

One January morning, in 2007, a man entered L'Enfant Plaza Metro Station in Washington, D.C. There was nothing about his appearance that made him stand out—he was wearing jeans, a long-sleeved t-shirt, and a Nationals baseball hat. He stopped at the top of the escalator, stood by the wall and proceeded to open his violin case—he would serenade the morning commuters in the hopes of making a few dollars for the day.

He played for next 45 minutes and during that time over 1000 people walked by. A number of people threw money into the case, but few stopped, indeed, it was hard to know if anyone really heard what he was playing. After playing his sixth and final song, he counted the money—a grand total of \$32.17—packed his violin and melted into the crowd.

The violinist was none other than Joshua Bell, one of the finest violinists of his generation. Just days before he had played to a capacity audience in Boston, but here he struggled to compete with the busy lives of people. Every piece he played was a masterpiece, music that had stood the test of time for centuries, and he played these masterpieces on an instrument that was itself a masterpiece: a Stradivarius worth \$3.5 million dollars.

Bell's performance had been arranged by The Washington Post as an experiment in context, perception, and priorities—the Post wanted to know whether beauty would be recognized and appreciated if it came to people in a plain, unexpected, setting, and at an inconvenient time.

It was clear from the experiment that even a cultured crowd of commuters didn't recognize the beauty right in front of them—many of them were professors and high ranking government officials. These commuters were so accustomed to riding the same train and getting ready for their day that Bell's music was in one ear and out the other.

Jonathan Grant writes, “Joshua Bell's unexpected performance in the Washington D.C. subway is something like the Christian vision of sexuality today. It appears dull and inconvenient as people bustle past on their way to seemingly better and more important things. And yet if we pause to really listen, we might perceive this vision represents the very music of heaven.”¹

Talking about sexuality in the church is challenging because there are so many dimensions to the conversation—cultural, social, political, and personal—all of these dimensions shape the way we think about the nature, purpose, or necessity of sex for human fulfillment. On the one hand, teaching a Biblical perspective isn't particularly difficult; the Bible is remarkably clear on the subject. On the other hand, teaching a Biblical perspective is incredibly difficult simply because, on this subject, many Christians reject the Bible's authority.

Grant writes, “Whereas the traditional Christian conviction is that Scripture is our primary text, so that we seek to interpret and align our lives with its truth, our culture...has reversed this dynamic. Within the modern mind-set, our lives and personal experiences have

¹ Gene Weingarten, “Pearls Before Breakfast,” *Washington Post*, April 8, 2007, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/pearls-before-breakfast-can-one-of-the-nations-great-musicians-cut-through-the-fog-of-a-dc-rush-hour-lets-find-out/2014/09/23/8a6d46da-4331-11e4-b47c-f5889e061e5f_story.html?utm_term=.16076b578ace

become the primary text; we seek to interpret and align Scripture in accordance with *this* truth... In this critical area it seems that Scripture cannot be allowed to contradict our deepest impulses.”²

We need to be vigilant in asking the question, “*What is our authoritative text?*” *Are we adapting our theology to better suit the culture, or, are we allowing theology to shape the way we think, desire, and act within the culture?*

Last week I held out two competing visions of sexuality—the one Cultural, and the other Christian; I highlighted three crucial disagreements between them.

a. The first disagreement has to do with the nature of reality itself (**Transcendence vs. Material**). Christians believe that God has created humanity and has established unchanging moral truths that provide a foundation for human conduct and a path to human flourishing—this includes boundaries concerning sex. The Cultural Vision rejects the notion of God, and consequently, the presence of unchanging moral truths—you and I should be free to do what feels right to us, as long we don’t harm anyone in the process.

b. I entitled the second disagreement, “**The Sovereign Self vs. Created For Relationship (with God and others)**”. Our culture operates by the assumption that maximizing individual freedom, and expanding the choices available to individuals, is the path to satisfaction and self-fulfillment. *Freedom is understood as the absence of restraint*. By contrast, the Bible teaches that self-fulfillment is impossible. We were created for committed relationship

with God and others—personal satisfaction cannot be found in living for yourself.

c. The third disagreement centres around **the nature and purpose of sex**. The Christian vision affirms that while sex is a good gift, from a good God, it is to be enjoyed within God’s appointed boundaries. *The Christian conviction is that God-honouring, life-enhancing sexuality finds its expression in the goodness of either celibate singleness or the life-long covenant of marriage between one man and one woman.*

The cultural vision defines sex as a natural, biological, force that should be embraced and expressed—to deny or repress this force is inauthentic, it does damage to your true self. Madonna once sang, “we’re living in a material world and I’m a material girl;” nowhere is this more true than when it comes to sex. Our culture insists that there is nothing transcendent about sex—in other words, it doesn’t serve a higher purpose, morality doesn’t even factor in.

