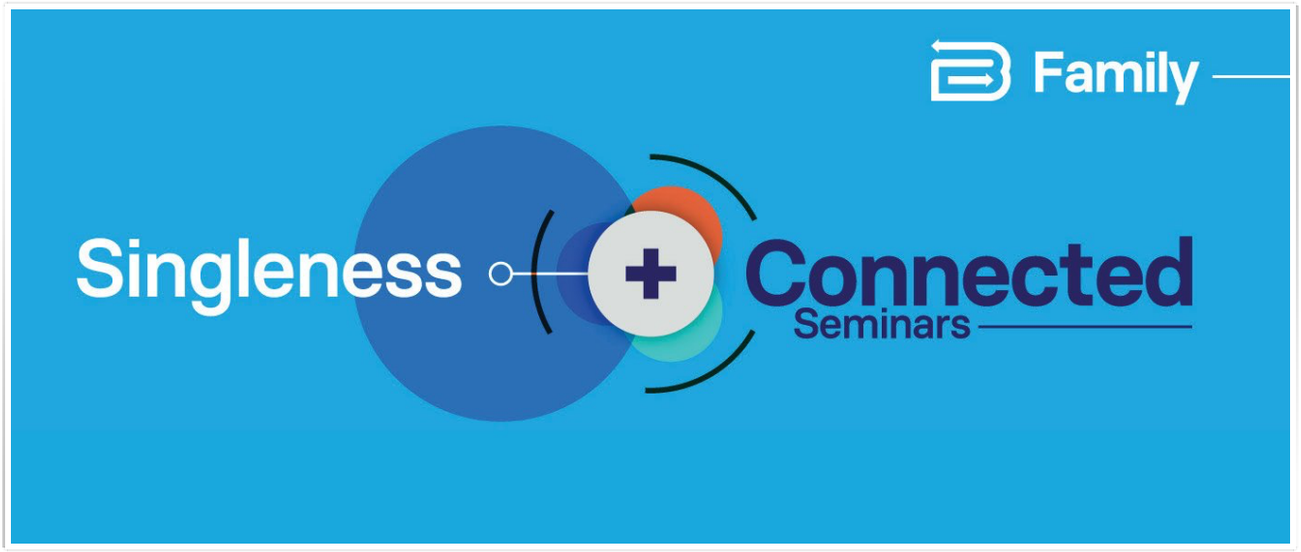


Single Not Dead: A Holy Handling Of The Single Sex Drive

Timothy Berg

Like 24

Saturday, February 08, 2020

[Note - what follows are notes from a brief PEP Talk I was asked to give for the "Singleness" stage of the "Connected Seminars" for Bridgeway Church. This and the other sessions are available with many other helpful resources here.]

The possession of your sex drive as a Christian single is neither a cosmic accident nor a personal loss. It is rather a bountiful gift from God that serves as a pathway to deeper experience of him. It is less like a trust fund and more like a checking account. You don't have to wait till you someday meet the "conditions" (of marriage) to benefit from it, but you can only get out of it now what you put into it by cultivating it in a holy way.

We don't talk about it enough (or, frankly, ever), but there is great value in the sex drive in the single Christian's life. The sex drive is intended by God to produce at least three basic effects in the human heart. First, for the married, it drives them into the arms of their spouse. Second, for many singles, it is meant by God to drive them towards marriage. But I am convinced that God has given the sex drive a third and even greater purpose, and one which our idolization of marriage can easily cause us to miss. That is, it can drive us all as singles towards Christ right now.

"Your sex drive as a single is less like a trust fund and more like a checking account."
(Tweet This)

Far too often we seek to motivate holiness in single life by suggesting that in a distant "someday" all the "waiting" will be worth it, so just struggle through it for now. As though sexuality worked like a trust fund that has no benefit until that day. We are supposed to just keep kicking the can of hope further down the road, hoping that one day this thing inside us will be good. We then end up treating sexuality like an "on/off" switch that should just permanently be in the "off" position until you flip it "on" at a wedding altar.

