

Water Is Thicker Than Blood: Radical Faithfulness in Singleness and Marriage

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Aubrey Spears

[0 : 00] Well, good morning. It's very good to be with you. We've just had a snowstorm in Houston. We got two inches of snow. It happens about every four years, and it was gone within 24 hours.

Like George Strait says, here for a good time, not a long time. But no, I've known of your church for a very long time. I was the planting pastor of the Church of the Incarnation in 2010, and so we've been living kind of parallel lives in a lot of ways.

And we've been talking about this weekend in this seminar that over the course of centuries, millennia, from the beginning, Christianity has always acknowledged two paths for being sexually faithful, two routes for publicly declaring and displaying the faithfulness of God in our lives.

One is celibacy and singleness, and the other is faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman. And this is a very broad subject, and it's very personal. And there's massive implications of this and what it means for us to live as Christians with love in our world today.

Now, I want us to draw our attention to this passage that was read just a few minutes ago from 1 Corinthians, 1 Corinthians chapter 7, where Paul writes, I wish that all were as I myself am, but each has his own.

[1 : 38] And if you write in your Bible, this is the critical word. Each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

Now, what are these gifts of different kinds that he's referring to? Verse 8, to the unmarried. He's describing singleness as a gift from God, not an intermediate state, not a thing that we should see as bad.

It's a calling. Then down in verse 10, he says, to the married. So here we have both marriage and singleness described as gifts of different kinds from God and callings.

And this was just so radical in the first century Greco-Roman world. This moment when Christianity burst onto the scene, in that environment, for example, women were considered valuable as long as they were married and had lots of children.

The average lifespan at this time was 24 or 25 years. As soon as a girl went through puberty, her job was to get married. She had one decade to produce citizens and soldiers for the state.

[3 : 05] So the marriages typically started around 12. If you were from a very powerful class, you could maybe resist until your late teens.

Infertile women, especially widows or divorced women, were considered less valuable. And then Christianity comes along and we hear the message that in God's kingdom, that's not the case.

And so suddenly, in the Greco-Roman empire, you find these remarkable single women. Women who found the kingdom of God to be the source of their identity, not their citizenship in Rome.

And so to remain single and chaste, whether you were male or female, this was a radical act of declaration that God and his kingdom was the source of your identity.

That God and his kingdom was everything. So much so that despite the overwhelming statistics, you don't need to get married.

[4 : 16] You don't need marriage and children to secure your worth and your place in society and your legacy. God, not the empire, was the meaning, the source, the location of all meaning in your life.

Service in God's kingdom, God's kingdom of heaven, and not family or country was the measure of a life well lived. Conversion through Jesus Christ, not salvation through birthing babies, was the way to everlasting life.

Holy virgins were a powerful testament in their bodies to who God is and to what God can do. This is difficult for us today.

Many of us, especially those of us who grew up in the church, many of us have absorbed the idea that marriage, and with it sex, represents the fullest life possible.

I frequently hear Christians saying to children, when you grow up and get married, as if that's the goal. Instead of saying, when you grow up, there are two paths.

[5 : 37] Instead of saying, as frequently as if you get married, saying, when you grow up, if you get to be a single. The deal is sex is good, but sex is not everything.

And sex is not the most important expression of love. Now, this brings us to marriage. Let's think for a minute about the radical faithfulness of bearing witness to God through your body, through marriage.

This is another gift. Three things about marriage that we definitely need to recognize in our society at this moment. First of all, the Bible teaches that marriage is a gift, a calling, a vocation.

The call to marriage is a particular way of serving God and serving our neighbor. When I was young, I got married when I was 20 years old.

And when I was 17 years old, or 18 years old, and I began dating the woman who became my wife, I remember going to my dad one day. He was in the garage building something.

[6 : 50] He had a wood shop in the garage. And I go in there and I say to dad, dad, I'm in love with you now. I want to marry her. How do I know? And dad said, can you serve God better?

And can you serve this world better if you marry her? And that was right at it. That was the key question. In that moment, he gave me this incredible gift of thinking about marriage in this profoundly Christian way.

We need to remember that the call to marriage is a call to serve God in a particular way. Now, in Matthew chapter 19, Jesus is teaching about this, and his disciples are like, whoa.

It was so bizarre to them. It was so out of left field. And Jesus quickly looked at them and said, look, if you can't do this, then don't get married. This is marriage.

