

Feature Article: JAF5371

SINGLE IN CHRIST AND A SEXUAL BEING: The Gospel Really Does Offer More than “Don’t!”

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This article first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 37, number 01 (2014). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

SYNOPSIS

To follow Jesus faithfully means we need to reorient our values and priorities radically. One radical value Jesus proclaimed was that single men and women had equal standing in His kingdom. Society, which up to that point was centered on marriage and family, was now to include those who were unmarried as valued and equal partners. The apostle Paul and church father John Calvin, counter to the thinking of their time, proclaimed the surprising worth of being single and celibate, echoing Jesus’ words. Singles are complete in Christ just as much as those who are married. But Christian singles do have a life journey that does not include the experiences of sexual expression that married couples enjoy (or, to be honest, of those who choose to live outside of God’s design for our sexuality). We know this is not easy, especially as we live in a culture that often proclaims sexual pleasure as the highest of all human experiences (and its counterpoint: to deny oneself in this area is to live a life of great tragedy). Singles of all ages need a constant infusion of the gospel to steward their sexuality as an overflow of the beauty and power that comes from devotion to Christ.

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ And He [Jesus] answered him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matt. 22:36–39).

“Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things will be added to you” (Matt. 6:33).¹

WHAT IS GOD’S PLAN FOR SAINTS WHO ARE SINGLE?

The Christian life might be summed up this way: it is a lifestyle of loving and obedient devotion to Christ, which bears out in a commitment to love people with relational

integrity, and to participate actively in His kingdom mission of disciple-making. This two-pronged mission, to love and to participate in Christ's kingdom-oriented reordering of the world, is for everyone. Those who are single in this life (short-term or life-long) have this same two-pronged mission, but they live it out uniquely without a spouse and, in part, through consistent and obedient stewarding of their sexuality.

Before discussing godly single sexuality, it's important to remember that our sexuality is not a stand-alone component of who we are. Our sexuality is but one aspect of our being, of being created in the image of God. Our sexuality is best understood through the lens of the broader Christian life of devotion to Jesus that bears out in our day-to-day decisions and priorities.

A Lifestyle of Devotion to Jesus and Kingdom Focus

Jesus Christ and Paul declared the single life to be good, and even to be desired, because marriage and the responsibilities attached to it (spiritual, emotional, sexual, relational, mental, and financial) *can be* a distraction from Christ and the broader ministry of the kingdom. Jesus said, "There are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it" (Matt. 19:12, ESV). Paul echoed this observation in 1 Corinthians 7:32: "I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife" (ESV).

John Piper elaborates on what Jesus and Paul said:

*We need not take this ("made themselves eunuchs") to mean any kind of physical sterilization any more than we take Jesus' words "tear out your right eye" to mean physically blinding ourselves. But it does mean that Jesus approves some of his followers' renouncing marriage and sexual activity for the sake of serving Christ's kingdom. "Let the one who is able to receive this receive it." That is what Paul chose for himself and what he encouraged others to consider in 1 Corinthians 7. "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am....I say this...to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord."*²

What Jesus and Paul said was revolutionary! To proclaim that singleness was good and even preferable to marriage was unheard of in a culture where marriage and family were considered the only blessed state. Paul's encouragement was anchored in his conviction that *devotion to Christ is supreme*, not one's spouse or family or genealogical line. Undistracted, unhindered love and obedience to Jesus is what the Christian life is all about, whether a person is single or married. But both Jesus and Paul taught that being single is preferable in order to remain focused on an undivided life lived for kingdom purposes.

Calvin explained the blessing of singleness this way when he commented on 1 Corinthians 7:35: "For what purpose celibacy is to be desired—not on its own account, nor on the ground of its being a state that is nearer to perfection, but that we may cleave

to God without distraction—*that* being the one thing that a Christian man [or woman] ought exclusively to look to during his whole life.”³ Calvin, a married man, agreed with Paul and Jesus in proclaiming that singles can potentially cleave to Jesus, attending on Him through loving devotion and service, in a far less distracted way than married people.

