

The Shape of Redemption, Part 2: Undivided Devotion to the Lord: The Crucial Witness of Christian Singleness to Christ's Sufficiency

TBC Adult Sunday School – October 20, 2019

We began this class by considering how our human bodies, gender, and sexuality are both *beautiful* and *broken*: they are good gifts from our creator God to be received with wonder and praise, but (like every other part of human nature and experience) they are also damaged and distorted by sin and its effects.

We then considered the importance of our bodies in Christ's redemptive mission. Because Christ accomplished our salvation in his body (through his obedience, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension), our salvation involves the redemption of our bodies, including our gender and sexuality.

What does that redemption look like? Last week, we considered God's affirmation of *marriage*. Marriage is a gift of God to the entire human race. But it is also a covenant sign, a sacred picture of the faithful, fruitful, exclusive, enduring, filled-with-love-and-wonder union between God and his people. Marriage is intended to point us to the kind of relationship that God is drawing us into for all eternity.

However, the shape of redemption in the earthly life of a Christian does not always look like marriage. This week, we will consider a second redemptive path that is also affirmed in the New Testament: namely, *singleness* for the sake of God's kingdom.

Biblical Teaching about Singleness

1. Under the Old Covenant, singleness and childlessness was a sign of God's displeasure and a curse.

- a. God established his covenant with Abraham and his offspring, that his offspring would become as numerous as the stars in the sky (Genesis 15). Under that covenant, God's primary way of building his people was through their bearing children. Therefore, for a descendant of Abraham, to be married and have children was a sign of God's blessing; to be unmarried or unable to bear children was a sign of God's curse (Deuteronomy 28:15-19).
 - i. Consider these statements from Jewish rabbis: "Any man who has no wife is no proper man; for it is said, Male and female he created them" (Rabbi Eleazar, 2nd c. AD). "Do not say, 'I shall not get married', but get married and produce sons and daughters and so increase procreation in the world" (Rabbi Joshua, 2nd c. AD). "No man may abstain from keeping the law, 'Be fruitful and multiply', unless he already has children" (Jewish Mishnah).¹
- b. Eunuchs (in the sense of castrated men who were therefore unable to procreate) were categorically excluded from the assembly of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:1).²
- c. From Abraham to the Babylonian exile, we have "no known examples of those within Israel who voluntarily chose to remain single."³
 - i. Exception: God tells Jeremiah not to marry or have children, as a living picture of the fact that Israel will be cut off as God's judgment for her sin (Jeremiah 16:1-4).

2. However, the prophet Isaiah looked forward to a day when this would change.

- a. "Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married, says the Lord" (Isaiah 54:1).

¹ Barry Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 152.

² At times the Hebrew word for "eunuch" (*saris*) referred to a servant in a king's court who was not necessarily castrated. E.g. Genesis 37:36 refers to Potiphar as a *saris* (usually translated "officer") of Pharaoh, but since he was married, he was almost certainly not what we would think of as a eunuch.

³ Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*, 81.

- b. “Let not the eunuch say, ‘Behold, I am a dry tree.’ For thus says the Lord: ‘To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off” (Isaiah 56:3-5).
- c. Why and how would barren women and childless eunuchs find a place of extraordinary joy and honor among God’s people, instead of being a sign of God’s displeasure and curse?
- d. The answer is found in Isaiah 53, which speaks of the Suffering Servant of the Lord.
 - i. The Suffering Servant “grew up like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground” (53:2). In other words, he began his life full of vitality and promise of growing into a strong, fruit-bearing tree. But then, he was despised and rejected, pierced and crushed: “as for his generation...he was cut off out of the land of the living” (53:8). His life ended in shame and humiliation, bearing the signs of God’s curse.
 - ii. But then, the chapter takes an unexpected turn. Verse 10 continues: “when his soul makes an offering for guilt, *he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.*”
 - iii. In Isaiah’s time, the meaning of this prophecy was not yet clear. Still, the unique accomplishment of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 is clearly the basis for the outpouring of honor and joy in Isaiah 54 & 56 upon those who were previously excluded and disgraced.
- e. Today, we can see how the words of Isaiah 53 were fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus.
 - i. Jesus began his life full of vitality and promise, but he was despised, rejected, pierced, and crushed. His life ended in shame and humiliation, bearing the sign of God’s curse on the cross. He never married, nor did he have biological children.
 - ii. However, through his atoning death and victorious resurrection, Jesus brought new life to countless multitudes who were previously dead, without hope and a future. Christ’s offspring includes men and women from all nations who have been born again, who have been given eternal life through the Spirit of God.
 - iii. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles [those previously excluded from God’s covenant people], so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith...If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:13-14, 29). In other words, we become part of God’s family not through physical birth but through spiritual rebirth.
- f. One person who received this honor and joy of being included in God’s family through faith in Christ was the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40).
 - i. Notice that the eunuch was reading Isaiah 53, the verses about the suffering servant who was humiliated and without descendants. Philip explained the good news about Jesus to him from this very passage, and his response was “What prevents me from being baptized?” He saw that through the work of Christ, he too could be included in the New Covenant, and this brought him great joy.

