

DEVOTED TO CHRIST: SINGLENESSE THAT GLORIFIES GOD
Devotion to Christ and Romance in the Church

Introduction

This summer we have been investigating what it looks like to be living as a single person whose body and spirit is devoted to the Lord. We have been encouraging you to embrace your God-given calling as a single person – to be a living illustration of the undivided commitment that the Church owes to Christ. But callings sometimes change. So maybe you are single now, but you don't want to be single forever. Scripture teaches that the desire for a spouse isn't a bad thing – marriage is a gift from God and something to be treasured, enjoyed, and even pursued. Proverbs 18:22 says that the one who marries “finds what is good and receives favor from the LORD.” And though Paul exhorts the single person to be content with his or her calling, he also tells us that it is no sin to want to be married. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says multiple times that whether to marry or remain single is a matter of Christian freedom and that each Christian has the right to decide which is better for him or her (vv. 7-9, 28, 36-38).

Provided that you are content and seeking to fulfill your calling as a single person, the desire for marriage is not a bad thing at all. But how do you pursue marriage as a single person without compromising your calling to be devoted to Christ in body and spirit? Tonight, I want to ask you three questions to help you think about how to pursue marriage in a way that does not compromise, but highlights your devotion to Christ. My hope is that this will encourage you to fulfill your calling on your way toward a happy and healthy relationship.

I. Do you live as a person devoted to Christ?

This is the first question I always ask a Christian seeking marriage. The first step to take in pursuing marriage is to become someone who would make a good husband or wife. But many Christian singles who desperately want to be married fail to find love because they are not living as a person devoted to Christ. Sensing a lack of meaning, they make an idol out of a relationship and so make a mad grab for sexual encounters, relationships, and marriages as a way to give their life some purpose. But because love is constituted in the act of *giving*, the selfishness of their idolatry inevitably suffocates love. Selfishness has different expressions, but three sins in particular keep people single against their will: pride, porn, and perfectionism. These sins short-circuit romantic love before it can grow by turning our focus on ourselves. If you have found it difficult to get into or hold down a relationship despite your desire to do so, ask yourself if you have a problem with one or more of these sins.

A. 3 Sins that Keep You Single Against Your Will

Pride causes us to look down on others, think of ourselves as better than they are. It is impossible to love someone else when your thoughts are fixed on how superior you are to them. Before you can even get to know the other person, you are already in competition with them, and

so love is already impossible. Because of your commitment to yourself, there is no room for someone else – you are eventually held captive by your pride, lonely against your will.

The goal of pornography – whether sexual or emotional in nature – is to provide people with a sexual or romantic substitute that can be enjoyed *alone*. Whether Playboy or Sleepless in Seattle, the goal is the same, to have love on *your* terms. You measure everyone you meet against your private sexual and emotional fantasies, and who could possibly measure up? When the illusion is broken, you reason that you would rather be single and happy than married and bored. Despite your sincere desire for marriage, you are held captive to your own fantasies.

Perfectionism has a similar result. By fixating on an ideal and unrealistic expectation of your future spouse, you create an infinite list of conditions upon which you are willing to love. It's not enough that she is godly, intelligent, beautiful, and an expert piano player – you wanted to marry a ballerina. It doesn't matter that he is godly, a hard worker, faithful to his church, and an engineer – you wanted to marry the quarterback of the football team. When your conditions for love go unmet you refuse to “settle”, and so despite your deep desire to be married, you are held captive by your unyielding and unrealistic expectations for marriage.

These sins can stop love before it can grow, but very often they are not alone. Many times a person struggles with several at the same time. This is because these sins are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. A proud person might be prone both to have perfectionistic standards, because others do not match up very well, and to use pornography, since it satisfies these standards and strokes the ego. It is also reasonable to expect that a person who uses some form of pornography would develop pride and an unrealistic set of expectations, since porn is made to cater to the consumer. Finally, it is not unlikely that a person with outrageous expectations of a spouse would turn to porn in frustration, concluding that no one (or almost no one) is good enough for them. These sins travel in packs because they share a common root – selfishness. If the problem is not identified, this cycle will eventually give way to frustration and bitterness.

B. Devotion to Christ – the Best Preparation

The best advise by far for singles preparing for marriage is to fulfill your calling. The single person who lives skillfully as a man or woman devoted to Christ is already preparing for marriage because marriage is intended to be a symbol of Christ's faithfulness to the Church. If marriage is the choice to donate your body to be a symbol of Christ's faithfulness to his church, then before you can give yourself fully to another person in marriage, you must first give yourself fully to Jesus Christ and find your identity in him. The single person who does this well will be prepared to be faithful in marriage because they have been laboring to be faithful to Christ.

