

DEVOTED TO CHRIST: SINGLENES THAT GLORIFIES GOD

Devoted to Christ but Lonely

Introduction

A sociological study published in 2006 discovered the disturbing reality that Americans today seem to have a far greater lack of significant social relationships than they did twenty years ago. According to this study, from 1985 to 2004 the number of Americans who say there is no one in their life with whom they can discuss important matters has just about tripled, and the number of individuals who say they depend entirely on their spouse for close contact has increased from 5.0 to 9.2 percent.¹ With such isolation on the rise in our culture, singles in particular may find themselves experiencing the pangs of loneliness and isolation.

As a single person, the struggle with feelings of loneliness may be the most difficult part of being single for you. You may find yourself embracing all that we have discussed in the previous studies, but you can't shake the painful loneliness you continue to feel. Loneliness is uniquely tied to your singleness, you may feel, for you are without that one constant individual, in a spouse, who you know you could share your thoughts and feelings with every day. If you struggle with feelings of loneliness, then the three suggestions offered below are for you. Our hope in this study is to show you how the Church can be a place where your sense of isolation and loneliness can be lessened, and how you can make God alone your ultimate comfort in your loneliness.

Realize you belong to a family

The experience of loneliness

To feel lonely is to feel alone, even if you are not alone. The experience of loneliness brings a feeling of being disconnected from others, isolated, and alone in the world. The feeling of being alone does not mean that you actually are alone, however; but it does feel like it. The feeling of loneliness can be felt when one is alone or with others, and one also may be alone but not necessarily feel lonely. Loneliness is not simply a feeling that there are no other people around, but it is a feeling that whether there are other people nearby or not you are isolated and by yourself at an existential level. Loneliness, then, is not unique to singles, but strikes at married individuals as well. For the single person, however, the isolating sense that you are alone in the world may be triggered more frequently simply by the more frequent moments of actually being by yourself. After gathering with a group of friends, for instance, many of which may be dating or married, you may not experience the feeling of loneliness until you watch your friends leave for the night. Then, as they leave two-by-two, like animals getting aboard Noah's ark, at that moment it may hit you: "I am alone. No one is with me." The feeling of loneliness strikes beneath the surface of a person, beneath what can be seen from the outside as to whether the person has people in her life or not. It strikes beyond that external reality to her very heart with

¹ McPherson, Miller, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and Matthew E. Brashears. "Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades". *American Sociological Review* 71. 2006.

the message: “You are alone.” For many singles, then, the fact that *at the end of the day* (literally) they are without a spouse, translates into *at the end of the day* (when all things are considered) they are alone, at a deep and ultimate level.

Your identity and the Church

With this being a common struggle for many single people, then, what help can be found in the Church? The first suggestion I have to offer is this: realize you belong to a family. In the face of a struggle that communicates a sense of being isolated and disconnected, Scripture’s message to you can be powerful: you belong to a family. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, the message of the Bible is that you are not ultimately disconnected. You are profoundly connected! Through your union with Jesus Christ by faith you have also been simultaneously united with other Christians around the world and through time. In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul discusses the racial and national loneliness of the Gentiles, who had once been “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” Separated, alienated, strangers, without hope—that’s a lonely place to be, but in response to this lonely situation the message of the gospel is awesome: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” Through Christ, we who believe have been brought into fellowship with God and others. Paul says in Ephesians 2:15-16 that Christ died for us “that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross.” You see, your identity in Christ as one loved, forgiven, and accepted by God, is a *shared* identity. While you remain a separate and distinct person, the core of your identity as a Christian is in the “one body” of Jesus Christ, a body that everyone else who trusts in Christ also shares in.

The truth of our shared identity in Christ dawned on me when I was able to enjoy communion with a smaller group of believers several years ago. Used to taking communion in larger churches where the bread or crackers were already broken in advance, I had not grasped the significance of our common identity as participants in Christ until I sat around a table with these other believers and we each broke off a piece of the same loaf of bread, representing Christ’s body. It was then that I realized just how united we are to one another as one family in Christ. Our identity is in Christ and his sacrificial work for us, but it is an identity that simultaneously unites us to others who also have received Christ. Paul says, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17). As a single Christian, your identity in Christ unites you also to Christ’s Church.