The celibate life is often only defined as a sexless life. But to view it only from the perspective of what you “can’t have,” rather than what you “can have” is to miss what Jesus, Paul, and Calvin are saying. The single life—yes, including abstinence—is so much more. Calvin was right in teaching that Scripture does not promote a celibate, single life as being more spiritual than a married, sexually active life. But it is not “less than” a married life, either; it is a different signpost that points to the supremacy of Christ.

Singles, living without the gift of a spouse and choosing to abstain from sexual expression outside of marriage, have a richer opportunity to attend on Christ through daily relational devotion to Him and purposeful investment in the kingdom of God. In fact, in many ways, the intense battle to be faithful to God through sexual abstinence provides the context for cultivating a close dependence on Jesus. The absence of a spouse, and perhaps children, provides time, energy, and a relational focus that can be poured into loving others and a broad spectrum of rich relationships. In other words, the “lack” that singles experience is meant to be a doorway into an abundantly fruitful life—spiritually, relationally, and vocationally for the eternal kingdom of Christ.

A PATH OF BOTH SANCTIFICATION AND SUFFERING

This abundant and fruitful life, however, isn’t the way many singles experience the call to live apart from sharing sexual love with a spouse. Rather, the experience of singleness with sexual integrity is often seen as impossible; it’s not, but it’s important not to assume it’s an easy life, as it can be excruciatingly tough at times. The call to bend the knee of our will and our desires (physical, mental, emotional, and sexual) to Jesus Christ our Lord is only possible with God’s help. Singles are not alone, however, in needing Christ to live lives of sexual integrity. Married couples oftentimes experience deep loneliness in difficult stretches of their marriages, and they, too, must equally depend on the mercy and power of Christ to remain faithful. So singles must not think they are the only ones pulling the heavy freight of resisting sexual temptation in life.

Sexual integrity for every human being is an experience of both sanctification and suffering. *Sanctification*, because as we battle to slay sin and to live fully for Christ, we learn to entrust Him with every area of our lives, and in doing so we grow in Christlikeness. (See 1 Pet. 1:6–9.) *Suffering*, because resisting the enticement of sin and temptation is a trial common to humanity and an unavoidable reality of living in a sinful world. (See 1 Cor. 10:13–14.)

Sexual integrity for the single person will always be connected to relational and emotional purity. What do I mean? One of the missional directives of the Christian life is *a lifestyle of loving and obedient devotion to Christ, which bears out in a commitment to love people with relational integrity.*

It follows from this directive that the way I relate to others through my words, actions, and physical touch will be critical. Relational and emotional integrity (purity) is a way of loving others that does not step outside of God's boundaries for sexual expression. To put it bluntly, when we engage others, or ourselves, in sexual ways that are outside of His boundaries, we are living in rebellion to Christ by turning to others or ourselves rather than to Him to find life in the midst of a broken world.⁴ Instead of living out a commitment to love others, we become devoted to self and pleasure, all the while deceiving ourselves that we are engaged in loving actions. How so?

The gospel compels us as single men and women, deeply loved by our Father, to live in this world as "sent ones" who, in response to Jesus' love for us, commit to love others selflessly, for their benefit and for their good. To *truly love* means (to put it negatively):

- To not covet, crave, lust after, or worship another person.
- To not pursue or manipulate someone into a level of emotional intimacy that properly belongs only between spouses. We might refer to this as emotional integrity or purity, and I've observed that it is often overlooked because sexual purity is a much more obvious problem. However, there is wisdom in not cultivating emotional intimacy, which is more "spousal" than brotherly/sisterly. Emotional dependency (inappropriate emotional intimacy) can happen when we share feelings, thoughts, desires, and issues of the heart that cultivate a sense of oneness that can feel like a "pseudo-marriage." This can happen between same-sex as well as opposite-sex friends.
- To not cross appropriate boundary lines with sexual touching (clothed or unclothed, with self or with others) that leads to inappropriate arousal and climax.
- To not engage in activities that ramp up sexual temptation, such as online pornography and its variations (phone sex, sexting, etc.), along with reading erotic and romantic fantasies—activities that eventually will fill our thought lives with images and sexual experiences that are not ours to possess and are actually destructive.

