



THE CHURCH OF THE  
RESURRECTION  
WASHINGTON, DC

## The Gift & Calling of Celibacy

1 Corinthians 7; Luke 20:34-36

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August 20, 2017

When I was in college, and one of the guys from our dorm had been turned down for a date, or hadn't been on a date for some time, we would sometimes bring him into one of our rooms, sit him down and say, very seriously, "We think you may have...The Gift." We didn't need to say more – this was a Baptist college, and so we knew our Bibles, and had read 1 Corinthians 7 in which Paul talks about celibacy being "a gift". But just in case we hadn't made ourselves clear, we would sing to our friends – to the tune of Roxette's "She's Got the Look" – "He's Got the Gift." This was adolescent Baptist humor at it's finest and, at the risk of over-explaining the joke, we laughed because it was *ironic*. To talk of celibacy as a "gift" was a joke. Celibacy was the gift nobody wanted – indeed, we thought, who would want such a thing? (My generation was the start of the True Love Waits campaigns. But waits for what – the gift of *celibacy*? I don't think so.)

Here's what I would like for us to think about tonight: did Paul's listeners laugh to themselves when he referred to celibacy as being a gift? Or would they have taken his affirmations of celibacy – to be unmarried and sexually chaste – with absolute seriousness and, if so, what should that mean for us?

Our New Testament passage tonight, from 1 Corinthians 7, is the text in which celibacy is referred to as a gift, and so we will look at that in particular.

Now, let's remember, Paul is talking about marriage and celibacy to a group of Christians who, for the most part, are facing some different cultural assumptions than us. For one thing, the infant mortality rate in the first century was sky high, and so for the population of a city like Corinth to simply remain stationary, each woman would need to produce an average of 5 children. This meant that women needed to begin having children at a young age, and would thus frequently marry at the age of 14 or 15 years old.<sup>1</sup>

Marriage, therefore, was an intensely practical calculation, as it was for the entire world until very recently, and not about individual fulfillment or happiness. You got married in order to create legitimate heirs to ensure the perpetuation of your society, your family's name, and your family's property. Marriage, in other words, *kept the world going*.

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<sup>1</sup> See Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (Columbia University Press, 1988).

Then Christianity came along, and presented the idea of a New World breaking into this one. The resurrection of Christ from the grave was a great disruption, and the early Christians began to think about what this meant for a new social order. Many assumed that the full consummation of God's kingdom was potentially coming very soon and, therefore, some early Christian groups sought to hasten this process of social transformation by renouncing all sexual activity in order to bring marriage and childbirth to an end—because if marriage and childbirth comes to an end, the fabric of organized society begins to crumble. This sort of apocalyptic thinking was in the air in certain quarters of the first century church.

Other groups of Christians were suspicious of marriage for a different set of reasons. Christian converts who had studied with the Stoics or other schools of Greek philosophy were often deeply suspicious of the body. They believed that anything to do with the body distracted the person's soul from more lofty pursuits, and therefore if a person wanted to be *truly* spiritual, then even marital intimacy would be renounced.<sup>2</sup>

These ways of thinking were almost certainly influential among some in the church at Corinth. Piecing things together from what Paul is saying here in chapter 7, it sounds like influential voices were telling folks in the congregation: (1) don't get married; (2) if you are married, don't have marital relations with each other; and (3), if you think that you are not going to be able to practice abstinence while being married, then get divorced.

And so one of Paul's main agendas in this chapter is to say no, no, no. If you're married, stay married! And moreover, do not deprive each other of marital intimacy except maybe occasionally, and briefly, for periods for prayer.

I briefly considered just ending the sermon there. (You that are married, let's go out and really live out this passage this week...)

But that would be to ignore something else in this passage. As Paul is making the primary argument about the validity of marriage, along the way he very clearly *also* affirms the call to celibacy for some Christians. He is very careful his wording, however, because while he wants to affirm celibacy, he does not want to affirm it for the same reasons that the Corinthians affirm it. While the Corinthians affirm celibacy perhaps as a way to hasten the demise of the old social order, or perhaps as a way to elevate the soul over the body, Paul wants no part of celibacy for those reasons.

But he also wants to allow that there is much good that can come from being celibate. Look at verses 6 -7: "Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another."

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<sup>2</sup> See Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Rev. Ed. (Eerdmans, 2014) and Richard Hays, *Interpretation: First Corinthians* (Westminster John Knox, 2011).

And so Paul says clearly that celibacy is to be affirmed – “I wish that all” – and he means this rhetorically, not literally – “I wish that all were like me, but it is for those for whom it is a gift from God.”

Now, Paul does not go to any great lengths in this passage to develop this idea of celibacy being a gift, but I want us to simply pause for a moment on that concept, and think briefly about the ways in which celibacy might be a gift.