That's an absurdly inhuman, horrifically unbiblical, and terribly damaging viewpoint. God is not up in heaven going, "Oh, I really messed up the timing here. I should not have flipped that switch yet!" Your sex drive – as a single – is not something that God mourns, but something he created and celebrates as key to your present joy in Christ and witness to the Gospel. It is less like a trust fund and more like a checking account; you can get out now what you have put in, but there are fees to pay if you try to take out without putting in first.

To see how this works we must note two dangers to avoid and explain two spiritual principles to employ.

Two Dangers To Avoid – Sexual Indulgence And Sexual Repression

The first danger to avoid we could call the *sexual indulgence* approach. It views the NT sexual ethic as an outdated relic of a bygone era, to be only scoffed at and ignored, in the way displayed in a comedy like, "The 40-Year Old Virgin." As though sexual purity was a mark of shame. "Do whatever you want, with whomever you want, and God does not really care." Nothing could be further from the truth. Proponents of this view, who abandon the clear commands of God (I Thess. 4:3-8; I Cor. 6:18-20) think they have found ultimate freedom but actually end up mere slaves to their lusts (Rom. 6:12-14). We have historically in the church done well warning against this danger. (See more by Sam Storms in his sermon, "Flee Sexual Immorality!" here).

But the opposite error is just as dangerous. It is a kind of *sexual repression*. Those who push this view see you as a single as a sort of androgynous, asexual being; like you should be Wendy or a "Lost Boy" in *Never-Never Land* who never matures sexually (Song of Songs 1:5-6; 8:8-9). Your relationship to your sex drive is viewed like the relation of Gollum to the ring he carries and obsesses over in Tolkien's famed fable, *The Lord Of The Rings*; it is an inherently dark force that could consume you, the only true escape from which is to reject ever holding it at all. Doug Rosenau notes that, "Historically, the Church has overemphasized behaviors when telling singles how to handle their sexuality," and suggests that we can, "Think of *repression* as trying to choke your sexual desires into submission. Ultimately, you'll grow tired and give in. This method is destined for failure." He further observes that, "Single adults with this approach to godliness are often surprised when their sexual surges overwhelm their genuine desire to make godly choices in their behavior. Unfortunately, they've never learned to make godly choices motivated from God's heart. They've simply *repressed* their sexual feelings and behaviors rather than accepting and disciplining them." We might also add that if/when they do marry, the baggage of their sexual repression can becomes a veritable minefield that they then have to walk through with their spouse.

To the single person, the message shaped by the "repression" approach can easily sound like this; "God created something. It's good. It's pleasurable. And he won't let you have it." This sounds strikingly like what Satan said about the fruit in the garden, as he tried to convince the woman that God was holding back something she could have, apart from God, enjoyed (Gen. 3:4-6). He painted a picture of a God who withholds good, and thus, of a God who is not good himself. Is it any wonder that singles – *in droves* – conclude that God is not interested in their pleasure? They typically then either abandon the Christian sexual ethic altogether, or knuckle under to control their bodies, while growing bitter and increasingly convinced that they don't really even like this God who would keep back something so pleasurable from them (a state that is not even remotely more holy than indulgence). Both of these results can have deep and long-lasting consequences in a single person's heart.

Longman and Allender, in their excellent work, *God Loves Sex*, point out that in the Song of Songs, the woman invites the single ladies in the city to physically admire the man, while also warning them not to "awaken love" before it is time (5:8-6:1). This illustrates for us the important place of the appreciation of beauty and the appropriateness of sexual attraction, while also highlighting the dangers of crossing God's boundaries.