A connection stronger than blood

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul illustrates the Christian community by describing it as a human body. Paul says, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (12:12-13). If you are a Christian who feels the frequent pangs of loneliness, realize that you belong to this family. Paul describes the Church here using the metaphor of a body, and what better illustration

could there be for communicating to us how connected we all are to one another in Christ? When you are struggling with feelings of isolation and disconnection, remember, you are as connected to other believers in Christ as a hand is connected to a foot in the same body. Your connection to other believers is real, regardless of what you feel about it. You are members of the same body in union with Christ.

Paul also reminds us in Ephesians, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19). In your struggle with loneliness, remember that you belong to the family of God. Regardless of how connected you may feel on earth, or what your biological family may be like, if you belong to Christ you have a worldwide family. You are not a stranger to this family; you are an equal member of it. In Luke 18:29-30, Jesus communicates this same idea to us when he says that those who lose their earthly families in order to follow him will receive new family members as a result, through the Church. In the Church, you have family connections that are stronger than blood, and connections that will last forever.

Rely on and serve this family

Rely on the Church

Now you may be hearing this and thinking, “That doesn’t help me at all. Saying I’m connected to other Christians does little to help me if I don’t actually have any relationships with Christians.” And to that I say, “Bingo.” In order for the Church to be a benefit to you, and for your fight with loneliness to be successful, you must not only understand your connection to the Church, but must live it out as well. If you believe the Church truly is a family to you, and that you share a common identity in Jesus, then you must *rely* on the Church. According to Paul, in the Church “if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Cor 12:26). You see, if your identity is in Christ, and you share that common identity with others in the Church, such that what hurts you hurts them, and what benefits you benefits them, then you must live in line with that identity by being intimately involved with a local body of believers. If you desire to have relief from your loneliness, you must do more than simply attend church on Sundays. There are plenty of people who go to church but feel completely lonely and isolated anyway. What you need to do is join yourself to a church. That means that you not only attend there, but you let yourself be known by the believers there, and you seek to know them as well. The loneliness you feel will be lessened as you have meaningful connections with others, and what better place for that to happen than with other believers who you are already connected to in Christ? Lifelong single, John Stott, offers this suggestion to single people:

Single people are wise to develop as many friendships as possible, with people of all ages and both sexes. For example, although I have no children of my own, I have hundreds of adopted nieces and nephews all over the world, who call me ‘Uncle John.’ I cherish these

affectionate relationships; they greatly lessen, even if they do not altogether deaden, occasional pangs of loneliness.²

Work on developing such friendships with other Christians. Let yourself be known to others, and seek to know them as well. In Galatians 6:2, Paul says that Christians are to “bear one another’s burdens.” Let other believers do this for you. Find believers in a local church community that you can share what’s on your heart with, where you can share your struggles and the issues that are important to your life. If you have a hard time finding such opportunities on a Sunday morning, then join a small group where those sorts of conversations may be more natural, and where deeper friendships can develop. Learning to be vulnerable in sharing the burdens of your heart, and being known and accepted in that, is a great help against loneliness, and this is exactly what the Church is called to put into practice.

Serve the Church

Relying on the church to meet your needs is only half of what involvement in the body of Christ is about, however. In order for you to live out your shared identity in Christ with other believers, you must also learn to *serve* this family of believers. The amazing thing about the body of Christ is that we are all encouraged and built up in our faith as we mutually look out for one another, seeking how we can bear the burdens of another, and looking to the interests of others instead of just our own (Phil 2:4). In seeking to combat loneliness in your life as a single, perhaps the best thing you can do is to not merely seek how you can find friends for yourself, but to seek how you can be a friend to others who need one. When you’re in a gathering of believers, are your eyes roaming around the room looking primarily for someone to connect with whom you know, or are your eyes able to spot the person who may not know anyone, who may feel as lonely and out of place, or more so, as you may?

One of the struggles that lonely people often experience is over-burdening other people with their feelings of isolation. In attempting to alleviate their feeling of being disconnected, a lonely person may latch onto someone who attempts to “bear their burden”, and then dump their thoughts and feelings on them without allowing them to hardly get one word in. While this one-sided sort of relationship may be useful in the kind of accountability relationships that were mentioned two studies back, this sort of thing does not work very well when trying to establish regular friendships. The problem, then, is that while trying to connect with others, lonely people can sometimes end up pushing others away as a result of their one-sided focus on their own need for connection. Serving others means that even though you feel a need to be heard, known, and accepted, you are willing to put that need on hold in order to let others feel the same way. So maybe ask yourself, how often do you ask how someone is doing, and actually want to know the answer, rather than just asking out of formality? When people are talking to you, do you really listen to what they are saying, or do you simply wait for your turn to speak again? When you listen to others, do you attempt to really understand where they are coming from, so that you could actually communicate that understanding back to them? Do not merely give your burdens to others, but seek to bear the burdens of others as well.