Too often, I think, we are too simplistic, and think of celibacy as a gift of subtraction versus addition. By subtraction I mean that we assume that the gift of celibacy is simply for those who somehow have less sexual desire than others. And while this might be true in some cases, books such as *The Cloister Walk* by Kathleen Norris, or *The Hidden Life of Nuns* by Cheryl Reed, which explore the life of celibate men and women in contemporary religious orders, show that this is not the case. Most of those who are celibate are not so because of a lack of sexual desire, but because they have been given the gift of an *expanded* vision of what they can do, and the breadth of impact they can have, by being freed from the more narrow commitments of marriage and family. And rather than repressing or ignoring their desires, most speak of using spiritual disciplines to redirect and channel those desires into love and service of others. In Cheryl Reed’s book in particular, she interviews activist sisters who teach in universities, work as prison chaplains or minister to drug addicts in urban safe houses, and for them the gift of celibacy has *added* their world, expanded their impact, and has increased their community.

The gift of celibacy is, in other words, a gift of freedom. As Paul writes in verse 28ff, “If you marry, you have not sinned...Yet I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried person is anxious [only] about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord.” In the case of Paul, it meant that he did not have to take into account a wife or children when the Spirit beckoned him to preach in dangerous parts of the Roman Empire. Paul didn’t have to worry about making enough money to afford piano lessons and college for little Paul junior.<sup>3</sup> Time that he would have spent in relation to his wife could be spent cultivating friendships and mentoring others. Paul affirmed celibacy in that it can free one to serve Christ and the world more expansively.

I once read an interview with John Stott, the Christian statesman who died in 2011, in which he talked about his own call to celibacy. He said:

“In spite of rumors to the contrary, I have never taken a solemn vow or heroic decision to remain single! On the contrary, during my 20s and 30s, like most people, I was expecting to marry one day. In fact, during this period I twice began to develop a relationship with a lady who I thought might be God’s choice of life-partner for me. But when the time came to make a

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<sup>3</sup> I heard John Piper use this description of Paul, once.

decision, I can best explain it by saying that I lacked an assurance from God that he meant me to go forward. So I drew back. And when that had happened twice, I began to believe that God meant me to remain single. Looking back, with the benefit of hindsight, I think I know why. I could never have traveled or written as extensively as I have done if I had had the responsibilities of a wife and family.”

I once read a letter from Billy Graham to John Stott, in which this freedom for ministry was acknowledged. Graham wrote to Stott, “Thank you for your November letter. Just reading it made me a bit exhausted! How do you do it, my friend? If you had a wife, five children, five in-laws, and 15 grandchildren, it would be rather difficult. Please forgive me if I am not able to keep up with you!”

Here is the question, though. If we can recognize celibacy as a gift – not for all but for some – why does it not occupy greater prominence, or is not afforded greater respect, in Christian circles (outside of the Roman Catholic Church)?

There are many things we could point out. Some might point out the ways that the Church has been deeply shaped by a surrounding culture that views sexual expression is a necessity, as essential to human happiness. And so even the very idea of saying no to that desire, as a means towards a life of greater love and greater impact, has become increasingly implausible in today’s world.

But I think another hurdle to viewing celibacy as a gift is the way in which relatively recent historical factors have elevated the intimacy of marriage over *other* forms of intimacy and community that used to be available, but are today in shorter supply. Therefore, a life of celibacy today is potentially without the kinds of support that once made it more possible. It can therefore feel to many that marriage is the *only* option for experiencing lifelong community, intimacy, and bonds of affection.

It was not always this way. As Stephanie Coontz points out in her book *Marriage: A History*, “through most of history, it was considered dangerously antisocial to be too emotionally attached to one’s spouse, because that diluted loyalties to family, neighbors, and society at large. Until the mid-19th-century, the word “love” was used more frequently to describe feelings for neighbors, relatives and fellow church members than spouses. The emotional lives of Victorian middle-class women revolved around female bonds that overshadowed the “respectful affection” they felt for their husbands. Men, too, sought intimacy outside the family circle. A man could write a letter to his fiancé recounting his pleasure at falling asleep on the bosom of his best friend without fearing that she might think him gay. When couples first began to go on honeymoons in the 19th century they often took family and friends along for company.”

There are historical reasons for this. Until around 1850, the main requirements most Americans had for their marriage revolved around food production and shelter. If you had emotional

connection with your spouse that was a bonus for your marriage, but was not its central purpose. From around 1850 onward, however, Americans shifted from largely rural to urban lives, and as people grew wealthier and more mobile, and as other social institutions became stronger, people began looking to marriage primarily for love and companionship, even as other forms of community became more central. Furthermore, we have all been impacted by Freud more than we think. Freud saw sexual desire as the key behind any and all relationships, and that fear and suspicion that Freud introduced still haunts friendship and other platonic relationships even today.

All of this means that the breadth of intimacy and community that everyone needs, whether they are married or single, is especially difficult today. It puts an incredible weight on marriage to deliver a comprehensive range of goods, and it makes any consideration of celibacy as a gift that much more implausible.