3. Because of Christ, under the New Covenant, singleness is now a gift from God and an honored calling to service in God’s kingdom.

- a. Jesus affirmed singleness as an honorable calling (Matthew 19:10-12)
 - i. Jesus’ words concerning singleness come in the context of his affirmation of the divine design for male-female marriage “from the beginning” (19:4) and his warning against the practice of quick and easy divorce and remarriage (19:6-9). The disciples react to his strong words about divorce by saying, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry” (19:10). Jesus does not respond to their comment directly; he does not argue for marriage or singleness by saying that one condition is inherently superior to, or more advantageous than, the other. Instead he says:

- ii. "There are eunuchs who have been so from birth" – those unable to marry or procreate due to birth defects
- iii. "There are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men" – in the ancient world, eunuchs were normally castrated, making them unable to procreate; they were also prohibited from marrying. "Making a person into a eunuch had two effects: (1) it lowered their social standing by making them defective in some way; (2) it ensured they would have fewer personal/familial loyalties and would be less likely to attempt to establish a dynasty. The combination of these two effects meant that a eunuch was useful for just one thing: serving in the court of a monarch."⁴
 - 1. Both of the above statements would have been well understood and uncontroversial. The climax (and the part that would have been particularly surprising) of Jesus' statement is in the words that follow:
- iv. "There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven"
 - 1. Here Jesus outlines a positive vision of what I will call *consecrated Christian singleness*: voluntarily embracing a life without marriage, sex, and children for the sake of devoted service in God's kingdom.
 - 2. Such a vision was unprecedented in Judaism (apart from Isaiah's prophecy), and it is a distinctively Christian vision that has no parallel in modern Judaism, Islam, or Mormonism, all of which view celibate singleness in a negative light.⁵
- v. Jesus recognizes that not all of his disciples will voluntarily embrace a life without marriage, sex, and children for the sake of kingdom service: "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given...Let the one who is able to receive this receive it" (19:11-12).
- b. One of Jesus' disciples who did receive and live out this vision of consecrated Christian singleness was Paul.
 - i. Some have speculated that Paul was previously married and then widowed before he became an apostle; however, this is pure speculation, which we can neither prove nor disprove. What is clear is that Paul during his time as an apostle was unmarried, and that he energetically commended this way of serving Christ: "I wish that all were as I myself am...to the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am" (1 Corinthians 7:7-8). However, alongside his energetic promotion of singleness, Paul also recognized Christian marriage as a "gift from God" (v 7).
 - ii. Paul highlighted several ways that consecrated Christian singleness can distinctively bear witness to the gospel:
 - 1. It is a way of traveling light in the present world in order to focus on eternal realities (1 Corinthians 7:26-31). It is a form of fasting, recognizing that earthly joys and ambitions are fleeting, intentionally focusing our desires toward the permanence of our heavenly home.
 - a. "In choosing a life of singleness for the sake of kingdom service, one can freely demonstrate the complete sufficiency of Christ for being a

⁴ Justin Hawkins, "What Doth Hinder Me? The Biblical Theology of Christian Singleness", Adult Sunday School, Trinity Baptist Church, February 21, 2016.

⁵ "Marriage is a commandment in Jewish tradition and celibacy is deplored" (New Encyclopedia of Judaism). Mohammed "apparently condemned the practice of celibacy as 'exceeding the law of God'. Celibate singleness is also explicitly rejected in Mormonism, where undergoing the rite of *celestial marriage* in the temple is necessary to achieve exaltation in the highest heaven in the hereafter" (Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*, 17).

fully blessed member of the new covenant, despite being without the fulfillment of a spouse and children.”⁶

