

DEVOTED TO CHRIST: SINGLENES THAT GLORIFIES GOD

Divine Devotion

Introduction

The number of singles in our population and in our churches is on the increase. According to USA Today, marriages have steeply declined over the last twenty years, and the average age of first marriages has climbed in the USA to 28 for men and 26 for women.¹ Evangelicals tend to marry slightly earlier, but they have not escaped the trend.² Almost 20% of our church, nearly 400 adults, are single. There are more singles than ever in our culture and churches.

Many of these are enslaved by their singleness. Some idolize their singleness for their freedom from attachment – unfettered by commitments of any kind, they are free to love, honor and cherish themselves and their careers. The love of their freedom from others causes them to despise marriage and flee from commitments. Others idolize marriage and resent their singleness, viewing it as forced imprisonment in loneliness. Feeling deprived of something good they become bitter and jaded, eventually distancing themselves from others. Though each has a different vision of their singleness, they are *both* enslaved by it. Our hope in this study is to open your eyes to God’s vision for your singleness, a vision that will give you fulfillment and set you free.

Devoted to the Lord

In 1 Corinthians 7:34, Paul teaches us that the purpose of singleness is to be “devoted to the Lord in body and spirit.” So what does it mean to be “*devoted* to the Lord”? Often when we think of “devotion” we think of private worship – we think about prayer, Bible reading, and meditation. For many who struggle with their singleness, the call to devote themselves to the Lord can seem emotionally hollow – a religious retreat from failed pursuits at romance, a kind of last resort for those incapable of finding someone to love. For some, it is quite a lot like being trapped in a loveless marriage. Is there faithfulness and commitment? Yes – but it is painstakingly one-sided. For them, the call to devote themselves to the Lord is unfair at best, if not abusive. But when Paul calls singles to be “devoted in spirit and in body” he is not simply calling them to suppress their desire for companionship by prayer and bible reading, he is calling them to live out an identity given to them by God.

The word translated “devoted” (*hagia*) by the NIV could also be translated “holy” or “sanctified”. Holiness is a massive theme of Scripture. Throughout the Old Testament, God called Israel to live a holy and sanctified life. This meant that Israel was to be separate and set apart for God’s purposes. God’s command to be holy involved the practice of a detailed code for living which set Israel apart. The type of clothes they wore, the days on which they worshipped, the manner of their worship, the food they ate, and even their personal hygiene was to be marked by holiness. The book of Leviticus teaches that Israel was to be marked by holiness for two

¹http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2009-02-17-marriage-campaign_N.htm

²<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/august/16.22.html?start=2>

reasons: “You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own” (Lev 20:26).

First, Israel should be marked by holiness because Israel’s *God* was holy: “I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves about on the ground. I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, *because I am holy*” (Lev 11:44-45). Israel’s God was unspeakably holy and Israel had countless examples of it, perhaps most memorably at Mount Sinai.

After the long journey out of Egypt, and having seen the fearful hand of God rend the Red Sea in two for her deliverance, Israel saw the LORD descend upon Mount Sinai. There the LORD entered into a covenant with Israel; God gave her his law and Israel agreed to obey the LORD’s commands. It is not difficult to imagine the fear that must have gripped the people as the LORD descended on Sinai. Their eyes fixed as dark clouds enveloped the mountain; hands trembling as lightning raced to earth; standing breathless, cowering as the bolts split the air like a whip (Ex 19). If anyone entertained thoughts of breaking the LORD’s command and approaching the mountain to glimpse God directly, all such ambition now evaporated in the terror of this revelation – the God of Israel is *holy* and she must be holy, too.

Israel’s call to holiness was certainly a call to imitate her God but, secondly, it was also a call to display the identity given to her by God. Since the God of Israel is incandescently holy, holiness emanates from him. Everything with which he comes into contact must be made holy. “You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and *I have set you apart* from the nations to be my own” (Lev 20:26). By God’s election of Israel, the Holy One had made Israel holy – He sanctified her and set her apart. Israel should *pursue* holiness because Israel *is* holy. The Old Testament describes Israel’s unique identity as “holy to the Lord” in a variety of ways, but one way is to refer to Israel as being God’s “treasured possession”:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:5-6).

You are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession (Deut 7:6).

By electing Israel, God set her apart as his treasured possession. They were a people “holy to the Lord”. Like a jeweled crown made for and suitably worn only by the King alone, Israel is the treasured possession of God. And as a holy people, they were called to pursue holiness and *be* what they already *are*.

When Paul calls singles to be “devoted to the Lord in spirit and body”, he draws on this very idea. Single Christians are called to be “devoted” because they are “holy to the Lord”. And if they are God’s “treasured possession”, they should live like it.

Christ's Devotion and Yours

Although God set Israel apart for himself and devoted her to his purposes, Israel failed to set itself apart as holy and instead became idolatrous, breaking the covenant they made with the LORD at Sinai. But if Israel failed to devote itself to the LORD, Jesus did not. Jesus was completely obedient to the LORD, a faithful Israelite, fulfilling the covenant that Israel had broken. In fact, the Gospel of John teaches us that this was Jesus' very purpose:

My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified (John 17:15-19).