They further explain how the brothers in the Song have appointed themselves the "purity guardians" of the woman (not unlike how some in "purity culture" today so appoint themselves), but are ultimately misguided;

> The brothers may be well intentioned, but they are clueless, and their suspicion is unfounded. First, their worries are unfounded because the woman is a wall. She has determined to save herself for her marriage day. They are clueless because, far from being immature ("she has no breasts"), she is mature ("my breasts are like towers"). Likely this statement is operating on two levels: The brothers are clueless because they have not noticed their sister's body has matured. And equally, the brothers are clueless because they have failed to read the character of their sister. Tragically, it is often still the case that more effort is put toward defending virginity than nurturing a love for pleasure and honor. They are interacting with her as if she is promiscuous. Instead, she is sensual, aroused, and arousing while also being committed to honoring her body and the healthy expectations of her culture. She is both erotic and a woman of peace.

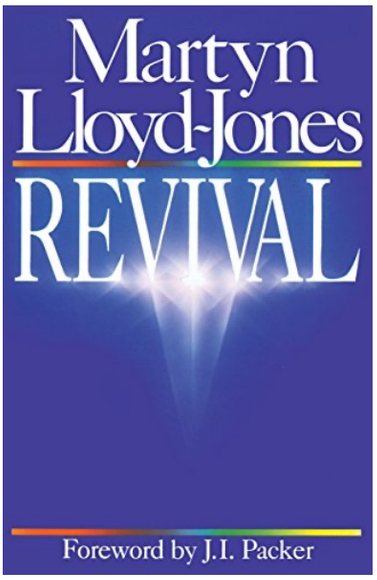
They use the Song to assert our holy sexuality against both of the dangers we have sketched out above (Song 8:10, "I was like a wall; now my breasts are like towers"). They then raise an important question;

> Christians sometimes misread Jesus's admonition not to lust (Matt. 5:27–30) as an admonition to stifle all desire, but lust is different from desire. Lust is an energy to possess and use, not one that attracts a man to a woman or a woman to a man. To tell singles not to desire sex or to forbid the poetic anticipation of it before marriage is to ask them to betray the way God made them. In other words, it is asking the impossible and the undesirable. It is impossible because God created us, male and female, with tremendous desire for sexual pleasure. Now he also, as we have repeated numerous times...reserved the "one-flesh" bond of sexual intercourse for marriage. That is why lust is forbidden, because it is a drive that plots and manipulates for the purpose of merely physical consummation. Desire, in contrast, is a God-given impulse that ultimately draws two people together. But what is a single man or woman to do with their desires in the typically long period between sexual maturity and marriage?

To answer that question, we need to understand two principles that might seem at first unrelated to sexuality but are actually core to our holy handling of it.

Two Principles To Employ - The Divine End Of Hunger And The "Jordan River" Principle Of Revival

The basic idea of "the divine end of hunger" is this - *all lesser hungers are mere reflections of our greatest hunger, that for God Himself.* That is, not only does God allow us the pleasure of partaking in things that we have a hunger for and thus enjoy, but he also has a deeper purpose in creating us with that hunger in the first place. The very reason why that hunger exists is in fact so that God might make known to us our hunger for him through it. Thousands of Christians headed in droves to the dessert when the church was no longer a persecuted minority in the fourth century, and not because they felt there was some inherent virtue in being naked, cold, starving and thirsty in the dessert. It was rather because they realized that a life where these hungers are rarely felt is a life that could miss out on experiencing the fullness of God. The same principle stands behind the biblical discipline of fasting. There is nothing sinful about food, or inherently holy about starvation. Rather, the experience of physical hunger, heightened and clarified by fasting, allows us to get some small taste of how hungry we already are for Christ, but without normally feeling it as we should. Fasting is less of a sacrifice of pleasure, and more a deferring of a lower pleasure as a pathway to a higher one. This leads us to a second principle we need to understand.



