How The Gospel Reshapes Your Worth And Value As A Single

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Like 24

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A Subtle Idol

I am convinced that one of the most prevalent forms of idolatry in the church today is what we could call, “The idolization of the nuclear family.” (I say that well aware of the complexities of talking about an "idol" in a western setting where it is not likely that you will fashion a physical object before which you will physically bow, but there is precedent for such language in some rare cases.) While broader secular culture may tend to denigrate family and marriage, the church tends to overcompensate by over-elevating them. This view of the nuclear family seems on the surface to spring from a biblical ideal. After all, God called all humanity to marry and procreate in Gen. 1:28, and all throughout the Old Testament, God presents marriage and offspring as the mark of his covenant blessing (Gen. 2:18; 12:2-3; Deut. 7:14; etc.). So this exaltation of marriage is *biblical*, right? Well, in short, no.

The truth is, this way of thinking lives in the OT alone, without taking into account Jesus and his coming, and what he and Paul taught about how the Gospel relativizes biological family in light of spiritual family (Mark 3:31-35), physical offspring in light of spiritual disciple-making (Matt. 28:18-20), earthly marriage in light of union with Christ (I Cor. 7:17-24; Eph. 5:23-33; II Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:7; 21:2, 9), and the temporality of human marriage in light of eternal communion with God (Luke 20:34-36). When we fail to hear the Gospel, we live with an OT model that takes a good thing (like marriage/family/child-rearing) and turns it into an idol.

Life In The Wake Of Our Idol

The consequences this can have on singles in the church (or considering joining the church) can be devastating. In terms of your own self-identity, you can feel that you don't really have as much personal worth and maturity, because you haven't reached the "grown up" rite of passage in marriage. Especially if you remain single (by choice or against your desires) past your mid-twenties, you can begin to feel as though there is something wrong with you. "Why aren't I like everyone else?" If you have experienced a separation or the loss of a partner, you can feel that you have somehow taken a step backwards in your own worth, as though you no longer matter to anyone, or at least not like you once did.

Perhaps just as painful is not only the way you see yourselves, but the way you can sometimes be seen by others. Single women, especially in their younger single years, can be perceived as an inherent threat to every married man, as though every one of them was a home-wrecker in the making from whom only the "Billy Graham Rule" can provide protection. Single men, especially as they grow into their older single years, can be perceived as inherently "creepy" and somehow dangerous to society at large, as though they must be kept constantly at arm's length and viewed with deep suspicion. Added to this can be the constant sense that you don't really fit into the life of the church, where the calendar and events are often arranged almost exclusively around married couples and families with children. This can easily leave you feeling like unwelcome and unwanted outsiders to "real" church life.

This is to say nothing of the normal challenges and difficulties that come unavoidably as a part of single life (just as marriage brings its unique struggles). For those outside the church or not committed to the Christian sexual ethic, singleness may seem like a place of only increased freedom. But for those committed to following Jesus in holiness, singleness also seems to mean great restrictions. Indeed, to many singles, the church's insistence on the sexual ethic of Jesus can seem like the perfect reason to avoid the church, because it sounds an awful lot like bondage to rules that are puritanical at best.

I don't intend to minimize or ignore these pains at all. They can be both real and deep, and come as a result of the Fall, a point we could develop at length elsewhere. But we must approach them with Gospel-shaped thinking.

Crushing Our Idol In The Light Of The Gospel

The only way we can rid ourselves of our idol and come to recognize the true worth of singleness is to hear anew the Gospel which proclaims our faith. Jesus *shatters* the views of secular culture that enshrine romantic love as the center of joy, and shatters the religious notions that make marriage and family a mark of greater worth or fulfillment.

When we come to the NT we realize that the OT themes that centralize God's blessings around marriage and family (Gen. 12:1-3, etc.) were actually only meant to point to Jesus as their ultimate fulfillment. The promise of seed that placed such a value on marriage and family in Judaism was never really about the blessings of great offspring – it was about *Christ* (see Gal. 3-4). God's blessing then is not found in family, but in Christ, regardless of one's marital status. These OT themes were only the shadow, and in Jesus, the substance has come. To ignore the fulfillment in Jesus and to live in the shadow of marriage as a center is to perpetuate an idol, an idol we must fight with the Gospel.