Sex has come to be understood as an end in itself—it’s not primarily for one man and one woman in marriage, nor is it about procreation, it’s primarily about pleasure. The assumption is that there is a direct link between sexual activity and human fulfillment—if you’re not having sex, then you cannot experience the satisfaction and fulfillment you deserve. I want to pick up this thought as I shift into the subject of this morning’s sermon, namely, singleness and sexuality.

² Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision For Christian Relationships*, 34.

1. Singleness, Sexuality, and Satisfaction: Less than 50 years ago, if one wasn't married by the time they were in their early 20's, they were considered an old man or an old maid. Young adults, would you agree that the messaging is very different today? Our culture has lost its confidence in marriage and put its confidence in sex—marriage will not make you happy, but perhaps sex will! Our culture tells us that we would be happier keeping our options open, enjoying multiple partners; why come home to someone who will make demands on your time?

illus: Last Summer, a good friend of mine took his 10 year old son to a Whitecaps game—the stadium's roof was open, the sun was shining, and they were enjoying the game. But before long, he began to hear bits and pieces of a conversation going on between the three guys seated behind him. He began to listen a little closer. These three guys were doctors, in their middle 30's, and they were in Vancouver for a medical conference but they weren't talking about the conference—they were talking about Tinder.

Are you familiar with Tinder? Tinder is a downloadable App for your smartphone that many are using to connect with men or women who are looking to hook up for a one time sexual encounter. These guys were talking about their sexual encounters while in Vancouver and which cities provided the best encounters. After a few minutes of hearing their conversation, my friend politely turned around and pointed to his son saying, "*Guys, I'm here with my 10 year old son... would you mind sharing your stories at some other time?*" To his relief they got the message and changed the subject.

Our culture's consistent message is that human beings are fulfilled and satisfied only *if* they obey their desires. This conviction was

summed up perfectly by Sprite's recent marketing campaign—*Obey your thirst!* The idea being pressed upon us is that we do damage to our self by denying our desires.

illus: the story is told in ancient Greek mythology of King Midas. Midas did a favour for one of the gods and in return the god promised to grant him anything he desired. King Midas had many things but there was one thing he wanted to have more of—gold—he was thirsty for gold. In keeping with this thirst, he asked that everything he touched be turned to gold.

When Midas awoke the next day, he extended his arm to touch a table and instantly it turned to gold. He couldn't believe his good fortune! He began to touch everything in sight—a chair, the carpet, his bathtub; he ran throughout his palace, giddy with delight, touching everything in sight.

When he sat down to eat breakfast, the table's centrepiece contained roses; so wonderful was the scent, he wished to draw it closer but the moment his finger touched the stem, the rose turned to gold and the scent disappeared. Disappointed and distracted, he reached out to the breakfast platter in front of him, plucking a ripe grape, but that too turned to gold. His thirst for gold had led to unintended consequences. Moments later, his beloved daughter ran into the room, and immediately embraced him—where there had once been a living, breathing, human being, there was now a gold statue bearing her image.

King Midas, in his despair, cried out to the god to remove the gift and rescue him from his own greed. The god felt sorry for Midas and did as he asked—everything Midas touched a second time returned to

normal again. An anonymous author, reflecting on what can be learned from this story, writes, “*The chief cause of unhappiness is trading what we want most for what we want at the moment.*”³

Let me rephrase this statement into a question, “Are you willing to trade what you want most for what you want in the moment?” Sex doesn’t provide the path to fulfillment—obeying our desires rarely leads to satisfaction and frequently leads to the loss of what we want most—a relationship that lasts.

When sex becomes detached from God’s purposes and boundaries, it becomes an avenue to consume pleasure. We have been taught to think of ourselves primarily as consumers who need an infinite spectrum of choices in order to be satisfied. Dale Kuehne writes, “Consumerism teaches us to acquire, consume, and move on, with novelty as our guiding impulse. The sad reality, though, is that what we do with things, we will inevitably do with people.”⁴

One can see this sad reality being played out in relationships all around us. You are no doubt aware that the trend towards “living together” is growing rapidly, the idea being that sexual intimacy and cohabitation is the best way to determine compatibility. Some have described this as the “definitely maybe approach” to marriage, where you can “try before you buy”. Here’s the problem, research reveals—overwhelmingly— that cohabitation ultimately undermines

long term relationships; only 20% of these relationships develop into a life-long commitment.⁵

2. Singleness, Sexuality, and Vocation: I want to move on to talk about Singleness, Sexuality, and Vocation. Let me pause for a moment to state the obvious: while many people are single, not everyone has the same experience of singleness. Some are single and simply waiting for “Mr. or Ms. Right” to come along. Others are single again—they have lost their spouse to death or to divorce.