The basic idea of "the Jordan River" principle of revival is this – *the greater your experience of desperation and hunger, the greater potential for God to work in more powerful ways*. Martyn Lloyd Jones used the miraculous crossings of the Jordon River and the Red Sea as a paradigm for when revival comes. Using Joshua 4, he suggested that every period of revival is preceded by a time in the "wilderness," where we find that we are dependent upon God. That is the first factor. The second factor is what happened when Israel came up against the Red Sea/Jordan. Both factors must be present before God shows up in his greatest glory;

> It is not only after Egypt, or after the wilderness that God acts. The real moment, the moment of crisis, is when you are right up against the Red Sea, when you are actually on the border of Jordan. It is then he does it. You see, we can be forty years in the wilderness, but the mere fact of being in the wilderness does not produce it. No, it is not only in the wilderness, but when we have actually arrived at this critical position. If I may use modern terminology, God always seems to do this, when we are right up against it and so much against it that we are hopeless and helpless.

It takes both the pressure of the wilderness and boundary of the Jordan River to put one in a spot to receive the greatest manifestations of God's presence. That is, increased desire and yearning *for* God is a pathway to increased experience *with* God.

The Benefit Of The Sex Drive In Single Life

Now we can bring together these two principles – *The Divine End of Hunger* and *The Jordan River Principle* – to understand the value of the sex drive in single life and grasp why the two extremes we have sketched out above cannot bring full joy. Neither the path of *sexual indulgence* nor that of *sexual repression* is God's plan for your sex drive as a single. God's plan is rather that this hunger, like all hunger, should become a window through which you increasingly see your deeper and more pressing thirst for Christ. Glynn Harrison put it this way,

> In fact, the biblical picture of marital sexual union is nothing less than an *anticipation* of an even deeper union with the Divine. And whether we are married or single in this life, sexual desire is our inbuilt homing instinct for the Divine, a kind of navigation aid showing us the way home. You could think of it as a form of body language: our bodies talk to us about a greater reality of fulfilment and eternal blessing, and urge us to go there.

God has given single life a unique pathway to deeper experience of him – something akin to the spiritual benefits of an (impossible) decades-long fast from food. But this experience can be easily missed if you remove *either* the hunger of the wilderness *or* the boundaries of the Jordan River. The well-meaning but misguided cry to repression will rob you of this blessing because it takes away your right to yearn. And the tempting but terribly flawed cry to indulgence will short-circuit this route to joy in your life because it robs your yearning of its ultimate end.

> "The sex drive in single life is undoubtedly a gift, yes; a cross-shaped gift. But never forget that in the logic of the Gospel, it is only the cross-shaped gifts that are followed by the power of empty tombs." (Tweet This)

A holy handling of your sex drive is not just a matter of trying not to break the rules, and always living "without" what everyone else seems to have. It's realizing rather that celibacy contains a path to the deepest experience of joy that can be known. When we *indulge* our passions and squelch them in lesser things, they lose their potential to point us to Christ. When we *repress* our passions, we forfeit the yearning that is meant to sanctify us. We fail to live "between the wilderness and the Jordan River," where God is most powerfully experienced. And the powerful experience of God, in the present, is what should truly motivate us to a holy handling of our sex drive.

Conclusion - You Have Not Lost Out

Singleness doesn't deprive you therefore, as though your sex drive were at best a waste in the present, and at worst a danger. Paul was convinced that as a Christian you already have in Christ the greater reality to which marriage only pointed as a sign (Eph. 5:31-32). It is not the burden of a cosmic accident that must only be borne and endured. The biblical perspective doesn't view the Christian sexual ethic as a "loss" for the single but recognizes instead that marriage contains one path to joy and sanctification, and single life contains a different but equal path to the same joy and sanctification. We each have our calling, the path "assigned" to us (I Cor. 7:17). One is not greater than the other, they are just different routes to the same end. In marriage the sex drive pulls you closer to your spouse, and you are able to imitate and reflect the God who is Trinity. Your sex drive deepens your relation and thus enables you to image the God who is eternally in communion with himself. But in Singleness the sex drive pulls you closer to God, and enable you to image the God who came incarnate in Christ, and lived on the earth as a single man. You are uniquely able to image the *incarnation* in single life.

