

Singleness

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[0:00] Well, we've come to our third session of our Sunday School class on gender and sexuality. We began this class by considering how our human bodies, gender and sexuality, are both beautiful and broken.

Our bodies 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're also damaged and distorted by sin and its effects.

And we then considered the importance of our bodies in Christ's redemptive mission. Because Christ accomplished our salvation in his body, our salvation involves the redemption of our bodies.

Now, what does that redemption look like, particularly as it's applied to our gender and sexuality? Well, last week we considered God's affirmation of marriage. Marriage not only as a gift of God to the entire human race, but also a covenant sign.

A sacred picture of God's faithful and fruitful, exclusive and enduring, and filled with love and wonder, the union that God has established between him and us, his people.

[1:12] 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.

And so this week we're going to consider a second redemptive path that is also repeatedly affirmed in the New Testament, namely, singleness for the sake of God's kingdom.

The primary book that I have found helpful in preparing this lesson is called Redeeming Singleness by Barry Danilak, D-A-N-Y-L-A-K.

It gets into a lot of detail, but it looks at this theme throughout the Bible, in the Old Testament and the New Testament. And so that's where many of the points in this lesson will come from.

But I want to have sort of three topics. First, biblical teaching about singleness. Second, practical implications for us as a church. And then third, I want to open it up for questions and discussion.

[2:18] So first, what does the Bible say about singleness? And one of the things that we will notice is that while the teaching on marriage is fairly consistent through the Old and New Testaments, the teaching on singleness changes quite a bit.

So in the Old Testament, under the Old Covenant, singleness and childlessness was a sign of God's displeasure and curse. Why?

Because God had established his covenant with Abraham and his offspring. He promised that his plan of salvation would go forth through Abraham and his children, that they would become a great nation, that they would be protected from their enemies, that they would be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

And how would that happen? By having, by having, through Abraham having many children, right? All of God's promises to Abraham depended on the promise of a child.

But, and particularly, God promised his descendants would become as numerous as the stars in the sky. So for a descendant of Abraham to be married and have children, especially many children, was a sign of God's blessing.

[3:35] And to be unmarried or unable to bear children was a sign of God's curse. You know, also in the ancient world, your children were your legacy. They were how your family name would be carried on.

And without any descendants, you would be forgotten. Your legacy would disappear. Your land would be taken over by others.

And the family name would be, would be gone. Gone. In the book of Ruth, the character of Naomi represents sort of this, at the beginning of Ruth, Naomi has lost her husband and her daughters have, sorry, her sons have married and then her sons have both died.

And she says, I am empty. I have no legacy. My name will be cut off. My husband's name will not be carried on. And sort of, she's a picture of, of that, of that state.

So throughout the Old Testament, we have no known examples of people within Israel who voluntarily chose to remain single. It just was not an option.

[5:00] It was something to be mourned if one could, would, could not find a husband or wife. The only exception is the prophet Jeremiah, who God told not to marry or have children as a living picture of the fact that Israel would be cut off as God's judgment for her sin.

And so, again, the exception proves the rule. You know, under the Old Covenant, singleness and childlessness was a sign of God's displeasure and curse.

Eunuchs, also castrated men who were unable to marry and procreate, were categorically excluded from the assembly of Israel. However, there's a change when you look at the prophet Isaiah.

And the prophet Isaiah has some surprising statements in Isaiah 54 and 56. So turn to those chapters if you can. Isaiah 54, verse 1.

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.

[6:14] What does that mean? And then, two chapters later, let not the eunuchs 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. And so in this culture where blessing was pictured, blessing and fruitfulness and hope were pictured in marriage and children, Isaiah says that barren women and childless eunuchs will somehow find a place of extraordinary joy and honor among the people of God instead of being a sign of God's displeasure and curse.

Of course, the question is, how in the world would this happen? Well, the answer is found in Isaiah 53, right before, the chapter right before these statements, which speaks of the suffering servant of the Lord.

Isaiah 53 is really the hinge chapter on which the whole book turns, but it's a picture of the suffering servant who is described in the beginning as beginning his life like a young plant, like a root out of dry ground, full of vitality and promise of growing into a strong fruit bearing tree.

But then he's despised and rejected, crushed and pierced and cut off out of the land of the living. His life ends in shame and humiliation and he bears the signs of God's curse.

[7:58] But then the chapter takes an unexpected turn. Chapter 53, verse 10, when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring. He shall prolong his days and the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.