The best way by far to prepare yourself for marriage is to give yourself to Christ, caring for your body and your soul as the members of Christ's own body. In fact, it is only when we find our identity in Christ by faith we are freed for the kind of service, vulnerability, and love that marriage requires. The security and comfort that comes from knowing yourself to have been forgiven and accepted in Christ frees you to be able to serve your spouse selflessly and sacrificially. Martin Luther said it this way,

From Christ . . . good things have flowed and are flowing into us . . . From us they flow on to those who have need so that I should lay before God my faith and my righteousness that they may cover and intercede for the sins of my neighbor which I take upon myself and so labor and serve in them as though they were my very own. That is what Christ did for us. This is true love and the genuine rule of the Christian life. Love is true and genuine where there is true and genuine faith.¹

In other words, we are freed from selfishness to selflessness *only* when we see our needs met in Jesus Christ.

II. What are you attracted to?

The second question to ask yourself is, “What am I attracted to?” Attraction is one of the most delightful elements of romantic love. Lovers will often speak with fondness about how they were drawn irresistibly to one another. They talk as though they were powerless in the endeavor – as if the sheer beauty of their lover had tied them down and taken them captive. Scripture itself talks about this – that is why the lover in the Song of Solomon says, “I am faint with love” (2:5), that is why the poet says “[Love] burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love, rivers cannot wash it away” (8:6-7). Love has a certain *power* over lovers that renders them somewhat *powerless* in their love. We term this powerlessness “attraction” – and our culture celebrates it.

But attraction can also be a source of tremendous frustration. Many singles consider themselves to be victims of the whims and unpredictability of attraction. How many relationships have been broken because one person no longer feels “sparks”? How many millions of hearts suffer in unrequited love because “he/she just isn’t attracted to me?” How many people battle off thoughts that no one will ever find them desirable? How many Christians who deeply desire marriage feel trapped because they haven’t felt “the spark.” After all, if love involves attraction, then we are powerless in the process. All we can do is point our toes down stream and follow the current of “attraction”. The whole endeavor seems helplessly fatalistic.

But while attraction plays a role in true love, the Christian should keep a few things in mind about it. *First, attraction can be misleading.* Sometimes Christians talk about love, romance, and attraction as if (1) they have objective knowledge of their own heart and (2) as if they know true beauty when they see it. But if Scripture is correct than this cannot be right. Scripture teaches us that man is “totally depraved”, which means that sin twists and distorts every part of our humanity. This even includes those parts of us that perceive beauty. So, the Christian should expect that, insofar as we are still sinners, we are likely to be attracted on occasion to that which is in fact sinful, and therefore also quite ugly. Simply put – attraction is no sure sign of God’s blessing.

¹ Luther’s Works, “The Freedom of a Christian”, 371.

Second, the Spirit changes what we find attractive. Scripture teaches that what we regard as beautiful changes under the direction of the Spirit. According to Paul, the fact that Christians find “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus” is owed entirely to the work of the Spirit. Without Him, we would have said with Isaiah that Christ, “had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him” (Is. 53:2). The knowledge and appreciation of true beauty is restored by the work of the Spirit. And if it is the Spirit that opens our eyes to true beauty, then we should seek His guidance for shaping our attractions to others.

One of the ways the Spirit changes our attractions is by teaching us to value and prioritize inner beauty. Scripture regularly draws our attention to the difference between inner beauty and outer beauty. Proverbs says, “Charm is deceptive and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised” (31:30). Ezekiel 16 describes Israel’s idolatry in terms of a beautiful woman who makes herself a whore. 1 Peter 3:3-5 says that Christian women should not seek the beauty that comes from “outward adornment” but that “unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit.” Finally, the book of Revelation draws our attention to the fact that, when Christ returns, the Church will be “prepared as a bride dressed beautifully for her husband” (21:2). And what is she wearing, except the fine white linen of “the righteous deeds of the saints” (19:8)?

This doesn’t mean that physical attraction is meaningless. Physical attraction is a dimension of romantic love that Scripture regularly speaks of as good. However, God does place a constant *priority* on the superior endurance, the absolute necessity, and incomparable purity of the beauty of the heart. This ought to inform the kinds of people we seek as a spouse. If you find yourself more motivated to seek a relationship with a perfect 10 than with a committed Christian, you are probably not prioritizing and prizing the beauty given inwardly by the Spirit. Maybe rather than looking first for someone who makes you sweat, you should look for someone who helps you pray.