2. It is an opportunity for “undivided devotion to the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:32-35), free from the anxieties and distractions that inevitably come with marriage. It can foreshadow the unmediated intimacy with Christ that all the saints in glory experience, when we will see him face to face.
 - a. “Vacancy for God”
3. It provides a unique opportunity for spiritual motherhood/fatherhood and fruitfulness. Note the many references to spiritual children in Paul’s letters:
 - a. “My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19)
 - b. “I became your father [KJV, “I have begotten you”] in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (1 Corinthians 4:15)
 - c. “My child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment” (Philemon 10)
 - d. Timothy is “my beloved and faithful child in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 4:17)
 - e. “We were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children...like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God (1 Thessalonians 2:7, 11-12)
 - f. “We too, like Paul, are called to be spiritual parents. Not only in begetting children through the gospel but in raising them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord until they are mature disciples...like Isaiah’s barren woman, Paul’s legacy was greater than that of any physical parents, for Paul’s progeny were begotten in Christ through the limitless power of the gospel for an eternal inheritance in heaven.”⁷
4. We might also add that consecrated Christian singleness visibly portrays the cost of discipleship and the worthiness of Jesus in these last days. Jesus called all of his disciples to take up our crosses and follow him. For some, celibate singleness is a particularly heavy cross to bear. Jesus also promised that “there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life” (Luke 18:29-30).

Practical Implications: Honoring Consecrated Christian Singleness in the Church Today

1. Recognizing the distinctive witness of consecrated Christian singleness to the gospel of Christ
 - a. The church needs the witness of godly Christian marriage, as well as consecrated Christian singleness, in order to point to the fullness of who Christ is.
 - b. We should recognize the uniqueness of the Christian teaching in this regard and how it is rooted in the gospel, where we find an identity, companionship, delight, and legacy even greater than marriage, sex, and children.
2. Encouraging consecrated Christian singleness within the church in its various forms
 - a. Some Christians will choose to renounce marriage indefinitely, like the apostle Paul and like many missionaries throughout church history, for the sake of serving Christ in a way that would not be conducive to married life.

⁶ Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*, 140.

⁷ Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*, 141.

- i. For these and others, the church must live out our calling to be the spiritual family that Jesus promised his disciples would find (Luke 18:29-30). Being single should not mean being isolated and ignored within the family of God.
 - ii. Historically, this has taken various forms including: monasteries that require a commitment to celibacy, stability, and obedience, other intentional Christian communities of singles and/or families who share meals, prayer, work, and ministry together, families sharing regular meals and holidays with single people, single people engaging in crisis care, mercy ministry, overseas missions, etc.⁸
 - b. Some Christians will be content to be single for the present time, due in part to life circumstances that make it impossible or unwise for them to pursue marriage at the present time. (Paul may have this in mind in 1 Cor 7:26 if the “present distress” to which he is referring is a food shortage or some other temporary circumstance.)
 - i. The church ought to help those in our midst who are in the process of discerning whether and how to pursue marriage and how to prioritize major life decisions.
 - c. Some Christians will desire to get married but cannot presently find a fellow believer of the opposite sex who is willing to marry them. In this case, singleness may be an unwanted burden, a cross to bear, but it may still be consecrated to God for his glory.
 - i. “The follower of Christ who lives a life of consecrated Christian singleness but who nevertheless yearns for a spouse should recognize that even in that unfulfilled yearning, he or she walks in the footsteps of Jesus who, even now, is not finally united with his own bride, the church, but instead waits with patient but passionate longing to be united with us.”⁹
3. Consecrating your singleness to God, if that is your present condition
 - a. *Resist* selfish motives and worldly pressures that promote ungodly expressions of singleness (e.g. laziness and immaturity, idolatry of career, unwillingness to commit, sexual immorality and impurity, negative views or ungodly fears of marriage and children)
 - b. *Embrace* God’s calling to kingdom service and joyful community. Especially if you don’t want to be single, it’s easy to focus on what God currently says No to. But have you considered all the things that God has said Yes to, that he is inviting you to embrace? (e.g. friendships, service opportunities, traveling, extended times of prayer)
 4. Engaging the large number of single people who don’t attend church
 - a. For a variety of reasons, married folks tend to attend, serve in, give to, and lead churches much more than single people. Are we doing all that we can to engage single people with the gospel and to invite them to find their place in Christ’s church?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

- 1) What difference does it make for you (either as a married or single person) that Christian singleness is intended to point to the sufficiency of Christ and his gospel?
- 2) How can we promote a God-centered rather than human-centered vision of singleness within the Christian church?
- 3) Can you think of any examples of Christian single people through whom non-Christians have seen God’s character or Christ’s gospel displayed?

⁸ “As a single adult, I have lived alone in a house, with roommates, as part of a community of singles, as part of another Christian household, and with elderly parents. Of all these arrangements, living alone was the least satisfying for my personal and spiritual welfare. The flexibility and simplicity of singleness can be a strategic asset for building quality and substantive relationships within the family of God—living arrangements are an opportunity to leverage this asset” (Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*, 215).

⁹ Justin Hawkins, “What Doth Hinder Me?”