And then three verses later comes that, sing, O barren woman. Now, in Isaiah's time, the meaning of his 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 and 56 upon those who were previously excluded and disgraced.

So what does this all mean? Well, today we can see how the words of Isaiah 53 were fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus. Jesus was that suffering servant who embodied the nation of Israel, who was the seed of Abraham.

He began his life full of promise, but he was despised and rejected. His life ended in shame and humiliation, hanging on a tree, bearing the sign of God's curse.

[9:07] Jesus never married, nor did he have biological children. Again, unusual in his day. However, through Jesus' death and through his resurrection, Jesus brought new life to multitudes who were previously dead, who had no hope and no future.

And so the offspring of Christ includes men and women from all nations who have been born again, given eternal life through the Spirit of God. The apostle Paul celebrates this in Galatians.

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. So that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles.

He says, if you belong to Christ, then you're Abraham's offspring heirs according to the promise. In other words, we experience, we become part of God's family in the New Testament, not through physical birth, but through spiritual rebirth.

And we see one person who received that honor and joy of being included in God's family through faith in Christ in Acts chapter 8, the Ethiopian eunuch. The Ethiopian eunuch sort of embodied everything that was excluded in the Old Testament.

[10:21] He was a foreigner. He was a eunuch. He had been castrated. He was unable to marry or bear children. His body had been defaced. He had a high status in working for a ruler, but he could never fully be included among the people of God.

And yet, he's reading the prophet Isaiah. And guess what chapter he's reading? He's reading chapter 53. And guess what verse he's reading? He's reading the verses about the suffering servant who was humiliated and cut off and had no descendants.

And Philip starts running alongside the chariot. And he says, hey, you understand what you're reading? And the eunuch says, nope, I don't. And Philip starts right there and tells him the good news about Jesus.

And says, Jesus was despised and rejected and cut off and excluded and humiliated so that you and everyone who believes in him could be included in the new covenant of grace.

And so he finally says to Philip, he says, look, here's some water. What prevents me from being baptized? Right? He couldn't have been circumcised.

[11:37] He couldn't have been included in the old covenant that way. But he could be baptized. He could become a full member of the new covenant. And that brought him great joy. And so, because of Christ, under the new covenant, singleness is now a gift from God.

Singleness can be an honored calling to service in God's kingdom. Something that it was not beforehand. So we see Jesus and Paul both affirm singleness as an honorable calling.

Again, Jesus and Paul both affirm marriage and singleness as potential ways of glorifying God in our body.

Jesus' words are in Matthew 19. You turn there. Jesus first begins by talking about God's design for marriage, male and female, from the beginning. And warning against, quick and easy, divorce and remarriage.

And Jesus' disciples reacted to his strong words about divorce. Because many people had very permissive views about divorce in those days. In fact, one rabbi said that it was permissible for a man to divorce his wife if she burned his dinner.

[12:59] And Jesus certainly was not on board with that. But they say, goodness, if such is the case of a man with his wife, it's better not to marry.

Now, the disciples were not seriously thinking that it was better not to marry. They were sort of challenging, asking Jesus, wait a minute.

Do you really mean this? You know, you have to... You're saying that it's necessary to persevere even in a hard marriage.

And there's not an easy way out. And marriage isn't always going to be fulfilling. Maybe... Maybe... Maybe...

Are you saying it could be even better not to marry? Now, Jesus responds to them in chapter 19, verses 10 to 12. And he doesn't say...

[14:01] He doesn't argue for marriage or singleness. He's saying one is superior to the other. But he says... But he says... Three things. So he says...

That they would have fewer personal family loyalties. They couldn't try to establish a dynasty. And so eunuchs were useful for just one thing.

That is serving in the court of a king. It's possible that an Old Testament example of such a eunuch was Daniel. The book of Daniel does not explicitly say that Daniel was made a eunuch.

But he was under the authority of one of the eunuchs of the palace. And some Jewish rabbis have thought of Daniel as an example of that eunuch that Isaiah talked about in Isaiah 56.

A sort of righteous eunuch. But both of those statements... Some eunuchs have been so from birth. Some have been made eunuchs by men. Those would have been uncontroversial.

[15:31] Jesus and his disciples were both well familiar with those situations. But the climax of Jesus' statement and the part that would have been particularly surprising is in the words that follow.

Jesus says... There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Not just people who are involuntarily unable to marry or bear biological children.

