

Christian Single

by Justin Fung

[adapted from “Being Single,” a sermon delivered at The District Church, July 20, 2013]

PART 1: AN APOLOGY

My friend [Eugene Cho](#) joked that it can sometimes seem like single is actually a compound word, made up of two parts: “SIN and GLE.” And Erin Dufault-Hunter, one of my ethics professors at Fuller, said in a class, **“Being single in evangelical culture is one of the loneliest lives a person can lead.”** That’s a reality that I’ve experienced at various points in my life; that may be a reality that you’ve experienced too—maybe that’s a reality that you’re experiencing **right now**.

This week I asked this on social media: “What burning thought/question/issue do/did you have as a single person?” A few folks responded, including some pastor friends around the country. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, many responses were very similar. In fact, they were questions that I’ve asked God at various points in my own story:

- “How long will I have to wait?”
- “Why me? What have I done to ‘deserve’ this?”
- “Did I miss my chance w/ so-and-so?”

I want to begin this blog series with an apology. I’m sorry for where we as the church have failed to provide a safe space for single people to be who God has created them to be. I’m sorry that we have not always provided a shelter and shield from the messages that say:

- there must be something wrong with you, or
- you’re not good enough, or
- there’s only one person and you may have missed your chance.

And I’m sorry that we have not always challenged you—in love—to **refuse** to listen to the messages that say you should have as much fun (read: sex) as you can before you ‘settle down’ for a life of boring monogamy, **to refuse** to be conformed to the mindset of the world that says sex is just one appetite among many that just needs to be fed, and **to discover** what life as lived to its full potential really looks like. **I’m sorry**.

Please know that it is our heart as [The District Church](#) to **provide a home and a family for everyone**, wherever you may be on your journey of faith and whatever your relationship status. I’m sorry if we’ve ever communicated that life doesn’t begin until you say, “I do.” Speaking as a pastor, I’m sorry on behalf of the church—and speaking as a pastor of The District Church, I’m sorry on behalf of our church; and I pray that wherever you are, God begins a work of healing in you for whatever harm has been done to you—intentionally or unintentionally—by the church or those in it.

Through this series, we have intentionally tried *not* to focus exclusively on romantic relationships for the simple reason that this is what the world—and, actually, the church sometimes—already does, placing an overemphasis on romance solving every problem or on meeting the one who will complete you. Fact #1: you are an incomplete, flawed, and broken person. Fact #2: you will not find your completion in another incomplete, flawed, and broken person. Pastor and author Tim Keller writes:

the picture of marriage given [in the Bible] is not of two needy people, unsure of their own value and purpose, finding their significance and meaning in one another’s arms. If you add two vacuums to each other, you only get a bigger and stronger vacuum, a giant sucking sound. (*The Meaning of Marriage*, 52)

The early church theologian Augustine wrote:

You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

We are made for God, and God alone will truly satisfy the deepest longings of our souls. And that’s the starting point for where we’re going.

PART 2: NOT A WAITING ROOM

Have you ever been told any of the following?

- “Singleness is a time God gives you to focus on him.”
- “If you are in the right place with God, it will happen.”
- “You’ll meet the one when you give it up to God.”

These are things that people say—and I’ve certainly been on the receiving end—because they want to make you feel better, to encourage you that there’s a purpose for what you’re experiencing or something bigger going on, and it’s true that there probably *is* a purpose and there *is* something bigger going on.

But:

- Isn’t everyone supposed to focus on God, not just singles?
- Doesn’t everyone—single or married—have things that God is teaching them, things that they need to work on, sinful habits and addictions that God wants to break?
- Do married people or people who are dating get a pass because they’ve met someone special?
- Is a relationship some kind of reward for achieving a higher level of consciousness, like you’ve jumped through all the hoops and now you get the prize at the end?
- Is God someone to be negotiated with, a slot-machine God who just wants you to at least **want** to give up idolizing or idealizing relationships, and then he’ll give you “the desires of your heart”?

Let me be clear about this, contrary to the narrative of Hollywood romantic comedies and a lot of shows we see on TV and even to the narrative of church culture:

Marriage, or even a romantic partner, is not the ultimate goal of life.

That is not the only thing you were created for; that is not where your story ends.