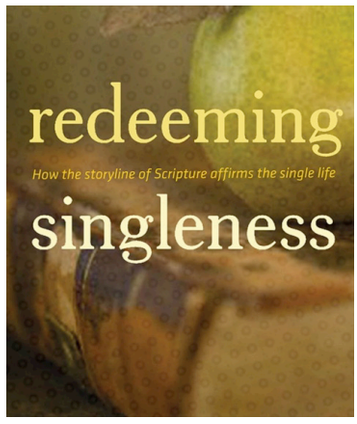
Let me suggest four ways the Gospel shatters our idolatry of marriage and bestows worth and value on the single life, two from Jesus and two from Paul:

1. Jesus Relativizes Marriage In Light Of Eternity

First, note Luke 20:34-36. In his response to the Sadducees' attempt to trip him up about marriage and the resurrection, Jesus makes the surprising revelation that earthly marriage is not eternal;

> 34 And Jesus said to them, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, 35 but those who

> are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, 36 for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.
> (ESV Luke 20:34-36)



Jesus stresses that earthly marriage is temporary and must be relativized in light of an eternal kingdom. This can be uncomfortable for us, especially for those who are or have been married, because we tend to attach so much value (rightly!) to the deep bonds of marriage. We can hear what Jesus says as meaning that the new heaven and earth will be a place of loss. Yet this is only because we have too low a view of God. As Barry Danylak notes, Jesus' teaching,

> does not imply we will be living a life of denial or even giving a momentary thought to anything of this earthly existence that we have left behind....The fact that there is no marriage in heaven speaks not to the paucity of our future existence but to the greatness of our God. For no earthly or human relationship we can or ever will experience will stand even as a momentary flicker of a candle in comparison to experiencing the blazing sun of our heavenly existence before the presence of our almighty God. There is sometimes a tendency, especially among the idealistic young who presume to have most of their years yet before them, to think that singleness is a temporary period of one's life until one finds an eternal soul mate in marriage. This passage is a reminder that in the scope of eternity the opposite is actually the case; marriage is for a season and time, until, as the traditional marriage vow reads, "death do us part." It is as single and free individuals that we will stand before his throne and live for all eternity.

2. Jesus Gives Singlehood A Place At The Center Of The Kingdom

Second, note that Jesus, almost shockingly, fights against the religious notions of his own culture and ours to give singleness a valued place in the kingdom of God. In his instructions on marriage and divorce (Matt. 19:1-9), he had spoken so strongly against divorce that the disciples felt like this would make marriage a virtually inescapable "trap." They responded by suggesting that this would make it sound like singleness should be preferred to marriage (19:10). They most likely did this to try to get him to back off of what he had said about divorce. Rather than take the bait, Jesus takes the opportunity to shock them and make a profound point about himself. He agrees with the premise that they had only meant to suggest as a rhetorical foil. "Yes, you're right," he says, "Marriage is actually not for all or even the default (19:11), and singleness, if it serves my kingdom, is in fact preferable to marriage." Their jaws no doubt dropped! The language Jesus uses to say this is important to his point;

> 10 The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." 11 But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. 12 For 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."
> (ESV Matt. 19:10–12)

Jesus, even though he is not just talking about the physical category of eunuchs, casts his vision of singleness is this language of the "eunuch." At least two powerful points emerge from what he does;

First, we should not paint all singles with a broad brush. Some eunuchs are made such by birth without their consent; others are made eunuchs by sexual abuse, castration, or some force outside themselves. Thus, for some, singleness is a permanent reality and for others a season, yet for both of these first two categories, it is not the preferred choice. Jesus has a place for each of them still. Yet others, "have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." He clearly enters the metaphorical here and acknowledges with this third category that one can choose the unmarried life for the sake of the kingdom. In other words, there are all kinds of reasons one may be single, for a season or a life, and we should allow diversity and avoid cookie-cutter stereotypes.

Second, this was scandalous language in Judaism. To choose unmarried life would be an unthinkable disgrace to begin with. But Eunuchs were, in Judaism, even more inherently degraded. Prevented from the priesthood and viewed as at best sexually ambiguous, they were an ostracized and marginalized sector of second temple Judaism's culture. Jesus in using this language seems to acknowledge that singles are often pushed to the margins of society. But he takes those who use their singleness for him (whether chosen by them or chosen for them) out of the margins. In fact, he goes even further. He doesn't just say that singles can now have aplace in the kingdom if they serve him; they have a central place, and anyone who can choose to be a eunuch for the kingdom should default to that role.