And who sort of have to accept those limitations out of necessity. But people who voluntarily embrace a life without marriage, without sex, and without biological children for the sake of devoted service in the kingdom of God.

Now, that vision was unprecedented in Judaism. And it's a distinctively Christian vision. So, modern Judaism, Islam, Mormonism, all view celibate singleness in a negative light.

So, this teaching is only found in the New Testament. That there is a positive vision of a life that forgoes intentionally, willingly, voluntarily forgoes marriage, sex, and biological children for the sake of devoted service to God and his kingdom.

[16:53] Now, Jesus recognizes not all of his disciples will embrace this single life. 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. So, Jesus emphasizes this is not for everybody. This is not even for most of Jesus' disciples, necessarily.

But there are some who God will give this ability to receive it. Now, one person we see in the New Testament who did embrace and live out this vision of consecrated Christian singleness was the Apostle Paul.

Now, some people have speculated that Paul may have been previously married and then widowed before he became an Apostle. But this is only speculation which nobody can prove or disprove. What is clear is that during his time as an Apostle, Paul was unmarried and he energetically commended this way of serving Christ.

I wish that all were single as I myself am. To the unmarried and the widows, I say it is good for them to remain single as I am. 1 Corinthians 7, 7, and 8.

[18:08] But again, Paul was not disparaging Christian marriage. He said it is a gift from God. He took pains to point out that if a single person, a Christian, chooses to marry, it is definitely not a sin to pursue marriage.

And in many cases, it is prudent and wise. In Ephesians, he has a very high view of marriage. We looked at some of that a little bit last week as reflecting the union of Christ in the church.

So, Paul is not promoting singleness at the expense of marriage, nor does he promote marriage at the expense of singleness. But in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul highlights a few ways that consecrated Christian singleness can distinctively bear witness to the gospel.

So, let me highlight four ways that it can. First, singleness can be a way of traveling light in the present world in order to focus on eternal realities.

It is a kind of fasting. Christians are all called to fast in one way or another, at one time or another, whether it's from food or other things, other things of this world that are good and given to us by God.

[19:17] And yet, for a time, we choose to forego them in order to train our desires and focus our desires on God himself and on eternity, on eternal things.

And so, in choosing a life of singleness, it is a, for the sake of kingdom service, one can demonstrate the sufficiency of Christ.

Just as many Christians throughout history have embraced a life of simplicity and have intentionally given away large amounts of money, even fortunes.

Some have chosen to live in poverty among the poor in order to love people and communicate the gospel to them without the distractions of wealth and materialism.

Again, not every Christian is called to that life, but many Christians have embraced that for the sake of God's kingdom and have had a very fruitful life as a result.

[20:22] And have been, and have done that in order to focus their affections and their love on Christ. So that leads us to the second thing.

It's an opportunity for traveling light in this world. It's an opportunity for undivided devotion to the Lord. Right? The picture of a eunuch in the ancient world was someone whose loyalties were undivided.

They were a loyal servant of the king, free from other distractions and loyalties and anxieties. And Paul says, consecrated Christian singleness is an opportunity for undivided devotion to the Lord.

Sometimes singleness has been referred to as vacancy for God. I think it was Thomas Aquinas who first used that term sort of cultivating, recognizing that our innermost desire for intimacy and connection can only be filled by God.

And sort of intentionally not seeking to fill ourselves with other things. Seeking to leave room for God to fill us in that deepest place.

[21:37] And of course, at one level, that's something that all Christians are called to do, whether married or single, is cultivate that inner space for God alone and recognize that only he can meet the deepest longings of our heart.

Not a spouse, not a child, not a career or anything else can do that. But, choosing to live without marriage and sex and biological children is an opportunity to cultivate that desire for God alone.

Third, Christian singleness provides a unique opportunity for fellowship in the body of Christ and for spiritual parenthood and fruitful service.

Jesus and Paul did not live an isolated existence. You think of all the people that Jesus interacts with, the homes that he stays in, in the Gospels. You think of Paul's extensive network of friends and co-workers and traveling companions, all the people that he mentions.

If you go to the last chapter of any of Paul's letters, he always mentions several people by name. He did not live an isolated life. He did not live, but his life was rich with relationships in the body of Christ.

[22:55] And he had the freedom and the opportunity to engage in those and to travel far and wide for the sake of the Gospel, in part because of his singleness.