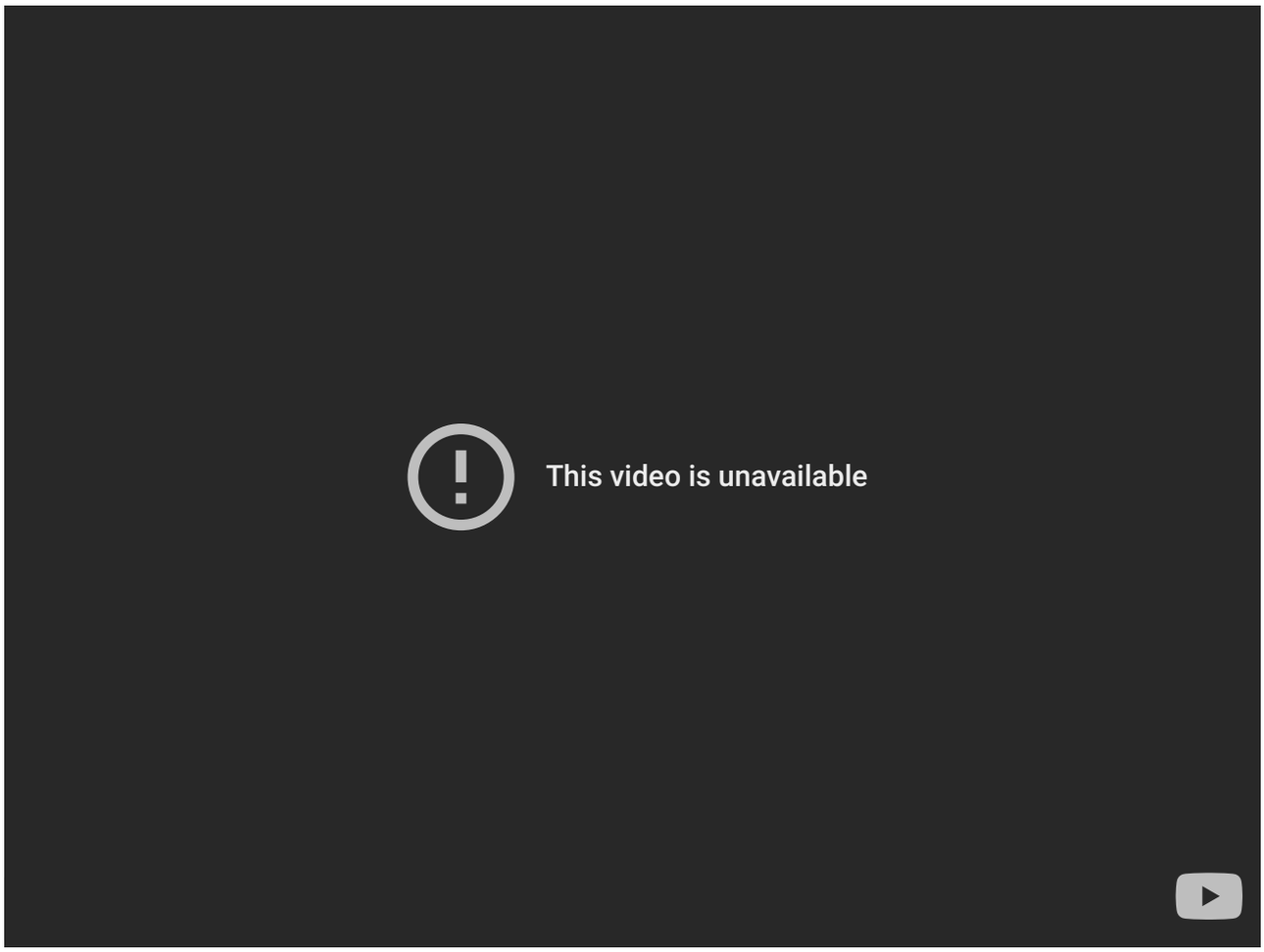
For the single man or woman to find sexual fulfillment, they will need to both *cultivate* their hunger in a healthy way and *restrain* their body so that they don't short-circuit the divine purpose of that hunger. To get the most out of your sex drive you must reject the extremes of both *repression* and *indulgence*.