Naturally, Jesus himself freely acknowledges that this will not be for all, or even for most. But it is not just an option, or a lower *allowed* status – it is in fact a *preferred* status. Jesus thus lifts singles out of the shadows of shame and out of the margins of religious life and plants them at the center of his kingdom. Tim Keller fleshes out what this short saying by Jesus implies;

> The Christian gospel and hope of the future kingdom de-idolized marriage. There was no more radical act in that day and time than to live a life that did not produce heirs. Having children was the main way to achieve significance for an adult, since children would remember you. They also gave you security, since they would care for you in old age. Christians who remained single, then, were making the statement that our future is not guaranteed by the family but by God. Single adult Christians were bearing testimony that God, not family, was their hope. God would guarantee their future, first by giving them their truest family—the church—so they never lacked for brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, in Christ. But ultimately, Christians' inheritance is nothing less than the fullness of the kingdom of God in the new heavens and new earth. Hauerwas goes on to point out that Christian hope not only made it possible for singles to live fulfilled lives without spouse and children, but it also was an impetus for people to marry and have children and not be afraid to bring them into this dark world. "For Christians do not place their hope in their children, but rather their children are a sign of their hope … that God has not abandoned this world…." The Christian church in the West, unfortunately, does not seem to have maintained its grasp on the goodness of singleness. Instead it has labeled it "Plan B for the Christian life."

3. Paul Explains That The Gospel Relativizes Our Marital Status

Third, Paul's Gospel shatters the idolatry of marriage by sharing of a totally radical view of single life. Building on the saying of Jesus we saw just above, Paul expanded even further what he saw in that teaching. Running full contrary to the Jewish and Roman views prevalent around him, Paul was convinced that the coming of Jesus radically reshapes our understanding of marriage and singleness.

> 17 Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. 18 Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. 19 For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. 20 Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. 21 Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) 22 For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. 23 You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. 24 So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God…

(ESV I Cor. 7:17-24)

Tom Schreiner notes that Paul, "does not view social relations according to the standards of the existing society. Singleness is prized because the single person can live exclusively for the Lord. The single state is not imposed on anyone, but the Jewish expectation of marriage for all is radically relativized." Certainly many or maybe even most Christians will marry, "But many are also called to singleness, for the things of the Lord are the most important; and relationships, like marriage, though not denigrated, are subordinate to the glory of God, the centrality of Christ and the spread of the gospel." Craig Blomberg goes even further while zooming in on Paul's words in I Cor. 7:29-31;

> "Not many Western Christians give adequate consideration to the possibility of remaining unmarried for the sake of wholehearted devotion to the Lord's work. More need to do so. Examples such as the internationally influential Anglican pastor, John Stott, or the widely heralded Southern Baptist missionary, Lottie Moon, have demonstrated how much one life can accomplish when freed from the demands of family...For all of us, single or married, if the end of the world truly could come in our lifetime, we should have an urgency about the Lord's work that contemporary Christians seldom reflect. And even if the Lord delays his coming, sudden death claims too many lives for any of us ever to assume complacently that we have a certain number of years or decades left to serve God more leisurely."

He notes that Paul's case for singleness was followed more closely "when evangelicalism as a movement in this country was poorer and more marginalized." Now that we are affluent, the First World tends to ignore or even disdain Paul's word, precisely because we become materialistic in our outlook. He insightfully suggests that Majority World Christians can, "teach us profound lessons concerning obedience to Paul's commands in these areas, because they are less tempted by such materialism." He urges us again to, "keep verse 31b ever before us, reminding ourselves, against every message society sends, that this life is an infinitesimal drop in the bucket compared to eternity. It is only worth investing our lives and our resources in that which will outlive this world."

4. Paul Explains That Marriage Is Only A Sign Of The Gospel

A fourth and final way that the Gospel crushes the idol of marriage and reorients us all around Christ, regardless of our marital status, is this - it teaches us that marriage is only a shadow and that Jesus is the substance to which it points. Anyone who has spent much time in church or attended a few Christian weddings knows that Paul famously presented marriage as a picture of Christ and the Church in Eph. 5. What is not always recognized is what this says about single life. The unmarried can feel a little "left out" of the metaphor, which is clearly to miss the point. Yes, Paul is teaching that marriage has a special value because it pictures the shape of the Gospel. But he isn't saying this to exalt marriage – he is saying this to exalt Christ. He takes the standard text of Judaism about marriage, Gen. 2:24, and cites it, then explains that it never really was about human marriage – it was about marriage to Christ.