Paul also, in many places, uses the language of spiritual children, spiritual fatherhood and motherhood. He speaks of Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

First Thessalonians, he says, we were gentle like a nursing mother, taking care of her own children, like a father, exhorting and encouraging you and charging you to walk in a manner worthy of God.

So Paul speaks of his relationship with individuals and with churches as a spiritual parent, sort of spiritual parenthood.

And again, whether we're single or married, we are called to be spiritual parents, seeing people come to Christ through the power of the Gospel, but also raising them, discipling new believers, leading them until they're mature Christians.

[24:01] And so sometimes there are some opportunities for discipleship and for seeing the power of the Gospel at work in others' lives, that Christians who are single have the opportunity to particularly invest in and become spiritual fathers or mothers in this way.

Of course, married Christians can do this as well. I might also add a fourth thing, which Paul doesn't explicitly mention in 1 Corinthians 7, but which I think is important.

I think particularly today, consecrated Christian singleness visibly portrays the cost of discipleship and the worthiness of Jesus. You know, many, in the world that we live in today, you know, in the ancient world, the biggest question would have been, how are you willing to forego the possible, go without the possibility of having children who will carry on your family name and care for you in your old age and be your legacy?

I think in the modern world, the question people ask is, how in the world could you live your entire life without having sex? Or without having the companionship, the emotional, personal companionship of a marriage partner who is side by side with you for your entire life long?

And again, whether in the ancient world, which emphasized children, or in the modern world, which emphasizes sexual intimacy and companionate friendship, being willing to forego all of those things for the sake of Christ is a testimony to the worthiness of Christ.

[26:02] And for some, that is, and I do not want to trivialize this, that can be a very heavy cross to bear at times for some people.

And, but Jesus did promise that no sacrifice that we make for his sake will ever be unrepaid.

Will ever not be, that every sacrifice we make for his sake will one day, somehow, in his mercy be repaid many times over. 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 age and in the age to come eternal life.

So today, consecrated Christian singleness can visibly portray the cost of discipleship and the worthiness of Jesus. Now, practically, some practical implications, then we'll open it up to questions.

What does it look like for us to honor consecrated Christian singleness in the church today, as the New Testament does, I believe, as I have shown?

[27 : 20] Four things. First, we need to recognize the distinctive witness of consecrated Christian singleness to the gospel of Christ. Church needs the witness of godly Christian marriage.

It also needs the witness of godly Christian singleness. And we should recognize the uniqueness of the Christian teaching in this regard, and how it's rooted in the gospel.

And in the gospel, we find our identity, our companionship, our delight, and our legacy even greater than marriage, sex, and children. So that's the first thing, to recognize the distinctive witness of singleness to the gospel of Christ.

Let me read a few words from a book by Henry Nouwen. He writes, In a world so congested and so entangled in conflict and pain, celibates by their dedication to God in a single lifestyle, and married people by their dedication to God in a life together, are signs of God's goodness and love in this world.

They both ask us, in different ways, to turn to God as the fountain and source of all human relationships. They both say, in different ways, that without giving God the first place in our hearts, we will ultimately fail in the hopeless attempt to fabricate peace and love by ourselves.

[29 : 06] The celibate speaks of the need to respect the inner sanctum, our inner place for God, at all cost. The married person speaks of the need to base his or her relationships on intimacy first with God.

But both speak for the source of all love and for God's presence in the world. Together, they give form to the beauty of the Christian community, and they stand out as signs of hope in a world of alienation and loneliness.

So, recognizing the distinctive witness of consecrated Christian singleness and marriage. Second, encouraging consecrated Christian singleness within the church in its various forms. So, I think there's at least three broad categories that Christian single people can fall, can find themselves in.

And they're rather different, but they can all fall under this heading. First, some Christians will choose to renounce marriage, will choose to renounce marriage indefinitely. Like the Apostle Paul, and like many missionaries throughout church history, I think of St. Patrick, who took the gospel to Ireland, or Gladys Aylward, a missionary in Asia, or Amy Carmichael, and many others, many have chosen to renounce marriage, sex, and biological children for a lifetime for the sake of serving Christ in a way they could not as a married person.

Now, historically, this has taken various forms, including monasteries, single sects, usually Christian communities, that have an ordered life of prayer, and that have leadership, recognized leadership, and that commit to staying together in one place, and often engaging in service together.

