Jesus. Along with my own testimony, I can name several other godly men and women who grew up with only one parent.

Consider Timothy in the New Testament. While his parents were married, their marriage was spiritually mixed. We meet Timothy in Acts 16:1 where we learn that his mother was a

gospel for Timothy. He can use similar influences in your child’s life, confirming the apostle’s encouraging promise in 1 Corinthians 7:14, “For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.”⁶

What steps might you as a single parent take when your ex-spouse’s sinfulness exerts a negative influence on your kids?

- Entrust your child to God. Remember that God owns your child. You are a steward, not the owner. Humbly ask God to work directly in your son or daughter’s life, and to use other means of grace to save, protect, and strengthen him.
- Appeal directly to your ex-spouse to change, restrain, or curb offensive behavior, out of love for your children. If

that fails, pursue other recourses of appeal or accountability. This might include provisions in your shared parenting agreements for counseling or mediation, or enlisting the help of common friends or his or her parents or siblings. In severe cases you may need to contact the police or child protective services.

- Continue to model and teach the gospel to your children, like Timothy's mother Eunice, reflecting Christlikeness that will contrast and counteract in refreshing ways the unbeliever's lifestyle. Ask God to help you walk according to the Holy Spirit—to demonstrate the Spirit's fruit, adorn the gospel, and make Jesus attractive to your children as they consider the fork in the road they face. In some cases you may need to wisely caution and advise your children before or after they spend time with their other parent: "Daddy may do some things differently than I do. I do what I do because I am trying to follow Jesus. Your dad at this point is not seeking to follow Jesus. Respect your dad, love your dad, and pray for your dad. This is how you should handle it if he...."
- Remind your children that each of them must decide if they too will follow Jesus, and they cannot blame any parent, or anyone else, for unbiblical modeling.
- Invite one of your pastors or elders to sit down with you and your children to give them a biblical perspective on what happened in your marriage, how God looks at you and at your ex-spouse, and how God wants the children to treat each parent and handle shuttling between two houses. This is especially vital if your children are being given a sinfully-biased perspective on these matters.

In the midst of all this, God has given you a practical opportunity to teach your children much about his sovereignty, wisdom, and goodness. You cannot mend all the problems and complications your children might face, but you can convey a rich, robust, big picture of God

and His ways. Connect them to the God of all hope, the Romans 8:28-29 God who brings hope and purpose to your life and to theirs.

One single mom summarized her concerns this way:

- I am not able to fill the father role for our children.
- My ex-husband and I have opposite philosophies on what to teach and model for our children—Christian priorities and values versus worldly priorities and values.
- I try to put my focus on the future, rather than on the past.
- When our philosophies and values clash, I try not to take it personally. I explain my position and stand my ground for what I am trying to teach my children. I try not to attack.
- My biggest concern is that I not let my attitude affect my children negatively. I am in this position of being a single parent, but I have no desire to be in it.

Notice how many things on this list have to do with her relationship with her ex-spouse and her own attitude toward single parenting.

6. Pursue a wise, God-pleasing, appropriate relationship with your children's other parent.

The call here is simple, albeit profound and frequently draining: To love God with your whole being and to love that other parent the way you so naturally love yourself (Matt. 22:36-40). If that parent is deceased, or if he or she is an ex-spouse who shows no desire to be involved with your children, the task becomes less complex.

But when relational tension exists with the other party, this call gets tough. "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Rom. 12:18), making every effort to keep your conscience clear before God and before other people (Acts 24:16). Cultivating attitudes of mercy, knowing when and how to confront or stand up for righteousness (particularly concerning your children), humbly confessing your failures and seeking the other person's forgiveness, controlling your tongue, praying for your former spouse, dealing with your in-laws – these and many more attitudes

and actions constitute God's will in what may be an ongoing exhausting relationship.

Yet there is good news here for you who seek God's will: You are not responsible to God for the response of others. Moreover God promises to walk with you through these tense interactions, to forgive you when you fail, to empower you to trust and obey Him, to use conflict to make you like Jesus, and one day to complete His good work in you and to usher you into His eternal kingdom, a place of everlasting peace, joy, and righteousness in His very presence.

7. Participate, as fully as your circumstances permit, in the worship, fellowship, and ministry of your local church, the body of Christ.

Divorce, or your spouse's death, can leave you numb and tempt you to distrust others and withdraw from close relationships. For a host of reasons many single parents find solace in solitude, even circling the wagon with their children.

This is a mistake—an understandable mistake, and an easy one to make, but a mistake nonetheless. You and your family need the body of Christ. While God in His providence has placed you in a single-parent role, He has not called you to live in isolation from other believers.

You need corporate worship, weekly times to set your eyes on God your Father and Jesus your Savior, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Single-parenting pressures can drive you toward self-absorption. Assembling with others to praise the triune God and receive His preached Word will drive you toward Him and others.