Third, attraction can be cultivated. This might be one of the best-kept secrets in our culture, probably because it requires commitment to learn it, but cultures who have relied on arranged marriages have known it for centuries. Attraction is not a *prerequisite* for a romantic relationship because attraction can be cultivated *within* an existing relationship. Again, this does not mean that attraction is un-important, it just means that *attraction does not have to be the starting point of every relationship*. In many cases, love begins as a friendship and attraction develops within that relationship.

III. How do you view your church?

The last question to ask is, “How do I view my church?” I raise this issue because most Christians look *within* the church for their spouse, and so their view of the purpose and mission of the church affects how they search for their spouse. Now, Scripture does not give us a blueprint on the steps to take to find a spouse. Some support dating, others support courting, but Scripture is largely silent on the particulars of how this should take place. Dating in church is weird and awkward, and for good and bad reasons. So let me give you two principles to help alleviate the weirdness.

The church is more like a family than a dating service. Some Christians treat the church as if it were e-Harmony, and worship services as if they were blind dates. They go to church functions – sometimes at a church other than their own – for the *sole* purpose of meeting guys or girls. I cannot warn you enough about this frame of mind. When you go to church just to find a man or woman you are skewing the purpose of church, the purpose of your brothers and sisters in Christ, and your purpose and calling as a single Christian! When you don't find someone to love at that church, you're likely to pack your bags and head to greener pastures.

This has always been a problem in the church. When John Calvin was a pastor in Geneva, he and the Elders called a widow before the church Consistory to discipline her for harassing the single men at church about marrying her. She would travel from church to church looking for a husband. This was in the 16th century – a medieval e-Harmony!

But Scripture calls us to think of the church as our true family. Jesus redefined what family is when he said, “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, sister and mother” (Matt 12:50). Likewise Paul tells us to treat the men and women of our Church as fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters in the Lord (1 Tim 5:1-2). The church is a family with ties that go deeper than biology, so we should treat our brothers and sisters with dignity, honor, and respect. We should not use the church for our own purposes – we should serve it, love it, and be faithful to it, just like we would do for our biological family.

For this reason we need to be careful about how we approach dating relationships within the church. We shouldn't do this recklessly or irresponsibly because, as members of Christ's body, we have an obligation to love and serve one another. We shouldn't enter into a relationship without prayer, counsel and thoughtfulness. We should take every precaution to show love and care for other individuals and for the unity of the church as a whole. When there is a break-up in the church, the couple should go to great lengths to keep *unity* in the church and not spread rumors. Because the church is our family, we have an obligation to maintain its unity.

On the other hand, Christian fellowship is a greenhouse for romantic love. Though God never intended the church to function like a dating service, Christian fellowship does create the ideal climate for the growth of romantic love. In this sense, the church is like a greenhouse on the North Pole, capable of sustaining life in a climate that is otherwise hostile to it. This is why it is a bad idea to marry a non-Christian – relationships planted outside the greenhouse rarely survive (1 Cor 7:12-16). This is also why you should look for the best prospects for a spouse right under your nose.

Guys, if the Lord has provided you with a great friendship with a Christian girl, you should pray about whether or not you should pursue a relationship with her. The Lord may intend for her to be more than merely your friend – ask Him if she might be a good match for you. Ask the opinion of a trusted mentor, advisor, or parent. Have some courage, invite her to coffee, let her know that you'd like to see if God might move the boundaries of your relationship.

Girls, if a Christian guy you've been friends with for some time approaches you about a relationship, give it serious consideration. Don't say, "He's like a brother to me," as if that were disqualifying. Every Christian man *ought* to be like a brother to you. You should expect that the best man for you will come from the group of guys you had previously labeled "just friends." You should not penalize a guy who cared about you and respected you enough to be friends first. This should give you greater confidence in his integrity, and you should give thanks to God that he is interested in you.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to say just one thing – there are no guarantees. You can have all the wisdom in the world, you can choose the person you think you are most compatible with, and you can pick the person with the best genetics, IQ, or paycheck. But that is no guarantee that you will be happy or that your relationship will be successful. Couples drift apart, engagements are broken, and marriages end in divorce – this happens all the time. A personal friend of mine found the man of her dreams and her heart was broken when he told her several months into their engagements that he was gay and unwilling to marry her. I know a couple with four children whose marriage dissolved after his wife developed a personality disorder.

Because our world is sin-twisted, love misfires. In the end, each Christian has to rely on God's sovereignty and grace to prepare themselves for the challenges of singleness and marriage. Whether God calls you to singleness or marriage, you need to prepare your mind now to fulfill your calling. The good news is that God has promised to provide us with everything that we need for life and godliness (2 Pet 1:3-4); so God will never call you to something he will not equip you for. Though God might require you to walk through fiery trials, he will never ask you to walk it alone.