In this passage, Jesus prays that the church would be sanctified, made holy, set apart from the world and devoted to God. But notice the *basis* of the church's holiness – it is Jesus' *own* sanctification. “For *them* I sanctify *myself*.” The sanctification Jesus has in mind here is his own death. Remember, this prayer was not uttered among the din of prayers offered by faithful Israelites in the synagogue, the temple, or during a feast or a festival. It was offered alone, in a garden, before Israel would hand him over to death. Jesus sanctified himself in death.

But Jesus sanctified himself *for* the Church. It is the whole witness of Scripture that Christ's death sanctifies his *people*, cleansing them from their sins and making them holy. Notice how Paul describes the conversion of the Corinthians earlier in the letter: “you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11). The sanctification of *Jesus* in *death* is the foundation for the sanctification of the *church* in *life*. In other words, *Christ's* devotion is the basis for *our* devotion. Since Christ died to make you God's treasured possession, you should live to make Christ your treasured possession.

Making the Identity Mistake

In sanctifying the church to himself, Christ gave this new identity to the church: they are *holy* – they are God's treasured possession. This was the purpose for which Jesus came – the Father sent him into the world to sanctify the church. Thus, when Paul calls single Christians to be “devoted to the Lord in spirit and body”, he points them not to a consolation prize, but to realize that which is most fundamental about them – their identity in Christ. “Devoted” is not simply something you are striving to *be*, it is something that you *are* in Christ. Christian, not what you do, but *you yourself* are holy to the Lord – *you* are God's treasured possession.

Many singles remain imprisoned by their singleness because they make the identity mistake – they mistake their calling for their identity. An identity is something that defines the core of your being and existence – something that is always and fundamentally true about you. A calling, on the other hand, is a role that God places you in for a period of time. Callings can and often do change throughout life. Your spiritual well-being hangs on the proper distinction and order of the two.

Many singles lose sight of the fact that they are *not* their singleness. Their singleness becomes all that they think about – the most important thing about them. All their life decisions revolve around it. The place that they live, the car that they drive, the friends they make, the church they attend, the LIFE Group they join, the service they perform, all the prayers they pray, and even the reason they follow Christ becomes about *finding someone*. Singleness has come to define *who they are*. When your singleness becomes your identity, you betray your true identity in Christ. Whether you loathe your loneliness or worship your independence, you’ve made an idol of your calling, and consequently the call to be “devoted to the Lord in spirit and body” looks like a consolation prize, a token calling for “runner’s up.” A life lived like this will lead only to increasing discontentment, selfishness, isolation, and misery.

But you do not need to live this way. Being “devoted to the Lord” is not a consolation prize – it is your identity in Christ! Your singleness is not permanent. It does not define you. It does not make you less or more of a person. It does not limit your experience of God and his love. It cannot give you or deprive you of meaning and significance. It does not withhold something good from you nor does it give you something of ultimate good. You are *not* your singleness. You are *more* than your singleness. But your union with Christ is permanent. Belonging to Christ defines you as God’s treasured possession. Your union with Christ makes you fully human. You know and experience God’s love only by virtue of being sanctified in Christ. The most meaningful and significant thing about you is that you have been devoted to the Lord. The fact that you are holy to the Lord is your greatest good in life. You cannot be considered apart from your union with Christ. You *are* your union with Christ Jesus.

Now, just as it is possible for someone to recognize but refuse to greet a friend from whom one has been alienated, so also it is entirely possible to be aware of one’s true identity, and yet refuse to live life out of its truth. To do so, you must do two things. First, you must dismantle the idol you have made of marriage or your independence. Don’t allow yourself to grow sour with discontent or distant with selfishness. Remind yourself that you are *more* than your calling. Second, you must define yourself by your union with Jesus Christ. There is a real battle in your mind over the meaning and significance of your life. As long as you entrust your significance to the idol of your own marriage or independence, you squander your meaning. But when you come to entrust your whole existence into the hands of Christ, you embrace your true significance and purpose. “If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it” (Matt 16:25).

Discussion Questions:

1. Scripture teaches that Christians are *holy* and *sanctified* in Christ. So why do you think so many Christians find it difficult to believe this about themselves? How does failing to believe this often keep us at a distance from God?
2. The call to be “devoted to the Lord” can often feel like a consolation prize when our singleness begins to define our identity. Have you or someone you’ve known struggled with defining yourself by your singleness or a relationship you are in? Why is it important to find your identity in Christ and *not* your singleness or a relationship?

3. Pastor Tim said that living out your identity in Christ begins with dismantling the idol you've allowed to define your purpose and existence, and to begin viewing yourself as a person set apart for Christ. How might this perspective on who you are change your priorities and the choices you make? How might it change the way you spend your time?

Prayer

Spend some time asking God to give you new perspective to understand your identity in Christ, a renewed commitment to tearing down idols that have defined you, and a new desire to live out your holy standing in Christ.