[31 : 01] Now, monasteries sometimes have a bad name in Protestantism, but again, there's some wisdom behind the idea of a community of single people who are committed to living together in the same place for a long time as fellow Christians, as brothers or sisters in Christ, and serving Christ together, and sharing a life of prayer together.

But it's not only monasteries that have done this. There are many examples of intentional Christian communities, sometimes including only single people, sometimes also including married couples or families who share meals, and prayer, and work, and ministry together.

There are some examples of these in inner cities, people who commit to living together and ministering together in particular neighborhoods, or on a less formal basis.

What about families sharing holidays with single people? Who are you going to celebrate Thanksgiving or Christmas with? Single people have been involved in a variety of ministries, whether it is adopting orphaned children, whether it's mercy ministry, overseas missions.

So, one writer says, at my former church, there were single women who served as pastoral nurses. They were free to attend, at almost any moment, the mesh of spiritual and physical needs of congregant shut-ins.

[32 : 32] Another church had volunteer street pastors. They walked the city streets late on weekend nights to provide Christian support for the local police force to be agents of peace in a city.

So, he says, the eunuch for the kingdom is the one who voluntarily refrains from marriage and family so as to guard his or her freedom for the sake of serving the Lord in whatever way he should call.

Now, I think for people who have committed to be single indefinitely, I think the church also has a responsibility to live out our calling to be the spiritual family that Jesus promised his disciples would find.

Being single should not mean being isolated and ignored, but rather, it should be an opportunity to experience the family of God in a deeper way.

Second category, some Christians will be content to be single for the present time, not necessarily indefinitely, but are okay with being single for now, due in part to life circumstances that make it impossible or unwise for them to pursue marriage at the present time.

[33 : 43] Paul may have this category in mind in 1 Corinthians 7.26 where he refers to the present distress, which may have been a food shortage or another temporary circumstance that would have particularly fallen hard on parents with children.

So I think as a church, practically, I think we ought to help each other, those who are in the process of discerning whether and how to pursue marriage and how to prioritize major life decisions, whether it's going to grad school or moving overseas or what other things it might be.

But, one, I think you can be content to be single for the present time and devote that to the Lord, even if it doesn't become, even if it is not a, your state for, status for the rest of your life.

Third category, some Christians really want to get married but can't presently find a fellow believer of the opposite sex who is willing to marry them. And in this case, singleness can be an unwanted burden and a heavy cross to bear, but it may still be consecrated to God for his glory.

As one person wrote, 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 passionate and patient longing to be united with us.

[35:17] How do we walk beside each other in the way of the cross and bear each other's burdens for Christ's sake? So third, we've said practically we should recognize the distinctive witness of consecrated Christian singleness, encourage it within the church in its various forms.

Third, if you are single, consecrate your singleness to God. Now there are a lot of reasons motivating people to be single today that are not godly and that are not helpful.

And so, we want to help each other resist selfish motives and worldly pressures that promote ungodly expressions of singleness. Whether it's just laziness and not taking initiative and remaining immature or not wanting to be corrected by someone else who's close to you, not wanting to experience that challenge that should come through any intimate, through any good friendship or certainly any marriage relationship, idolatry of career, negative views or ungodly fears of marriage and children.

So we want to resist all those things. None of those things are the motivations that God has, that ought to be driving us towards singleness. And if those are part of our motivations, if those sort of are characteristics in our lives, we want to fight against them and seek to be renewed in our minds.

But we don't only want to resist those things, we also want to embrace God's calling to kingdom service and joyful community.

[37:03] I think especially if you don't want to be single, it's easy to focus on what God says no to. In particular, God says no to sex outside of marriage. But have you considered all the things God has said yes to and that he's calling you to embrace friendships, service opportunities, traveling, extended times of prayer?

You know, as a married person, especially as a parent, it's harder to find extended times alone to pray. You can't easily just go away for a few days and pray and be with the Lord or leave for a few weeks on a missions trip if you have young children at home.

So, there are many things that you as a single person have the freedom to engage in and embrace and so do that. Finally, I would want to challenge us to engage the large number of single people who don't attend church.

Now, for a whole variety of reasons, married folks and parents tend to attend, serve in, give, tithe to, and lead in churches much more than single people at this time in the United States.

So, are we doing all that we can to engage single people with the gospel and to invite them to find their honored place and their purpose in Christ's church? Well, we'll move on to our questions for discussion and reflection, which are the same questions I asked last week with regard to marriage, but now with regard to singleness.

[38:41] peace Shoulders. peace .

Quite . . .

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