You also need fellowship with other Christians, both brothers and sisters in Jesus who can help you, encourage you, and live out the Bible's many dozen "one another" commands. Immersion into God's family will guard you from loneliness, self-centeredness, and victimhood. Of course this entails willingness on your end to humbly seek and gratefully receive help from those who want to serve you in various ways: assisting with child care, giving financial help, including your family for holiday get-togethers, counseling about purchases or other financial matters, instructing

in child-training, providing additional employment, or doing household tasks for which you are not skilled or don't have time.

Several single parent breadwinners particularly valued transportation help: "When I can't be in two places at the same time, I have learned to ask for assistance with transporting my children to a practice or game, and most people are more than glad to assist. In most cases, I think it easiest to go to the church for help because you know that people are looking and willing to serve." While cherishing this help, another recently divorced mom notes the downside: "Scheduling has been a nightmare for me when there's only one of me to do the running and I have to work. My daughter can always catch a ride with someone else but is it the ride I would want her to have? I hate not being able to pick her up after school to encourage her when she's had a bad day, or cheer for her when she's done well on a particular test or speech."

Pastoral counseling can be invaluable. Here's one single parent's experience:

Of the types of support I sought, I found pastoral facilitators to be much more helpful, accepting, persevering—in my opinion because they had another source—God—to draw on to keep them healthy and balanced.

In pursuing participation in the church, don't settle for classes or small groups that are single-parent-only. These might be wise provisions for you initially, giving you some short-term relief and helping you connect to the rest of the church. But remember that the body of believers is bigger than you and your single-parent friends. As a member of the body you have something to offer others, and they have something to offer you. Currently, for example, I lead a care group at my church that by design consists of married and single people, and those singles, again by design, include both single parents and non-parents. I desire my group to be a microcosm of the whole church in all its breadth.

In particular, look for and ask God to give you a faithful friend or two of the same gender in the church with whom you can cultivate a peer relationship of Christ-centered fellowship.

Finally, beyond the benefits, membership in the body of Christ also entails responsibilities. You need to serve. While the combination of single parenting and breadwinning may drain your time, look for opportunities to serve in even small or occasional ways. Where there's a will, there's often a way. In serving you will not only please God and help others but you will model servanthood for your children, and you will derive great joy yourself as you follow the way of your Savior who taught us that "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35)

At the same time, for some men and women, becoming a single parent means throttling back on plans for Christian service. One single dad, a part-time ministry student, came to this bittersweet conclusion: "God is calling me to turn over my goals and aspirations to Him and to realize that maturing me is more important than my reaching short-term goals: my seminary degree, Christian ministry, and greater opportunities in my current job world." Ironically, whatever his vocation direction may be, he will likely emerge as a wiser, more compassionate servant of Jesus our Lord.

8. Expose your children, where possible, to mature Christian men and women who can serve as models.

Within most churches there are mature Christian men and women who can provide role models for your son or daughter. Talk to your church elders about this. They themselves and their wives might serve in such a role, since their ministry job description includes modeling godliness (1 Pet. 5:2-4; Heb. 13:7). Keep your eyes open for exemplary believers and don't be afraid to invite them into your children's lives, smoothly, in appropriate ways. You might invite a godly couple over for a meal or ask a growing Christian adult if he or she might cultivate some personal interest in your child.

"But they have uncles and coaches and scout leaders who are good people," you say. That is good. But at the end of the day, ask what message these well-intentioned people send, if they themselves do not openly live for Jesus. They may be sending a moralistic message that you can have a good life without Jesus Christ. In other words, don't settle for merely good moral

influences (though you should prefer them to immoral ones). Your goal is to lead your children to Christ, not to produce little Pharisees.

9. Seek God's counsel from your pastor, elders, or a biblical counselor concerning marriage or remarriage possibilities.

The matter of marriage or remarriage for you as a single parent of course warrants an entire article or book of its own. Is pursuing a partner the right step for you? While Paul in 1 Timothy 5:14 favors younger widows remarrying, there are few direct statements on this issue, and even in this case of younger widows, wisdom is required.

Here are five questions to ask yourself:

- *Am I free before God and others to marry/remarry?* Have I dealt with any past issues or ongoing obligations, as in point two above?¹¹
- *Do I want to marry/remarry for the right reasons?* Motives are crucial for entering marriage. The right driving motive is "I want to love and serve this man or woman in a God-given relationship of marriage." But there are wrong motives that reinforce our natural self-centeredness: "I need a husband or a wife." Or, "my children deserve a mom or dad." On the other hand, there are wrong motives to not marry: "I'll never trust a man or a woman again."
- *Is this person the best person for me, and am I the best person for him or her?* Within the broad biblical boundaries of marrying only "in the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39; see also 2 Cor. 6:14-17)—your common commitment to follow Christ—you have much latitude in mate selection.¹² But at the end of the day (as some have discovered the hard way), it is better to remain a single parent than to enter into a potentially destructive marriage.
- *How can I, and my fiancé, best prepare for marriage or remarriage?* Are you and your fiancé committed to wise, Christ-centered premarital training? Don't fall for the lie that limits premarital training to eighteen-year-olds with little life experience. Everyone can profit from

marital preparation, even if—and perhaps especially if—you have had a previous marriage. Most Bible-believing pastors in our day want engaged couples to receive quality help before marriage. (Note: If your fiancé is uninterested or unwilling, you might question his commitment to following Christ once you are married.)