This is what it's for. Now, part of what this means is that marriage is more than a personal choice. It's more than personal paradise.

[8 : 00] It's a way of fulfilling a call. It's more than your own personal dream. It is a public vocation. It is a public office.

Second, a second thing that comes out of Christianity with regard to marriage that's critical for us today is that the family created by marriage is not the most important relationship a person can have.

We saw this in our gospel. Right? Right? Right? Right? Here is Jesus taking a radical step for a first century Jew. He is redefining family in terms of loyalty to himself.

Now, in a culture in which tithes of blood had become everything, Jesus said there is a set of relationships that are more important and more basic and more fundamental.

They are not based on blood. They are based on the obedience of faith. Now, Paul picks up on this and in his letters, he uses this remarkable language about the church.

[9 : 12] He calls the church the household of faith. And he calls other Christians his brothers and his sister. Where did he get this way of thinking about the church from?

He got it from Jesus. Now, in the Old Testament, the structure of Israel, it was family-centered. The family was the most important, the most basic unit of society.

And there were reasons for this. But in the New Testament, Jesus shifts that. He's often shooting arrows at this family-centric, this idolatry of the family that had grown up in his culture.

Think about it, when some people come to Jesus and they say, we want to follow you, and he says, hey, you have to love me more than mother, brother, father, sister. Some people follow him and say, hey, let me first go take care of some family obligations.

And Jesus said, hey, you got to pick. And what is Jesus doing in all of these moments? He's deconstructing an idolatry of the family.

[10 : 15] Now, this in no way is to jeopardize the fact that God still considers the family very important.

The New Testament is filled with instructions about family life. And they need to be studied and obeyed. The New Testament praises marriage and child-rearing as honorable and critical vocations.

But the point that needs to be understood is that the family is no longer the center. The church is. The church is the primary school of love.

The place where we learn how best to receive and to give love. Now, unfortunately, we know that the church has fallen very short of this.

And too often, followers of Christ are not able to experience the true intimacy that we all need within the church.

[11 : 19] But this is our charge. And the church's success in reflecting this, this love and intimacy, makes a world of difference when it comes to talking about two vocations, singleness and marriage.

Both equal. Now, let's circle back to the vocation of singleness in light of what we've seen about marriage. Thank you so much.

About marriage and family. I want to say, if you're single and you're lonely and you're longing for a human relationship, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that.

There's nothing wrong with your desire. God isn't capricious. He doesn't want for you to be lonely. He doesn't delight in broken hearts.

It's okay to long for human companionship. But we've been led to believe that a romantic relationship is God's answer to loneliness.

[12 : 25] But in the Bible, loneliness is consistently addressed through friendship. Not marriage.

Think of the many places in the New Testament where intimate fellowship is envisioned. Like 1 John, chapter 4, verses 7 to 21.

Or 1 Thessalonians, chapter 2, verses 6 to 8. Or Paul's famous love poem, 1 Corinthians, chapter 13. Love is patient. Love is kind.

Or Jesus' farewell discourse to his friends in John, chapter 13 through 16. In none of these passages does marriage come up.

We can find real answers to loneliness apart from marriage within the church. This hands down one of the most important issues for us to come face to face with as we think about sex and sexuality today, especially as we think about our gay brothers and sisters.

[13 : 40] Here, there's a remarkable gay celibate Christian man by the name of Greg Johnson. He's a Presbyterian pastor.

And he's written this wonderful book called Still Time to Care. And the subtitle is What We Can Learn from the Church's Failed Attempt to Cure Homosexuality.

He writes, Alongside shame, the soul-crushing reality of loneliness is the largest challenge faced by many gay people.

And he said the fact is it is a challenge that becomes too often worse when they join the church. And then he writes this heartbreaking paragraph.

I'm going to read the whole thing. He says, Imagine what it's like for a teenager in the church who realizes she's gay. The thought of being alone for an entire lifetime crashes upon her.

[14 : 53] Think about older women in your church as it dawns slowly on them over the years that they will probably never marry. Think of all the pain and the sorrow and despair that might fill the heart of a woman who feels the clock ticking and marriage has not happened.

Think about it. Think about it. And then he said, Take the couple in our church who are trying to conceive a child only to realize that every promise ends in failure and every new hope becomes a dead end.