- When Jesus is asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”, his response is not, “Get married,” but rather: **“Love the Lord your God with everything you’ve got and everything you are, and love your neighbor as yourself.”**
- When the prophet Micah says to the people of Israel (6:8), “God has told you what is good and what he requires of you,” it isn’t, “Find fulfillment in a man—or a woman,” but rather: **“Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.”**

Singleness is not a waiting room for the ultimate destination of marriage. The ultimate destination is a new heaven and a new earth, it’s fully transformed hearts and lives and bodies, it’s when God’s rule and God’s kingdom are fully realized on earth as it is in heaven. The waiting room is this present age, where we groan with all creation for our restoration to be complete. And the journey is one of becoming more like Jesus, learning to live and love more like Jesus, inviting others into this life-giving relationship that we’ve found with Jesus, while we wait—and we do wait!—for him to come back.

Singleness is not a waiting room, and on a purely practical level, let me say this: **the issues that you face as a single person are not magically going to go away if and when you meet what my mom likes to refer to as “a special friend,”** if you like it and you **do** put a ring on it.

- If you’re insecure as a single person and think that getting married will solve that problem, you’re simply projecting onto your future partner the requirement that they feed your insecurity and bolster your sense of self-worth, and that’s not the foundation of a healthy relationship.
- If you’re all about yourself now and think that you’ll change when you meet the right person, God have mercy on your spouse.

Singleness is not a waiting room; let God work on you right now.

PART 3: NOT A TERMINAL DISEASE

Public Service Announcement: Singleness is not a terminal disease.

It can be real hard; it can be real lonely; it has its challenges. And the church has too often elevated marriage and romantic relationships far above where they were meant to be, and this has usually been unintentional but no less damaging. I remember early in seminary when I wrote a paper and in it, I concluded that, for some reason that I couldn't quite place, there was a sense in which I wouldn't consider myself a grown-up until I was married and had kids. I'd never been told that, but that was the reality I observed in church culture: when folks who were single would get asked if they'd met anybody yet, and if they said no, you'd get this really thinly-veiled reaction of pity and maybe a "Well, I'll be praying for you!"

In Jesus' day and culture, marriage was the norm too. In fact, people in Jesus' day were getting married **at least** ten years earlier—the average age for the American woman to marry is around 27 and for American men, it's almost 29, but in first century Palestine, it was usually just around or just after puberty. Tim Keller writes:

Nearly all ancient religions and cultures made an absolute value of the family and of the bearing of children. There was no honor without family honor, and there was no real lasting significance or legacy without leaving heirs. Without children, you essentially vanished—you had no future. The main hope for the future, then, was to have children. In ancient cultures, long-term single adults were considered to be living a human life that was less than fully realized.

It was in this culture and in this environment that Jesus remained single his entire life. And if Jesus was the most human of us all, the truest human being to ever live, and if he was single, then singleness **cannot** be looked at as a terminal disease or as some kind of half-life.

But I do wonder what people thought about this man, still unmarried long after he's supposed to be, hanging out with kids and adulterous women and other folks who were not highly regarded in society—and trying to teach about Scripture and God and how to live. *Who is this guy? Who does he think he is?* **Yet Jesus never addressed this.** Could it be that his personal relationship status wasn't the main thing that defined him?

The Apostle Paul—who was also single—**did** address it; he had to respond to a church where people were asking about it. In 1 Corinthians 7, he writes about single people and married people and about each person having a "gift"—and this is where we find the root of that phrase, "the gift of singleness." That's right: **singleness is not a terminal disease; singleness is a gift!** Now, if you're single, you may be rolling your eyes like I've done countless times in the past because you've heard talks about how singleness is a gift and you're like, "This is not a gift I want! Can I return this even if I don't have the receipt?"

But this passage has often been misunderstood, because Paul says that **marriage is also a gift**; and the fact that something is a gift doesn't make it any easier to navigate—ask a married person!

The gift is the present.

(See what I did there?)

The gift is where you are right now. We always spend our time dwelling in some other state: the perfect relationship, the perfect house, the perfect job; the next promotion, the next raise, the next vacation. And yet a life of contentment is possible: as Paul writes in Philippians 4:11, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have." The secret? He reveals this two verses later: "I can do all things through God who strengthens me." Every moment is a gift, every situation can be a gift, God is working all things for the good of those who love him, even those places that are not very comfortable or are downright difficult.

If you're single right now, you have the gift of singleness—congratulations! Unfortunately, **this doesn't mean you won't face fear**: fear of commitment, fear of being hurt, fear of limiting your options, fear of missing out, fear of making a bad choice, because **every** human being faces those things.

