

## AM I A MARRIAGE NORMATIVE PREACHER?

After three years of research (and a lifetime of experience as a never-married woman), I have learned that marriage normativity is RARELY a deliberate decision by the preacher. In fact, in my workshops and doctoral studies, I have learned that preachers didn't know the term marriage normativity, let alone recognize when they were doing it.

I developed this evaluation form to help preachers assess and reflect on the intensity and volume of marriage normative illustrations in their preaching. Single women, however, can use this template to address the issue of marriage normativity with their pastor.

### WHAT IT REQUIRES:

- This PDF. Just ten questions but will take time!
- Volunteers. These volunteers should be single women from your congregation. Using my definition of single women, try to get at least one representative of each: unpartnered, don't want to be partnered, divorced, widowed, and married but attend church solo.
- Humility. You're going to need to be vulnerable and receptive to their feedback. Do you have to take their advice wholesale? No, but you would be wise to listen. Even the act of asking them to participate in your ongoing formation as a leader and Christ-follower will endear you to them. I promise.
- Purpose. This is a listening session not a "fix-it" session. Right now, they are informing you about a blind spot you may have in your preaching. Take notes for you to reflect on later. Don't offer any promises and, again, with humility, don't be defensive. You are listening.
- Follow through. Lastly, I recommend a follow-up session with your volunteers. Sit down with them and then go back 3-5 months later and ask the questions again. Look for progress, look for areas of growth.

**This work created by Rev. Dr. Jamie Fiorino.**

**More information can be found at [www.blessedarethesingleladies.com](http://www.blessedarethesingleladies.com).**

**Please contact for reprinting permission.**

## THE SET-UP:

After choosing your League of Single Women, contact them and ask for their help. I suggest this kind of wording, but (obviously) use your own words:

*Dear .....*

*I invite you to be a part of my continuing education as a preacher. I've just become aware of a blind spot for some preachers called marriage normativity, and I am curious if it is happening here and with me. Your perspective as a single woman will help me see if I am unintentionally creating a problem where one should not exist. If you agree, I'll ask you to pay attention to certain topics and words in my sermons over the next two months. Then, I will set up a meeting with you and a few other women for an honest conversation.*

*Listen carefully in my sermons and messaging to the church for these specific things.*

*Take note of the number of times I use:*

- *Examples of marriage and families*
- *Examples of my marriage and my family*
- *Mention singleness and dating*

*Lastly, note the frequency and tone of these illustrations, as well as your reaction to it. I look forward to discussing this topic with you. For more information, look at the website: [www.blessedarethesingleladies.com](http://www.blessedarethesingleladies.com).*

*Salutations...*

**Now. On to the questions!**

## FIVE QUESTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION BEFOREHAND:

1. *Marriage normativity is the implicit or subtle teaching that marriage is the desired state for all Christians, according to restrictive interpretations of Scripture. Also called matrimania, this behavior reinforces a societal bias which elevates marriage above singlehood and stereotypes a successful marriage as one demonstrated by healthy children, financial stability, and overt happiness; an action which hurts the whole church.*

Take a moment and think about your reaction to this definition. What words or phrase do you agree with? What leaves you feeling unsettled?

2. You can't change your preaching until you believe the problem exists. Spend some time thinking, journaling, or praying about how the topic of marriage was treated in the church you grew up in, or the church in which you came to faith. Are you repeating the message that marriage is expected, or is this something you truly believe?

>If you truly believe marriage is expected of all believers, how do you know that your congregation agrees with you?

>If you see the problem of treating marriage as normative, what resistance will you face from your congregation by changing your preaching habits?

3. Thinking back over the last six months of sermons, how often do you think you use marriage normative language and illustrations in your preaching?

4. When considering the best sermon illustrations, how do you pick what to use? Do you use the first one you think of, or is there a Google search? Make a list of other areas from which you can mine sermon illustrations. (Hint: history, art, sports...)

5. What scripture would you use when counseling a single woman who feels stuck in her marital status?



## THE SET-UP:

In preparing to spend one to two hours with your League of Single Ladies, consider these suggestions:

- > Make sure your meeting location is conducive to conversation.
- > Ask a non-participant to come and take notes for you to use later!
- > Tailor the suggested questions to your group and your context.
- > Let them consider in silence, and don't lead the answers! This is their time to vulnerable with you. Remember, you are in the position of power and they may not want to tell you something they think you aren't going to want to hear. Modeling an open, humble posture might help them open up.

## ASK THEM:

1. *Marriage normativity is the implicit or subtle teaching that marriage is the desired state for all Christians, according to restrictive interpretations of Scripture. Also called **matrimania**, this behavior reinforces a societal bias which elevates marriage above singlehood and stereotypes a successful marriage as one demonstrated by healthy children, financial stability, and overt happiness; an action which hurts the whole church.*

Take a moment and re-state that definition in your own words.

Think about your reaction to this definition. What words or phrase do you agree with? What leaves you feeling unsettled?

2. Where do you see or hear marriage normativity in our church?

3. Thinking back (and perhaps looking at your notes), when—if ever—did you hear me say (or imply) marriage is expected?

4. What words used in my sermons trigger for you a sense of non-belonging, as it relates to your marital status?

5. If there were a spectrum between “none” and “frequently”, where do I fall when it comes to:

- Treating marriage as an idol
- Positively addressing singleness
- Using sermon examples which imply marriage normativity
- Giving the impression that being married is expected of all people
- This church believing that the Bible says marriage is required for Christians

## MORE SELF-REFLECTION REQUIRED:

If possible, take some time after you meet with your League of Single Ladies to reflect and pray on your time together.

- > Ask yourself: What did I hear? How do I feel about it?
- > Consult the notes from your scribe; is your recollection true?
- > Consider what is yours to do now. Was there something urgent they brought up?
- > Resist the urge to form a new group or program in response to their feedback. The idea was to listen and respond by making changes in your preaching.
- > Don't forget to send thank you notes or emails to your League (and scribe) and set up a follow-up meeting so they will be paying attention to your sermon illustrations.

## ONE LAST THING:

*Pastor-friend,*

*On behalf of all the single women in your church now, and those yet to come, thank you. Thank you for hearing us. Thank you for being willing to learn. May God bless the meditations of your heart, and the words of your mouth.*

*Blessings,*

*H Jamie*