- *Have I considered and sought wise counsel about the unique challenges that a “blended” or “step-” family provides?* Merging your life and children with another person is no simple task, especially if he or she also has children.¹⁴ It’s not as easy as the *Yours, Mine, and Ours* films might suggest. Do you want this man or this woman to influence and shape your children? Are you prepared to adjust to a different style not only of marriage but also of parenting? What do your children think about this person, his/her children, and the whole proposition? How much will their opinion matter in your final decision? And how much will you allow them to bond with the potential mate before you tie the knot? Get some counsel; romantic love can be the wrong kind of blind love.

Conclusion

Does single parenthood spell doom? Not for dads and moms who belong to Jesus and devote themselves to him. Are your children

destined to a second-class existence? Not in my case; God had His hand on my life and brought me into a saving relationship with my heavenly Father.

Jenny’s testimony can be yours: “I face not the sorrows of a fallen world but the saving grace of the Refiner’s fire. That causes me to kneel in desperation at the Lord’s feet, but not pleading for a house with a picket fence, a husband, and 2.5 kids. No, I desperately plead for the riches of His kingdom—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control! For some people these gifts may come with ease, but I insist on the wretchedness of my soul that needs to be transformed at any cost. And I trust that God is not blind or uncompassionate, but very much in control. The Bible promises us trials, and these trials are there to test our faith, make us stronger, and sharpen our character. Why then should we resist God’s goodness?” What is Jenny’s ultimate hope? Jesus.

But He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:9-10)

¹ Andrew Farmer, “Appendix A: Single Parents and the Church,” *The Rich Single Life* (Gaithersburg, MD: Sovereign Grace Ministries, 1998), 151. Downloadable version available at www.sovereigngraceministries.org.

² While unpacking Christ-centered counsel on grieving the loss of a spouse (and similar topics that follow) goes beyond the scope of this article, I recommend Paul David Tripp’s helpful booklet, *Grief: Finding Hope Again* (Winston-Salem, NC: Punch Press, 2004).

³ Farmer, 153.

⁴ Consider the discouraging research in Judith S. Wallerstein, Julia M. Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The*

Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study (NY: Hyperion, 2000). For a hope-filled biblical perspective, see Amy Baker, “Children of Divorce: Issues to Be Addressed in Helping the Children,” a workshop presented at Faith Baptist Counseling Ministries’ Biblical Counseling Training Conference, February 2000. For audio recordings contact Faith Baptist Church at 765-448-1986 or www.fbclafayette.org/store.

⁵ Consider, for example, Isaiah 1:2; Malachi 1:6; Romans 1:30; 2 Timothy 3:1-5; Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:1.

⁶ Commentators differ on the nature of the “sanctification” and “holiness” benefits that come to the unsaved spouse and children. I understand it to refer to the special privilege—a Gospel beachhead—that other family members have when a father or mother belongs to Christ and lives out his or her faith in the home.

⁷ For help on resolving conflict, see Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004); Timothy S. Lane, *Conflict* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2006); and Robert D. Jones, “Resolving Conflict Christ’s Way” (*Journal of Biblical Counseling* 19:1, 2000), 13-17. Another Sande book, *Peacemaking for Families: A Biblical Guide to Managing Conflict in Your Home* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2002), more concisely focuses on marital conflict and includes chapters that apply biblical peacemaking to in-laws and to children.

⁸ While this article addresses the single parent, there are massive implications for church leaders and church members. Again, hear the pastoral heart of Andrew Farmer: “As we acknowledge the various dimensions of the single-parent gap, let us also recognize that God in His wisdom has provided an ideal place for single-parent families. It is the local church: a community of faith, the family of God. We who are the members of local churches need to welcome single parents and their children into our midst as fellow recipients of the mercy of God. Without creating unhelpful dependencies, we need to be willing to see their needs as legitimate and worthy of our long-term attention. We also must be prepared to stand with them in

the legal system, the government-assistance system, and perhaps most importantly, in our own little social systems. We need to bend our way of doing things to include them and their children, and help them find their practical place in the church family.” Farmer, 152.

⁹ Again, there are implications for how we do church. While I have a concern that we fail to properly integrate singles with married persons, that concern doubles with single *parents*, triples with single *moms*, quadruples with single moms who must also be *breadwinners*, and quintuples with single, breadwinning moms who have been *divorced by their husbands* for unbiblical reasons. Where separate couples-only groups and singles-only groups are a church’s norm, we fail to reflect the true make-up of the church, and we leave limited options for single moms and dads to experience true Christ-centered fellowship.

¹⁰ An excellent booklet to guide your thinking about whether you should marry is David Powlison and John Yenchko, *Pre-Engagement* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2000) and a previous article version, “Should They Get Married?”, *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 8:4.

¹¹ See Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986).

¹² Howard Eyrich, “The Christian Concept of an Equal Yoke,” *Three to Get Ready*, rev. ed. (Bemidji, MN: Focus, 1996); also Garry Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004).