For most of my life, my greatest fear was that I would be alone, and that drove me to desperately want to be in a relationship. My first relationship didn't happen until I was 19 and in college, and while in many respects it was a healthy relationship, it wasn't until afterwards that I realized I'd been looking to women for the soul affirmation that only God can give. Even now, at 30, in a dating relationship, even though my relationship with God is as tight as it's ever been, and even though God has dealt with a lot of the insecurities and uncertainties that drove me in my teenage years and into my twenties, I still occasionally see that old fear of being alone rear its ugly head and make me want to try to control this relationship, try to make it look the way I want it to.

And in those moments, I'm reminded that Jesus tells his followers that we would never be alone, that "As you do as I command, as you do life with me, as you seek first the kingdom of God, I am with you **always** through my Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). And I'm reminded that Jesus intended his people to be community for one another. World-renowned and widely-respected pastor and theologian John Stott, who died last year aged 92, was single his whole life, and he said [this](#):

God created us as social beings. Love is the greatest thing in the world. For God is love, and when he made us in his own image, he gave us the capacity to love and to be loved. So we need each other. Yet marriage and family are not the only antidotes to loneliness.

Being single does not need to be the same thing as being lonely. We are the body of Christ **together**, intended to complement and support and uphold each other. And so in that context, among friends and by the grace of God, I'm reminded that I can let go of my need for control, and I can trust God.

Singleness is not a terminal disease. (Thanks be to God.)

PART 4: SEX

Statistically, [most single adults have had sex](#). Some of you are in relationships where you're having sex now; others of you have had sex before—maybe it was good, maybe it was terrible; and some of you really wish you could have sex. My hope today is that, regardless of what has already happened, we can have a biblical understanding of and approach to sex, because what happens next is also pretty important—actually, more important.

It's an interesting thing being a single 30-year-old pastor in a church full of young, smart, good-looking people, in a city full of young, smart, good-looking people, in a culture that tells you that you need to be young, smart, and good-looking in order to find someone else who's young, smart, and good-looking so that you can "find God's match for you" (anyone seen that tagline recently?) and/or just have a little good old harmless fun between the sheets.

Accepting singleness as a gift—living into who God created you to be—doesn't mean being free from sexual desires and urges; it doesn't mean you'll be miraculously free from hormones and chemical reactions in your brain and your body; it doesn't mean you'll be rescued from the cultural bombardment that we're all faced with: on billboards, in ads, on the internet. I know how difficult it is to be hit by wave after wave of messages that say you need to have sex in order to fully enjoy life; that you're somehow incomplete if you haven't had sex; or that it's just another appetite like being hungry or being thirsty—it's a physical urge that just needs to be satisfied.

I realize this may be a very sensitive topic for some of you, but the perspective that says, *What happens in the bedroom is nobody else's business!* doesn't really work for a people who say, as Christ-followers, "**All** to Jesus I surrender; I surrender **all**."

So here's what I think the Bible says about sex—and if you disagree, talk to me, email me, dialog with me; let's keep encouraging each other to find better and fuller and more holistic ways of following Jesus.

First, if Jesus was single and celibate his entire life, for 15-20 years after his hormones started kicking in, for 10-15 years after he was 'supposed' to be married and at least have some sort of outlet for his sexual urges, and if Jesus is

the most complete, most fulfilled, most content human being that ever lived, then you are **not** incomplete if you haven't had sex and you **can** live life to the full even without having sex.

And before you say, "Well, he was God," the author of Hebrews reminds us: "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (4:15).

And before you say, "Well, he didn't have the internet or magazines on which every single cover has the word 'Sex' on it, or he didn't date anyone so of course he wasn't tempted to have sex," you don't need those things to be tempted. As far as I'm aware, you have a mind, you are a sinner, and there is a devil: ergo, you will be tempted. **It is not a sin to be tempted; Jesus was tempted! It is a sin to *give in* to temptation, to entertain those thoughts and play them out and act upon them.** Martin Luther is reported to have said that you cannot stop birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.

Second, sex is not just an appetite like any other. This is clear from the way Scripture talks about it: Paul writes, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20). In fact, it is for these very reasons that Paul writes, one verse earlier, "Shun sexual immorality! Every other sin which a person commits is outside the body; but the one who commits sexual immorality sins against his or her own body."

I think God intended sex to be not only a way to procreate and have babies, but more importantly, as one of the most intimate and vulnerable and enjoyable expressions of commitment and trust and love. In the beginning, it says in Genesis, "The man and the woman were naked and unashamed" (2:25). That doesn't mean they were brazen about it, as is the common attitude today, which says, *It's just sex! What's the big deal?* Rather, it means that they had no fear in revealing all of who they were to one another. And the physical act of sex is symbolic of this closeness, allowing someone to get about as close as a person can get, "becoming one flesh."