Our culture is mistaken when it tells us that we cannot be satisfied or fulfilled without sex, but historically the church has made a different mistake, namely, telling singles that they cannot be fulfilled without marriage. Some churches, implicitly or explicitly, have gone as far as suggesting that choosing to remain single is selfish—“*if you really want to be holy, then marriage is an absolute must.*” It’s rubbish—complete and total rubbish.

Let’s not forget Jesus’ relationship status—He Himself was a celibate single. Was Jesus unfulfilled or selfish simply because He was single? What about the Apostle Paul, was he fundamentally incomplete because he wasn’t married? Let’s take a closer look at what Jesus and Paul said regarding singleness.

In Matthew 19:3, the Pharisees brought the following question to test Jesus: “*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every*

³ Author unknown.

⁴ Dale Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld: Rethinking Relationship Beyond An Age Of Individualism*, 80.

⁵ Galena K. Rhodes, Scott M. Stanley, and Howard J. Markham, “Couple’s Reasons for Cohabitation,” *Journal of Family Issues* 30 (2009): 233-258.

reason?” Jesus’ response revealed God’s design for marriage relationships—one man and one woman, married for life. After hearing His response, the questioners pressed Jesus—if God wants marriages to last a life-time, then why did Moses permit divorce? Jesus replied, Marriage is meant to last a lifetime, but God permits divorce in certain cases because of the hard, unforgiving, hearts of husbands and wives.

Let me read the rest of the conversation, beginning at vs. 10, “*The disciples said to him, ‘If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.’ Jesus replied, ‘Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.’*”

The disciples wonder aloud, if singleness might not be better than marriage—it offered more freedom and less restriction. Jesus agrees with their assessment but goes on to reframe singleness in terms of vocation. “*Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given...there are those who choose to live [as celibate singles] **for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.***”

Your singleness may only be a temporary stage in life, but whether it is or not, it can be so much more than something to be endured. In 1 Corinthians 7:32-35, the Apostle Paul speaks pragmatically about the advantage of his remaining single. A wife and mother has daily, often demanding, family commitments; the same could be said for a husband and father. As a husband and father, I have particular responsibilities that necessarily narrow my availability for ministry

commitments, of for developing a large network of friends. Paul, however, in remaining single, knew a freedom to serve the Lord—he traveled the world on mission, he developed a vast friendship circle, and mentored many, many pastors, teachers, and missionaries.

As Westerners, we are so used to thinking about life in terms of our own satisfaction, that we miss what is so obviously missing from Jesus’ and Paul’s descriptions of marriage and singleness. Biblically speaking, marriage serves a greater purpose than self-fulfillment—marriage provides the opportunity to set aside one’s own preferences in order to serve one’s spouse and children. In the same way, biblically speaking, singleness serves a greater purpose than self-fulfillment. Freedom from marriage doesn’t mean singles are free to obey their thirsts, pursue their own interests, and ignore the needs and wants of others.

Whether we are single or married, our relationship status conveys something central to God’s own being and action in the world. The relationship between a husband and wife mirrors the unity and intimacy that exists between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Singleness expresses God’s ever-expanding love for the world—the Father sent the Son so that many might be included in God’s family.

The question is, *what is your marriage—or your singleness—in service of? How might God want to use your relationship status serve something greater than yourself?* Committing to live for your own happiness, will only lead to a dead end; real life is found in giving your life away to God and to others.

3. Singleness, Sexuality, and the Family of God: I want to conclude this morning by talking about Singleness, Sexuality, and the Family of God. I want to begin by looking at two Scriptures.

Genesis 2:18, 24-25, “*The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’ 24 That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. 25 Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.*”

Exodus 20:12, “*Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.*”

While we do not lack significance as individuals, Genesis reminds us that we were made for relationship. God’s pronouncement—*it is not good for man to be alone*—is not primarily a statement about the necessity of marriage, it’s a statement about our fundamental nature as relational beings. Relationship is so essential to being human that solitary confinement has come to be known as one of the worst forms of punishment. We cannot flourish apart from deep and meaningful relationships with God and one another.

