

DEVOTED TO CHRIST: SINGLENESSE THAT GLORIFIES GOD

Devoted to Christ: Singleness with Purpose

Introduction

How many times have you heard it said of someone, or maybe have said yourself, something like, “he’s such a great guy, how is he still single?” Or, “she’s such a catch. When will she get married off?” The implication behind questions like these is that great men and women get married, and those who are not great do not. For many, being single imprints upon them a meaning that touches their very identities: they are defective, second-rate, somehow less-than others who do marry. In response to this message, we learned above that single Christians are not defined by their singleness, but by their union with Jesus Christ. Singleness, like marriage, is a God-given calling, not an identity. The calling of singleness does not stamp upon the single person an identity any different from a married person. Rather, single Christians are to have their identities firmly rooted in Jesus Christ, and are to view their singleness as a unique and special calling.

What, then, is singleness all about as a calling? What is the meaning of singleness, if it is not about the identity of the single person? As we explore these questions, what we are going to discover is that singleness has great significance. It does imprint a meaning. That meaning, however, communicates a message not about us, but about God himself. In uncovering the meaning that God ascribes to singleness, our hope is to free you who are single to live with a greater sense of purpose in your calling.

The Meaning of Singleness

In order to get at the meaning of singleness, we need to first rightly understand the true meaning of marriage. If we misunderstand the meaning of marriage, we will likely also fail to grasp the significance of singleness. In Ephesians 5, Paul writes to husbands and wives, teaching them how to live out their marriage calling in a way that glorifies God. Paul writes to wives: “Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands” (Eph 5:24). And to husbands Paul says: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). Bringing things together, Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 and says, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Eph 5:31, 32). The bombshell Paul drops here is that marriage is not most ultimately about the relationship between a man and a woman at all, but is about Christ’s relationship to his Church. Marriage was patterned, from the beginning, after the relationship between Christ and the Church. In other words, marriage did not come first, Christ and the Church did. The loving and eternal relationship between Christ and the people he would save existed in the mind and plan of God before creation, and marriage was designed to display that relationship. This is incredibly significant, for it shows us that the meaning of marriage is, and always has been, about something that is just as true for single people as for married people. Marriage is not the be-all end-all of human existence. Marriage is not the eternal norm, without which a person is abnormal. Rather, Christ and the Church is the norm, and marriage is simply

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one way to illustrate it. The devotion of a husband and wife to one another in marriage illustrates the supreme devotion of Christ to the Church. You can see from this why divorce and marital unfaithfulness is so serious. When marriage fails to be what it was designed to be, it sends a false message. It lies about the relationship between Christ and the Church. Instead of showing the supreme faithfulness of Christ to his bride, it instead declares the lie that Christ may be unfaithful, and may be separated from his Church.

That marriage was intended to illustrate Christ and the Church is the reason why marriage is a high, but also only a temporary calling for this age. In Matthew 22:30, Jesus answers the question of a man who was wondering who a woman would have as her husband in the future age, if she had been married to a total of seven men during her lifetime. Jesus' answer to this man is that "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven." In other words, marriage will not exist in the future world. It is only a temporary calling for this age. Marriage is what the Bible calls a "type". It is like an imprint in clay made by the seal of a ring. The design imprinted on the clay is not the ring itself; it only reflects the design of the ring. So marriage also reflects a reality greater than itself. Marriage is a type. It reflects a heavenly reality, and it foreshadows that same reality when it will come in its fullness to earth. Marriage reflects the heavenly reality of Christ's union with the Church, and it foreshadows the day when that union will be an earthly reality forever. Once the reality has arrived, however, the image is no longer needed. This is why marriage between men and women will not exist when Christ returns. The reality to which it pointed will have arrived. The redeemed men and women who make up the Church will be married to Christ, and will be devoted to him exclusively forever.

Now, where does singleness fit into all of this, you may be wondering? If marriage was designed to show off Christ's relationship to the Church, then singleness was designed to show off the Church's relationship to Christ. You see, as marriage seems to uniquely highlight the devotion of Christ to his Church, seen in the devotion of a husband and wife to one another, singleness seems to uniquely highlight the Church's devotion to Christ, seen in the single person's exclusive devotion to Christ. This is likely why Revelation 14:4 describes the devoted Church using the imagery of singles: "It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb" (Rev 14:4-5).¹ The calling of singleness, more than the calling of marriage, uniquely shows the devotion of the Church to Christ. Through the single person's commitment to follow Christ wherever he leads, especially through the suffering experienced by refraining from marital and sexual intimacy, the commitment to Christ that the whole Church is called to is clearly illustrated. In 2 Corinthians 11:2, Paul also uses the concept of virginity as a metaphor for the Church's pure devotion to Christ and the gospel. Paul says: "I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ." Just like a person's sexual abstinence before marriage, so a single person's extended abstinence from sexual impurity, and from marriage itself, demonstrates the pure devotion to Christ that all the Church is called to. One can see here

¹ Mounce, Robert H. *The Book of Revelation*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. Page 267.

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as well, however, what a false message is sent when singles fail to live out the meaning God designed for their singleness. When singles live promiscuously, rather than in purity, for instance, the message it sends is not that Christ is supremely worthy to be loved and trusted, but that sex is. Rather than seeing the purpose of life in devotion to Christ, as the One ultimately satisfying, the meaning and purpose of life is declared to be found in sex and relationships.