Scientifically speaking, when two people have sex, not only is the chemical dopamine released, which makes you feel good, but also oxytocin, which is the bonding chemical, increasing commitment. That's why, relationally and emotionally, if you have sex with someone, you're more likely (and of course there are exceptions) to feel a connection with that person. Relationships in which sex is a part are going to be a lot harder to end if they need to and they're going to hurt a lot more when they do, and relationships in which sex is the *main* thing tend to be self-serving rather than self-giving; and we see in the person of Jesus Christ that love is about putting the other's needs before our own. "We know love by this, that he [Jesus] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 John 3:16).

As Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, "Love is an act of the will, where you act lovingly even if you do not always feel loving. We tend to think love is a feeling, but it is not. Love is an action; love is something we do for others" (*God Has A Dream*, 78).

So **sex is not the same as love**. Sex is intended to be the most intimate and vulnerable *expression* of love, meant to be enjoyed in tandem with serving the other person and sacrificing for the other person and putting the other person's needs before your own. It's not that sex is bad as a single person and then good for married people. Sex was always intended to be a very good thing; so precious, in fact, that God wanted to protect it within the confines of a covenant relationship, where two people have committed to each other that, no matter what, they will see it through. When things are valuable, we take care of them: most of you treat your iPhones as valuable, even if that shows itself by putting it in a protective case so that it can take some punishment. Similarly with sex, if it is a good thing, if it is one of the best things in life—and I believe that it is—then it should be cared for, it should be protected, it should be enjoyed in the safest environment, that is, a committed covenant relationship.

Jamie the Very Worst Missionary wrote a couple of great blogs on sex ([here](#)¹ and [here](#)²). Here she's talking about waiting:

¹ <http://www.theveryworstmissionary.com/2013/03/sex.html>

... when you wait to have sex, you are creating an important connection between the very powerful urges to do things that feel really good and the ability to control those urges. **Otherwise known as self-control.** This practice of self-denial and delayed gratification makes you a healthier, more poised, and better moderated person. Ultimately, self-control is a character trait—or *ahem*, *fruit of the spirit*, for the Christian folk—that will help you be a better long-term partner in your 'til-death-do-we-part relationship.

... we've done a really bad job of teaching about sex in the Church. Our approach has been to shame girls for having it, and shame boys for wanting it. And when the smart kids ask, "Why wait?", we shrug our shoulders like a hillbilly and say, "*Because the Bible says.*" Then we give the girls a purity ring and we give the boys nothing and we cross our fingers and hope they'll cross their legs. So dumb.

We've made virginity the goal, when it is purity that we should be aiming for; they're not the same thing. Sexual purity is a lifelong spiritual practice that doesn't begin or end with a single sex act, just as it doesn't begin or end on a wedding night. So when we are asked, "Why wait?", we should have an answer that empowers and prepares people to choose wisely **for a lifetime.**

So her advice for her kids is to wait and, by waiting, to cultivate self-control and to grow as a healthy, mature human being who's capable of rising above the animal instincts that tell you that you can't do anything other than what you feel. She says:

the person you're with right now ... is **not** the last person you will have those feelings toward, and you need to know what it feels like to **not** act on those feelings, because a day will come when you will have to exercise self-control for the sake of the relationship you've given your life to—and, trust me, you will want to know how to do that. Do not relinquish that power without a fight.

Now, please don't hear me saying that what married people do in the bedroom doesn't matter. It's entirely possible to be selfish with sex as a married person, just as **it's entirely possible to live a life of integrity and wholeness and joy as a single person without sex.** And as C.S. Lewis puts it in *Mere Christianity*:

There is no getting away from it; the Christian rule is, 'Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence.'

PART 5

Being married is a gift, a viable, biblical way of living, if submitted to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Being single is also a gift, a viable, biblical way of living, if submitted to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

This doesn't mean it will be easy, it doesn't mean that there won't be challenges, or that we'll love every minute of it. But in every circumstance and every situation, it is possible to be content, to trust God, to live as if Jesus really has made a full life available to us.

For the longest time, I thought of being in a relationship as a reward. I wouldn't have phrased it that way, but I can see that in hindsight. I went through middle school and high school thinking, "Why is this taking so long, God? I'm doing everything I'm supposed to: not sleeping around, not doing drugs, treating people well, going to church regularly, being part of youth group, memorizing Bible verses." No girlfriend.