Let me end by giving you a few summarizing thoughts;

- A holy handling of your sex drive views it more like a checking account and less like a trust fund.
- A holy handling of your sex drive rejects both the dangers of sexual indulgence and sexual repression.
- A holy handling of your sex drive lives between the Wilderness of Hunger and the Jordan River of Restriction.
- A Holy Handling of your sex drive recognizes that it is a cross-shaped gift, but remembers that only painful crosses can be followed by the power of empty tombs.
- A holy handling of your sex drive views it more as a responsibility than as a right.
- A holy handling of your sex drive is gained less as an event and more as a process.
- A holy handling of your sex drive prioritizes the shape and direction of your heart over the actions of your body.

Your relation to your sex drive is not like Gollum's relation to the ring of power; it is more like Frodo's via Bilbo. In God's sovereign wisdom, as Gandalf notes, "behind that," [the giving of your sex drive] "there was something else at work," something that allows both the single and the married to fully enjoy the substance of which the sign is only a shadow. You have not found your sexuality on accident. You were meant to find it. As Gandalf concludes;

"In which case you also were *meant* to have it.
And that may be an encouraging thought."



If You Enjoyed it, Share This Blog!

Facebook | Twitter | LinkedIn

And Subscribe to The Blog Here!

Blog RSS

How The Gospel Reshapes Your Worth...

The church does just tolerate...

Jesus > The Bible (Part 2)

Jesus is the core of the...

Jesus > The Bible (Part 1)

What is core to the Christian...

Exegesis	Bible	Kjv
Kjvo	Kjv Only	Textual Criticism
Gifts	Gospel	Fundamentalism
Preservation	Resurrection	Textus Receptus
Reformation	Luther	Neo-Fundamentalism
New Testament	Tongues	Apologetics
Church History	Eschatology	Kingdom
Tr Only	Tyndale	Apostolic Fathers
Commentaries	Easter	Gospels
Jesus	Luke	Sex
The Shire	Theology	Tr
Anabaptist	English Bible	Holy Week
Inaugurated Eschatology	King James Bible	King James Only
Lord Of The Rings	Luke-Acts	Missions
Objections To Christianity	Preaching	Protestant
Single	Singleness	Slander
Slavery	Song Of Songs	Technical Commentaries
Textual Essays	Translation	Acts
Already/Not Yet	Anabaptists	Apostles
Bible Study	Biblical Commentaries	Burgon
Ccm	Charismatic	Charity
Christmas	Christology	Chronology Of The Life Of Christ
Church History \	Contemporary Issues	Cross
Cursing	D. A. Carson	Demonization
Die Hard	Doctrine Of Preservation	End Times
Exegesos	Exegsis	Faith
Fathers	Fundamentaism	Gordon Fee
Gospel Contradictions	Greek	Hands
Historical Jesus	Historical Theology	History
Homosexuality	Journal Of Travels	Kingdom Chronicles
Kingdom Of God	Kjvonly	Lewis
Liturgy	Marriage	Matthew
Mattthew	Minimal Facts	Music
Nt	Oh My God	Omg
Paraphrase	Pastor	Paul
Philosophy	Polycarp	Praying
Psalms	Radicals	Reformers
Satire	Sermon Notes	Sex Drive
Sexuality	Single Life	Singles
Spiritual Gifts	Spirituality	Strongs
Synoptic Problem	Taking The Lords Name In Vain	Tattoo
Text	The Doctrine Of Preservation	The Power Of The Tongue
The Singer	Translation Methods	Tro
Webster's	William Tyndale	Word Studies
Words	Worship	

1 Comment Sort by Oldest

Add a comment...

Carolyn Betz

What a beauitful, encouraging post. Thank you for going beyond the surface basics that are often given to Christian singles to work with and diving into the deep end. Thank you for sharing from the Word (and Lord of the Rings!). Knowing that my sexuality has a purpose, even in singlehood, makes a world of difference.

Like · Reply · 1 · 1y

Facebook Comments plugin