The single calling, then, bears great meaning. Singleness, like marriage, bears an imprint by God, intended to communicate a message. As marriage highlights the relationship between Christ and the Church that is *not yet* fully consummated, singleness highlights that same relationship as it has *already* partially arrived. Although the union of Christ and his Church has not yet fully arrived (for when it does marriage will cease), it has been inaugurated already through the coming of Jesus; and singleness most clearly demonstrates, in the present, this future reality. That the future reality of Christ and the Church has been brought into the present already is why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 that even married Christians should live as if they were not married, “for the present form of this world is passing away.” In the age to come, all will be as single Christians are now. Christ will be united to his people in marriage forever, and his people will all be single—devoted to him alone. The calling of singleness shows off this future reality, and calls all Christians to live in light of this reality. The exclusive devotion of singles to Christ illustrates the supreme devotion of the Church to Christ. Singleness glorifies God by communicating the message that devotion to Christ is primary and eternal. It says to the watching world: God is enough. God is sufficient. God is better than anything, or anyone, else. God is worth all the pain of following him. This is the meaning of singleness. It is high calling. And the message it communicates is not about the single person, but about God himself.

Show the Meaning of Your Singleness

To live with purpose in your singleness, you need to keep God’s meaning to your singleness clearly in view. Living with purpose in one’s singleness requires that one not let the meaning of singleness be defined by the world, but by God’s Word. Knowing, then, that God intends the calling of singleness to communicate a message about his own superiority and sufficiency, and the devotion that the Church should have to him, how can we who are single let that message show through our lives?

First, never forget that you are not your calling. Singleness is a calling, not an identity. Your identity is firmly rooted, never to be moved, in your union with Jesus Christ. The love that God has for you is what defines you. You are loved, valued, forgiven, accepted, purposed, and empowered in Christ. This is who you are and will always be. Whether your calling is to singleness or marriage, your identity in Christ is the same. It needs to be remembered as well that your calling may change throughout your lifetime. The callings of singleness and marriage are both temporary. Our callings may change through life, but our identity will not. Our calling may change from single to married, or from married back to single, but what will never change is our identity in Christ as God’s beloved children, heirs to all the precious and great promises of God (2 Pet 1:4). Both the callings of marriage and singleness highlight aspects of our common identity in Christ, but they are not in themselves that identity. Show the meaning of your

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singleness, then, by defining yourself not primarily as a single, but as a blood-bought child of God.

Second, show the meaning of your singleness by striving for contentment in God. The reason singleness is uniquely designed to showcase the sufficiency and superiority of God, is that singles are called to find in God what those who are married often find in one another. Those who are called to marriage often find in their spouses love, affirmation, security, comfort, companionship, and intimacy, among other things. For those who are single, however, having a sense of these things is often less certain or immediate, and this requires the single person to depend on God in a greater way for the fulfillment of such needs and desires. The truth of the matter, however, is that both single and married Christians are called to find all their needs and desires ultimately in God alone. Jesus is the bread and water of life, who alone can satisfy all the hungers and quench all the thirsts of the human soul (Jn 6:35). This is true for both single and married people. Singleness, however, points in a unique way to that truth; yet, in order for it to do so, you must, as a single, display in your life your contentment in God. Although we will be looking more at just how to do this in some of the studies to follow, for now let me simply say that displaying contentment in God in your singleness does not mean pretending that the difficulties you face as a single do not exist. Instead, showing the sufficiency of God in your calling as a single happens as you acknowledge the struggles, pain, and heartache you may experience in your lack of the blessings of marriage, and then by faith lay hold of God's promise that "those who fear him have no lack!" (Ps 34:9). Learn to be so content with all that Christ is for you, that you could say with Paul that you have learned in whatever situation you are to be content (Phil 4:11).

Third, show the meaning of your singleness by being actively involved in service to Christ and the Church. Too many single Christians go through life as if their time of singleness is just a parenthesis before their real life begins in marriage. As a result, they delay active involvement in serving Christ, thinking that such service may prevent them from marriage, and believing that such full-scale participation in the Church can wait until they are married. The problem with this way of living is that it sends a distorted message about God. If living life to the full for Christ and his Church must wait until marriage, then Christ and the Church have been subordinated to marriage, rather than the other way around as God intended. It puts marriage on a level of priority higher than Christ. In order to show the meaning of singleness that God desires; namely, that devotion to Christ is primary, and that Christ is sufficient to meet all our needs, you must prioritize serving Christ over looking for a spouse. Show how enough Christ truly is for you, by not waiting for marriage to actively serve him. Dream big dreams now for how you can maximize your time and your life for the sake of the gospel. Don't put it off.

In order to live a life of purpose in your singleness, you need to be aware of the meaning that God has ascribed to singleness. Singleness is not about you, it's about God. So the next time it gets leaked that you are single, slug off your shoulders the implication that your singleness says anything about who you are. It doesn't. You are a child of God, loved and valued by him, and united to Jesus Christ forever. Don't be ashamed of your calling as a single. Instead, be confident that your singleness is intended by God to say something glorious about him, about his supreme sufficiency to satisfy every need, and his supreme worth to be devoted to exclusively by

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all. You, as a single, are uniquely gifted to communicate this message. So let the true meaning of your singleness show.

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