And then in college, six months after I came back to faith, I was in a relationship that lasted for a number of years and got pretty serious. But that didn't work out, and I was left saying, "What happened, God? We were both Christians, we were both in leadership at our church, we were both trying to follow you." And I was single again.

² <http://www.theveryworstmissionary.com/2013/06/sex-pt-2-why-wait.html>

A year later, I moved to California to go to seminary and my first month there I met a lot of smart, young, good-looking people who were choosing to follow God and preparing for ministry of some kind. But no girlfriend.

I decided I must need to take a six-month dating fast to refocus on God, and I did—put all thoughts of relationship out of my head for half a year. After that, I thought the first person I met and liked would be the one—but nope.

And this pattern continued:

- God broke my heart for issues of injustice and poverty—how about now? *Nope.*
- I left a fantastic community in California to move to DC to do advocacy work at a Christian social justice organization, what I felt like God was calling me to—how about now? *Nope.*
- Discovered my calling as a pastor over two years ago at The District Church—how about now? *Nope.*

I remember talking to an old college professor and saying,

I just feel like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. I've done everything you asked of me and yet you've withheld your best. I've always tried to treat women with honor; I've worked to become more content, to learn to wait and be self-controlled; I'm a pretty well-rounded person. So ... why no girlfriend?

I was acting as if I *deserved* a relationship, as if a relationship—and a marriage—was a right because I was part of the club and because I'd met all the criteria. And my prof said, "Well, what did the father say to the elder son?"

I went back and looked at Luke 15:31:

Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

And I cried because I remember a year before the conversation with my prof, talking to Aaron and Amy at the park as Elijah played, and I remember saying, "99% of life is in place; all I need is a someone to partner with me in what God's calling me to do. All I need is for God to bring that last piece and then life will be complete—doesn't he want me to be happy?" And they lovingly pointed out that that's a pretty selfish and self-centered perspective to have.

But isn't that how things go? We always tend to focus on what we *don't* have rather than on giving thanks for what we *do* have. The devil would like nothing more than for us to stop acknowledging the blessings we've received and clamor for what we don't have or what we think we need. But God says to each one of us: **"You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."**

I'm still not married. I'm in my first relationship in eight years, and it's really great. But life—just as when I wasn't dating—continues to have its ups and downs, its challenges and joys, its constraints and freedoms. They're a little different, of course, but the point remains: being in a relationship is not a higher existence but it is a gift, just as being married is not a higher existence but it is a gift, just as being single and not in a relationship is not a higher existence but it is a gift. **You are more than your relationship status.**

Last year, in our *Sex, Love & Dating* series, we talked about how it's not about looking for the right person, but about becoming the kind of person the person you're looking for would be looking for. (Shall I run that by you again?) That's a good start, but it's not about becoming the right person so that you can meet the right person—marriage is not a right or a reward. Singleness is not a waiting room or a Petrie dish where God works on you until you're ready and then once he's done, you get transplanted into the real, grown-up world of marriage.

How do I know that?

1. This side of Christ's return, God's never done working on you.
2. More importantly, when I look at Jesus, my mentor, my role model, my Lord, my friend, I don't see a man desperately seeking a romantic partner. Jesus remained single and lived life to the full—the very thing he

came to give us; so it's possible, despite what the world may tell you, despite what you may be feeling, despite what others may say.

I wish we had more time and space, because I feel like I've only skimmed the surface, that there are so many other things I want to talk about. Let me give you two practical tips real quick, though:

1. **Don't compare yourself to other people.** We're not in competition with one another: it's not about trying to out-do one another, get married first or stay single the longest, not about who can find their partner quickest or soonest. Jon Acuff advises, "Don't compare your beginning to someone else's middle." We encourage each other and hold one another accountable as we all seek to do life as best we can together, to live life to the full together.
2. **Invest in friendships.** As I said at the beginning, we're created for relationship—with God and with one another—and we see that throughout Scripture: Jesus with Peter, James, and John; Paul with Barnabas, Silas, and Timothy. In my own life, there's absolutely no way I could do this without the love and support and accountability of close friends: male and female, single and dating and married and divorced, parents and those who never want to be parents. We are the body of Christ, and each of them is helping me to become more fully who God has created me to be just as I hope I do the same for them as a 30-year-old single guy.

I love this quote from Paige Brown, that's brutally honest and spot-on, and I'll close with this:

Let's face it: singleness is not an inherently inferior state of affairs. ... But I want to be married. I pray to that end every day. I may meet someone and walk down the aisle in the next couple of years because God is so good to me. I may never have another date ... because God is so good to me. There's the balance.