² Quote taken from Colón, Christine A., and Bonnie E. Field. *Singled Out: Why Celibacy Must Be Reinvented in Today’s Church*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009. 141.

In addition to serving the Church by bearing the burdens of individual brothers and sisters in Christ that you get to know, look for how you can serve your church community by volunteering to help in areas the church has a need. If you have free time, and you feel lonely during much of it, then look for ways you can help out your church during those times. Volunteer to babysit, or help in the nursery or Sunday schools, so parents of children can attend a service or Bible study. Help with media services, with the music ministries, or with one of the various prayer teams. There are probably many needs your church has, so ask around and find out how you can get your eyes off yourself and your loneliness and onto the needs of others. This intentional focus on the needs of others in the body of Christ demonstrates the unity that you all have in Jesus Christ, and gives to the world a picture of the gospel, where God laid aside all thought to himself in order to become “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” for us (Phil 2:8).

Rest in God in your loneliness

Finally, in your struggle with loneliness, as a single person, rest in God. If all you ever do is attempt to remove your feelings of loneliness by connecting with others, without bringing your loneliness to God as well, you will have wasted the opportunity for your loneliness to deepen your connection to the only one who matters most, God himself. In Psalm 25:16, David prayed to the Lord, “Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.” David saw that the ultimate hope for the loneliness he experienced was to be found only in God, and so he brought his feelings of loneliness up to God through prayer. When you find yourself engulfed in feelings of isolation and loneliness, where’s the first place you run for help? Do you call a friend? Call home? Maybe log onto facebook? Or do you turn to Jesus Christ? Looking for connection with others is a God-given help against loneliness, but it is not our *ultimate* help. While relationships with others can, and should, be turned to for relief from loneliness, perhaps what some of us need to learn is the ability to sit in our loneliness; to not immediately seek to remove the negative feeling, but to remain in solitude for a time, to bring our pain and loneliness to Christ, and to find in him the only connection that our souls totally depend on.

The truth of the matter is nothing on earth can ever fully and finally take away all your loneliness. Henri Nouwen commented on this, saying:

Many people suffer because of the false supposition on which they have based their lives. That supposition is that there should be no fear or loneliness, no confusion or doubt. But these sufferings can only be dealt with creatively when they are understood as wounds integral to our human condition.³

Because of our sin and brokenness, loneliness cannot be completely removed in this life. You may find the perfect community of friends, but the sense of isolation will return. You may find a spouse that you are able to share your life with, but the feeling of loneliness will return even there. Learning to connect well with others is a means of combating loneliness, but it is not the ultimate cure for it. Feelings of loneliness will come and go through life, and so while we may

³ Quote taken from *Singled Out*, page 135.

learn to lessen them through the Church, we should never forget where our hope truly lies. To rest in God in the midst of loneliness keeps you dissatisfied with this world, remembering that you are meant for another world, one in which Christ will be among us, and crying and pain will be no more (Rev 21:4).

Conclusion

The experience of loneliness that many singles struggle with is not an uncommon one. In learning to combat these painful feelings, however, recognize: you belong to a family. Because your identity is in Christ, you belong to the family of God, a body of believers who also share in that same identity because of Christ's body that was given for us. Remember as well to rely on and serve the Church as your family. Living out your identity in Christ will mean caring for, and being cared for, others who share that same identity. Developing deep, mutually encouraging relationships with other believers will greatly help in the fight against loneliness. But finally, remember where your hope ultimately lies. Only God can be a connection for you greater than the one you long to have with others. Expect suffering and loneliness to continue, at least in part, throughout life. Tim Keller says, "We learn that through all of life there runs a ground note of cosmic disappointment. You are never going to lead a wise life until you understand that."⁴ With this in mind, turn your eyes to eternity, rest in God, and live out your shared identity in Jesus Christ.

⁴ Tim Keller. *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters*. New York: Dutton, 2009. 37.