There is a need today to spell out what these boundary lines are, as there is rampant confusion regarding the expression of our sexuality among believers. But defining boundary lines must always be done in the context of how they work to enrich our relationships with others; they are not lines that function only in a legalistic sense ("Don't go too far!"). So, to spell out positively what it means to love others truly as a single man or woman, we read in 1 John 5:1-2: "If you believe that Jesus is the Christ—that he is God's Son and your Savior—then you are a child of God. And all who love the Father love his children too. So you can find out how much you love God's children—your brothers and sisters in the Lord—by how much you love and obey God" (The Living Bible).

Did you catch that? Jesus says I can know whether I am loving others by *whether I am loving and obeying Him*. The horizontal must always connect to the vertical. They are

not to be separated. So, if I'm engaging in sexual intimacy with you (physical or emotional, real or virtual) apart from the safety, promise, and commitment of marriage, then I'm not loving you at all; I'm using you (even if it's mutual selfishness). Godly love is that which enables and assists another person to live faithfully to Christ and His commands. It honors our sexuality while acknowledging that to use it wrongly is harmful and detrimental to both our lives; that disordered and self-centered sexuality hinders our growth (sanctification) toward becoming people who reflect Christ.

Let's admit, though, that this is not easy to do. We must acknowledge that turning away from these constant temptations and clinging to Christ is not something we can do on our own. Take heart! Jesus has not left us to find a way on our own, struggling through temptation, failure, guilt, shame, and discouragement.

Jesus Is with Us: Practical Provision for Our Sexual Struggles

My own struggles as a single woman (emotional, sexual, and relational) have been varied throughout my four decades of life. I have known moments and seasons of defeat. I have learned to identify, however, one consistent thread that gave power to my feelings of discouragement: identifying myself primarily as a struggling single who happens to be a Christian, rather than as a Christian who happens to be single (and sometimes struggles). Is this word play or semantics? Not at all. How we identify ourselves is profoundly important, and is foundational to how we face the temptations of being single. As a single-in-Christ woman, I must first look to Jesus and who He says I am (complete in Him). He teaches me how to live in this fallen world of temptation, loneliness, and unmet desires. As I increasingly grow in faithfulness to Him, not denying my sexuality but guarding it, I can then devote myself more fully to the mission God has given me as a single person—*a lifestyle of devotion to Christ, which bears out in a commitment to love people with relational integrity, and to actively participate in His kingdom mission.*

How does this look practically, on the street level of our lives? It starts with a foundational perspective that I must cultivate daily: *Jesus gives me Himself.* Not only am I "in Christ" but He is within me, and all who believe in Him as Savior-Lord. This means that at all times I have:

Someone I belong to and who is with me in all circumstances and experiences. (See John 14:18, 23.) When I feel "less than" or a "have-not" because I don't share a bed, experience sexual love, or check the "Mrs." box on a form, I can remember Jesus, my eternal bridegroom and friend. When I'm invited to bridal showers and know that friends will get married, have sex, and bear children, Jesus gives me grace to rejoice with those who rejoice, and He also gives me grace to be honest about my grief when I ache and weep for those same blessings.

A way of escape, a Rescuer who is constantly present to enable me to resist temptation when my body, emotions, or thoughts long for the intimacy of oneness with a spouse. (See 1 Cor. 10:13 and Matt. 26:34-35.)

A secure identity: I am His, loved and forgiven. When I succumb to devotion to self through lust, selfishness, and self-pity, and feel the pull to use people for my own emotional comfort, Jesus turns my heart back to Himself, reminding me of who I am and what is mine through Him. (See Eph. 5:1–2 and 1 Thess. 1:9–10.)