> 31 "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.
> (ESV Eph. 5:31-32)

Marriage, in other words, is only the picture, the thing which points, not the substance, the thing to which it points. As Glynn Harrison points out, "The Bible does not teach that there will be no marriage in heaven. Rather, it teaches there will be one marriage in heaven—between Christ and his bride, the church."

You are not as a single left out or sacrificing something by not being married to an earthly spouse. You already have – in Jesus – the substance to which marriage is only a pointer. Danylak explains, "Looked at positively as a celebration of the complete sufficiency of Christ, singleness can be a powerful witness for the Gospel." He goes on to note that this stands in contrast to Judaism, Islam, and Mormonism, where marriage and children are expected norms. The Gospel, he notes, gives us a unique perspective, and uniquely gives value to single life. "In choosing a life of singleness for the sake of kingdom service, one can freely demonstrate the complete sufficiency of Christ for being a fully blessed member of the new covenant, despite being without the fulfillment of a spouse and children." Sam Allberry makes this even more clear when he explains the role of marriage in biblical theology;

> The marriage [Jesus] came for was the one all of us who are in him will enjoy with him for eternity. His singleness on earth bore witness to this ultimate marriage he had come to establish. Singleness for us now is also a way of bearing witness to this reality. Like Jesus, we can live in a way that anticipates what is to come. Singleness now is a way of saying that this future reality is so certain and so good that we can embrace it now. It is a way of declaring to a world obsessed with sexual and romantic intimacy that these things are not ultimate and that in Christ we possess what is....*If marriage shows us the shape of the Gospel, singleness shows us its sufficiency* [emphasis mine]. This is why the church needs single people. Not as a supposedly endless source of free babysitting, but to remind us that the joy and fulfillment of marriage in this life is partial and can only be temporal. The presence of singles who find their fullest meaning and satisfaction in Christ is a visible, physical testimony to the fact that the end of all of our longing comes in Jesus.

The Church Needs Your Unique Witness To The Gospel And Celebrates You As A Single

You need to hear this as a Christian single; *you matter*. You are not, on account of your singleness, broken or flawed. You are not deficient or defective. You are not lesser or a loser. Your place is not in the margins or the shadows. You are not on the outside. Jesus has welcomed you to the center of the kingdom. True, not all God's people live out the Gospel we proclaim, and many may fail to celebrate your singleness in a biblical way. Yes, secular society will scream at you every chance it gets to try to convince you that happiness and fulfillment is found in romance, and to try to make you feel ashamed, impoverished, and devalued for not having it. But the Gospel speaks more loudly than any of those voices. It proclaims that you are loved, that you are valued, that you can know satisfaction in the Christ who died and rose to redeem you; a reality so great and a relationship so amazing that it trivializes every other human bond by comparison.

And this is the Gospel that you not only desperately need to hear, again and again, in order to see your true worth in Christ; it is also the Gospel which you and you alone can uniquely proclaim in your communities, your families, among your friends, at work, and as you live out life in God's church. The "idolization of the nuclear family" will constantly press against us. The people around you need you to display the sufficiency of the Gospel as you live life satisfied in Jesus.

All that to say, the church does just tolerate you as a single. It does not just accept you. It does not just try to carve out a place to make you fit in awkwardly. Rather, the church enjoys you. It celebrates you. It *needs* you. Not because of some mythical role as a free babysitter or a person with more "free time," but because as a single who serves Jesus you stand at the center of the kingdom of God, and have a unique witness to the Gospel of Christ that is desperately needed as a timely antidote to our idolatrous age.

For Further Study

Earlier this year, the body I am honored to be a part of devoted some time to celebrating singleness and equipping singles and marrieds to think through singleness biblically. There's a marvelous selection of resources that were put together by an amazing team here. The seminars which this team put together can be listened to here (I commend Hanna Chang's incredibly insightful talk to you in particular). I shared the notes to my own small contribution here.

The two most helpful "one-stop" resources I would recommend would be the exceptional sermon from Sam Storms here, and the incredibly helpful book by Sam Allberry (cited above) here.

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