So, what might we do to address these hurdles? There are no easy answers, and no quick fixes. But if we are to take scripture seriously and accept that celibacy is truly a gift, how might we enable it to flourish in the church today? I want to suggest two things.

First, we must continue to emphasize the biblical and theological truth of the Church as first family. At our most recent parish retreat we talked about the unofficial motto of Rez being "God sets the lonely in families," and that is exactly right. An emphasis on the church as first family does not mean that the biological family is not important, or that we should not work to nurture and protect marriage and family, especially as it is under assault in today's culture. Paul makes clear in our passage tonight the ongoing validity and importance of marriage.

But Paul's affirmation of celibacy also makes clear that getting married and having a biological family is not the "be all, end all", and in this Paul was in direct continuity with Jesus. As we heard in our gospel reading tonight (Luke 20), Jesus said, "In this age people marry and are given in marriage, but those in the age to come will neither marry nor be given in marriage." Why is the future not marriage? Because complete union with God – of which marriage is a sacramental sign – will be fully realized. We will not simply come to church for a weekly Eucharist in the Age to Come – why? Because we will be eternally feasting with Christ. Similarly, we will not be married in the age to come because we will achieve full union with the One we most deeply long for. In this respect, therefore, celibate disciples of Christ in this age stand as prophetic witnesses and reminders of humanity's future with God.

Of course, Jesus challenges the ultimacy of the biological family elsewhere, too. He said in Matthew 10 that he came to bring a sword that would separate parent from child, brother from brother. In Matthew 8 Jesus challenges a young man who has just lost his father to leave and follow him, forgoing the funeral. In Mark 3, Jesus' family appears at the scene of his busy ministry and calls for him, and Jesus says, "Who are my mother and my brothers? Here are my mother and my brothers!" he says to those seated around him. "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." In John 19, when Jesus is hanging on the cross he looks

down upon his mother and, instead of speaking to one of his biological brothers to care for his Mary, Jesus nods to his disciple John and says to his mother, “Woman, here is your son,” and to John, “Here is your mother.”

Thus, I would suggest that the ongoing challenge for the church today is to continue to put hands and feet to the church as family. How do we create deep, lasting, committed, stable contexts in which people can flourish whether they are single or married? I think we should probably be looking less for answers here, and more for *experiments*. I know of families that have purposefully bought houses big enough for more than just their biological family to live in, and who embed singles into their family in a long-term way. I know of others who have determined, in a way that is out of step with our highly mobile culture, to not move, to stay in one place, to create the kind of stability and community that can only come with time.

That’s the first practical consideration for acknowledging celibacy as a gift – to deepen our practice of the church as first family. A second consideration is to move beyond thinking about it as simply a binary choice between a vowed, lifelong call to singlehood, on the one hand – and, on the other hand, to automatically and unthinkingly assume that marriage is the right thing to do. Lauren Winner writes in her book *Real Sex*, “Perhaps we ought not fixate on the call to lifelong singleness. Some people, of course, are called to lifelong singleness, but more of us are called to singleness for a spell...Often, our task is to discern a call to singleness for right now, and that’s not so difficult. If you are single right now, you are called, right now, to be single—called to live a single life as robustly, and gospel-conformingly, as you possibly can.” Elsewhere she writes about the challenge to not allow our natural anxieties about getting married to distract us or rob us of the life we are to be living right now.

When I consider those words – to not allow our anxieties about the future rob us of the life we are to be living right now – they make me wonder if, perhaps, the challenge of living in seasons of celibacy – yet with a desire to get married – might actually be representative of a challenge for *all* of us in our spiritual lives more generally, and that is this: *how to I live with both contentment and hope in seasons that I would like to be different, but over which I have limited control?*

I suspect that many of us will find this to be a perennial challenge in our relationship with God. Because even the person who desires to get married, and then experiences the fulfillment of that desire by getting married, will *eventually* experience new seasons they would like to be different, but over which they have limited control. Perhaps it will be a challenging season in their family, or with their health or career. And the challenge will once again be: how to I live in *this* situation, right now, with both contentment *and* hope? How do I seek to make this situation better, being proactive, doing everything I can – while still operating out of a deep sense that, no matter what happens, I will be safe in God’s hands?

The question for those living in that in-between place between singleness and marriage is, in fact, simply one iteration of a question for *all* Christians: what we do with our desires, our

longings? We are desire-haunted creatures, who are never fully content no matter what state we are in. And the challenge, rather than seeking to muffle or assuage those desires with lesser things, is to allow them to turn us to God.

Henri Nouwen, before he died, reflected on these questions.<sup>4</sup> He suggested that we do the following: We sit with our pain and incompleteness and own it. We give up the false, messianic expectations that we will someday experience just the right combination of circumstances to ensure complete happiness. We commit ourselves to the ongoing work of prayer, sitting still long enough for restlessness to turn to restfulness. And we remember that this process is never done once and for all. It is something we enact time and time again, as we continually ask that all of our desires, ultimately, lead us more deeply into Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> See Henri Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love* (Doubleday, 1996).