Think of how hard it is for that couple to watch the baptism of a child or a Christmas program or to pass by the nursery at church.

Think of how hard it is for them to come to church on Mother's Day. Think of the heartache they experience when they attempt genuinely to be happy every time a friend announces they're expecting a baby.

Enter into the pain of realizing God is denying you something for which your body was made. Now take all of the pain, the woman or man growing older, not getting married.

[16 : 11] Take all of that sorrow and heartache and loss which is slowly spread out for them over decades. take it all combine it all and front load it onto a 16 year old girl this is earth shattering this is her reality in the church and weep with her and make sure we have churches where she can be in friendships where that becomes known before it destroys her now how can we do that how can we address the beast of loneliness that so many

LGBTQ people in our church in our communities in our families in leadership how can we address this beast of loneliness and here we turn to Jesus like this song that we sang we turn to Jesus and imagine Jesus on the cross there's his mother his brothers Jesus in this moment takes his best friend and says here's your mom and he says to this to Mary here's your son think about this moment when Jesus is teaching and his mother and brothers are wanting a word with him and somebody comes into the room and says hey Jesus your family's outside and Jesus points at his disciples and says here are my mothers and brothers for whoever does the will of the father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother

Jesus redefined family for his followers the church is family with all of those obligations and duties church as worship service is not enough church as worship service cannot sustain the vocation of singleness we do not need to get married in order to overcome loneliness I've sat with too many couples who went into marriage thinking that was going to happen our true family is the church the good news of the gospel is that in Christ Democrats and Republicans can become family and the rich and the poor and strangers and people from different ethnic groups marriage might even hinder our life together in the church because it can distract from the primary goal of becoming a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ we need to be the kind of churches where singles experience this reality we need to be the kind of churches where if you're single we are a safe and healthy place for you regardless of your orientation we need to be the kind of place where you don't feel like a second class citizen where your vocation your calling is just as valuable just as equal where you are given honor and dignity and being a person who is single is just as important as being married it's just as serious and just as challenging and just as rewarding and beneficial to this world and to God's kingdom and all of us married people and single people we need to raise the children of our churches with a deep sense that God has a calling for them and it may be marriage or they might get to be single and we may may we be the kind of churches that no matter the calling the children in our midst know that loneliness will be met with deep friendship because when we look at scripture we see that water is thicker than blood that the waters of baptism are thicker than the blood of relatives and so for all believers single and married gay and straight the most fundamental issue about our lives is that that we live our lives faithfully to God committing ourselves to him and growing through the Holy Spirit's work in our lives to greater Christ-likeness we do this in the context of our daily struggles becoming better stewards of our sexuality trusting God and growing in faith recognizing that we can see our lives in the context of God's sovereign and redemptive plan and let's remember that when it comes to sex the will of God is chastity for all of us by chastity

I mean the integrity the harmony between flesh and spirit that we receive when by God's grace we obey Christian sexual discipline this is God's will for teenagers for men and women who are married or unmarried for men and women who are attracted to the opposite sex or the same sex we are all given the hard and high and ultimately infinitely valuable calling and challenge of chastity chastity means far more than controlling your appetites if that were the case then there would be no need for it in the new heavens and the new earth where we no longer fill the pool of these appetites the call to chastity means that all of us gay and straight single and married teenager and widow all of us are called to offer our sexual life back to God presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God chastity means being not conformed to the world but being transformed by the renewal of our mind right thinking leads to right living being transformed by the renewal of our mind so that we can prove demonstrate what the will of God is what is good and acceptable and perfect of course this means discipline and control and self-mastery all of us must restrain our sinful sexual impulses you do not have to enter into a sexual relationship you can either by choice or necessity bypass that and seek to devote your body directly to God as members of Christ's bride the church and if you do give yourself sexually then it must be done in accord with the order

God establishes in creation as a church we've got to celebrate both marriage and singleness we have to help one another sustain celibacy and chastity we have to learn to counsel and comfort those who in either state find themselves overwhelmed with conflicting and contrary desires and remember the hero of our faith our champion our savior and redeemer was fully human and fully God and he was single let's pray Lord Jesus Christ thank you so much for your good scriptures that you give to us that are reliable and trustworthy thank you for the comfort and empowering presence of your Holy Spirit thank you Father for sending your own son to die for us to make us your own in his name

[24 : 48] I pray Amen