I have a number of friends my own age that are single—some have never married, while others are single again because of death or divorce; singleness isn’t always easy for them. Both in the culture at large and within the church, there is a bias towards being in a committed relationship. Often singles are made to feel as though they cannot be whole apart from such a relationship.

I want to say that I believe this kind of thinking is off the mark. Biblically speaking, the family is the primary unit of human

relationship—marriage is important, but it’s important in so far as it serves the family, and by family I’m referring to the extended family of Grandparents, Uncles, Aunts, Cousins, Siblings, Nieces, and Nephews.

Not all of us will marry, but all of us belong to a family. Here in the West we tend to talk about marriage in terms of “*starting your own family*,” but this is the wrong way to express it—marriage is the joining of two families. And for those who remain single, to speak of oneself saying, “*I don’t have a family of my own*” is surely the wrong way to express singleness—you were born into, and remain a member of, a family.

Today, our experience of family is varied—some of us enjoy loving family relationships, others’ experience of family has been marked by conflict, rejection, or abuse. A healthy family is a place where everyone gets noticed, where everyone matters, where everyone has something to contribute and everyone has a place to belong.

If the Old Testament’s primary relational unit was the extended family, in the New Testament the primary unit is the church as the family of God. Mark 3 tells of a time when Jesus was preaching in a house packed with people, and at one point his mother and brothers showed up. Because they couldn’t get into the house, someone approached Jesus saying, “*Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.*” Jesus replied saying, ““*Who are my mother and my brothers? ... Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.’”*”

Ephesians 1:5 says, “*In love [God] predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will*”. Families share a common blood that binds them together, but in Christ, and through His shed blood, there is a bond even thicker, one that binds women and men, young and old, singles and marrieds, poor and rich, from every nation under heaven. All of us have a biological family we were born into, but through Christ we have been born again into a new family. No matter where you go, when you find a church that is committed to Jesus, you find a family—brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, and children.

Our culture assumes a direct link between sexual activity and human fulfillment, but the Bible does not. The Bible argues that the more fundamental need is to experience loving relationships. Far too many people look to sex hoping to find love, but sex cannot provide the love we need. As a celibate single, Jesus modelled a fulfilled life, complete and holy in union with the Father, but also rich in friendship with both women and men. Jesus’ life reminds us that our primary identity is found in these relationships and that sex is not necessary for human wholeness.

To those who are married, I want to encourage you to think beyond the boundary of your nuclear family. If you know someone who is single, invite them to join in your experience of family. When you go out for dinner, or to a concert, or to a movie, invite them along. Invite them into your home—invite them into your lives: clothes on the floor, children acting up and the works. Every family could use another sister, brother, aunt, uncle, or grandparent.

To those who are single, I want to encourage you to think beyond the boundary of your own life. The danger in singleness is in becoming

too attached to our own freedoms, plans, and preferences. Use your singleness is the service of something greater than yourself.

The Lord’s Supper: This morning as we celebrate the Lord’s Supper together I want to continue with the theme of family. Everyone who becomes a Christian must do so individually—your parents’ faith, your grandparents’ faith, your friends’ faith isn’t enough.

Becoming a Christian requires you to believe—Romans 10:9-10 says, “*If you confess with your mouth ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.*” If you have not done so before, put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, make your confession so that you might be a part of His forever family.

John 19:25-27 records something that took place during Jesus’ final moments on the cross. “*Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and [John, his disciple] standing nearby, [Jesus] said to her, ‘Woman, here is your son,’ and to [John], ‘Here is your mother.’ From that time on, [John] took [Mary] into his home.*”

In His last moments, Jesus was thinking about family, and not just about His mother, but about all who would be adopted into God’s family. When God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, His life served a greater purpose than His own preferences. When Jesus died on the cross, His death served a greater purpose. Through Jesus’ death, the sin of the world has been dealt with, the barrier between

God and humanity has been torn down—forgiveness has been won, and a way has been made for us to join God’s family.

The bread represents His body that was broken for us; the grape juice symbolizes His blood which was shed for us. This is a family table, a family meal, where everyone is invited to come and receive what Jesus offers: forgiveness, love, strength, and healing. If your heart’s desire is to receive these gifts from Jesus this morning, then come with glad and expectant hearts.

Invite servers forward

Worship

Prayer Ministry Announcement

Benediction

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people—**the family**—of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. May His mercy, His love, and His healing meet you today.