All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge always at my disposal. Jesus is the One in whom all this treasure is hidden, and since my life is secure, “hidden” in Him, He gives me everything I need for life and godliness as a single woman. I’ve leaned on this truth through my twenties, thirties, and now forties. This wisdom has helped me navigate the world of dating, unreciprocated strong attraction to certain men, and the world of my ministry work, which for twenty-five years has required me to work closely alongside *many* men. (See Col. 1:27; 2:3.)

Brothers and sisters in Christ who help and shepherd me in stewarding my sexuality. As “branches abiding in the Vine” together, we help each other to live devoted to Jesus. This is the community on Earth that He gives to teach, counsel, guide, know, and love us in our successes, failures, and struggles to live as single saints. I have a spiritual family to whom I can confess my sin and be prayed for and spurred on to love Jesus. (See Heb. 3:12, 13; 10:24, 25.)

A kingdom calling to be engaged in. This has everything to do with living in godly unmarried sexuality. We abstain from certain things, but also fully participate in others—such as His holy work in this world (See Eph. 2:10; 1 Pet. 2:9–10).

A forgiving King, who welcomes me to come to the throne of grace for mercy and help when I fail to believe any of the above, and give way to sin. When I’ve used friends (female and male) to make myself feel good; when I’ve lingered on sensual entertainment (a song, movie scene, picture on a billboard) to satisfy an unholy curiosity; when jealousy and discontentment inflame me, and my thoughts toward others become bitter; regardless of my foolishness and sin, I am always invited and tenderly welcomed into the arms of Jesus (Heb. 4:16).

In Christ I have all of this at my disposal. Jesus “with me” is not an abstract notion that has no real power in my daily life. But in order to take what Jesus has given to all of us so that it becomes more central to our hearts, consider the following steps of faith:

Cultivate your relationship with Jesus through prayer, reading and meditating upon God’s Word, and spending time with people who love Him (Matt. 22:36–37).

Learn how to starve the flesh and feed the Spirit through seeking to understand what influences help you to walk in sexual and emotional integrity and what influences

hinder you. Analyze the kinds of music, movies, and TV shows you partake in, taking note of their impact on you. Examine your relational world and watch out for people who pull you away from Christ, rather than toward Him (Gal. 6:7–8).⁵

Make a commitment to pray for and cultivate relationships in which you are truly known. God has brothers and sisters to assist you in your singleness. We need people who have “meddling rights,” who will come after us with love and probing questions whether we ask for it or not. Do you have friends like this? (1 John 1:7; Prov. 28:13).

Intentionally and consistently renew your mind for transformation. The world is constantly preaching to our souls. Regardless of what sexualized influences and experiences you’ve already had, every Christian needs to battle intentionally against worldly thinking (Rom. 8:5–8; 12:1–2).

Know your body and physiological weaknesses. Know your body, because we are embodied souls. For example: women need to know their hormonal cycle and be aware of what times of the month they may be more prone toward sexual desires being stirred up. Men and women need to know how their bodies react to certain visual, tactile, and audio stimuli. Reflect on how God is calling you to love Him through the use of your body (1 Thess. 5:23).

Grow in understanding how your heart is always worshiping. At any given moment, you are living out Jeremiah 2:13 (turning away from Christ to the world) or 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 (turning away from the world to Christ). We live for something or someone; that’s our created nature.

What a relief for singles (whether youth, young adults, older adults, or seniors) to know that we have a constant and faithful God who enables us to live with our sexuality in a godly manner, and who also provides us with guidance and practical encouragement through the wisdom of His Word and His people. “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory, blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (Jude 1:24–25, CSB).

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NOTES

1 All Bible references are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

- 2 John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009), 112.
- 3 *Calvin's Commentary on the Bible*. Available at <http://www.studylight.org/com/cal/view.cgi?bk=45&ch=7..>
- 4 See articles on godly and broken sexuality in Harvest USA's women's workbook, *Sexual Sanity for Women: Healing from Sexual and Relational Brokenness* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2013), 168-72.
- 5 Harvest USA has resources specifically to assist men and women to live with integrity in their sexuality and relationships.