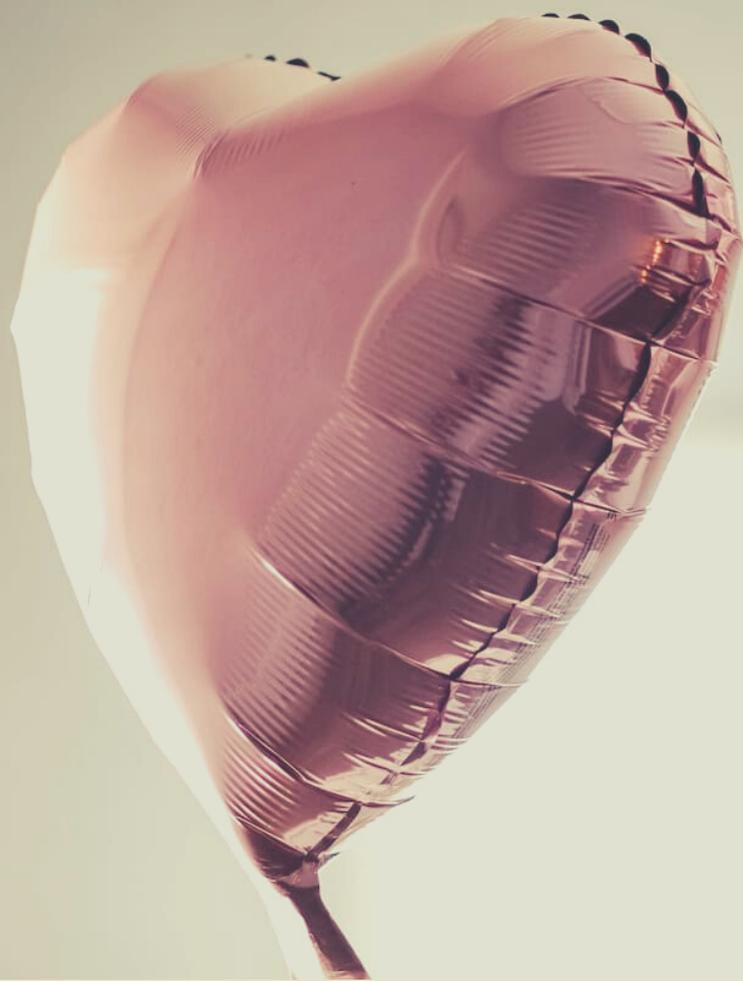


A Celebration of Singleness



By Rev. Bob Ragan and Kyle Bowman

A Book on Singleness, Intimacy,
and Desire.



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CHAPTER ONE

An Introduction

When the Church puts so much emphasis on the beauty and gift of marriage, it is easy to overlook and misunderstand the different blessings of singleness. In such a marriage-oriented culture, singles often tend to view singleness as a “lesser” state, a time of being in a holding pattern, or even a second-tier status in the body of Christ. And, to exacerbate the issue, marriage can be made an idol and seen as the ultimate form of intimacy--with this mindset, singleness becomes an “incompleteness,” a deficit.

Thankfully, this is not the reality that the Bible presents to us. Being single does not mean you’re second-best or incomplete! Quite the opposite--singleness is biblically and historically regarded as an esteemed status. Some of history’s most notable and admirable figures were single. To name a few:

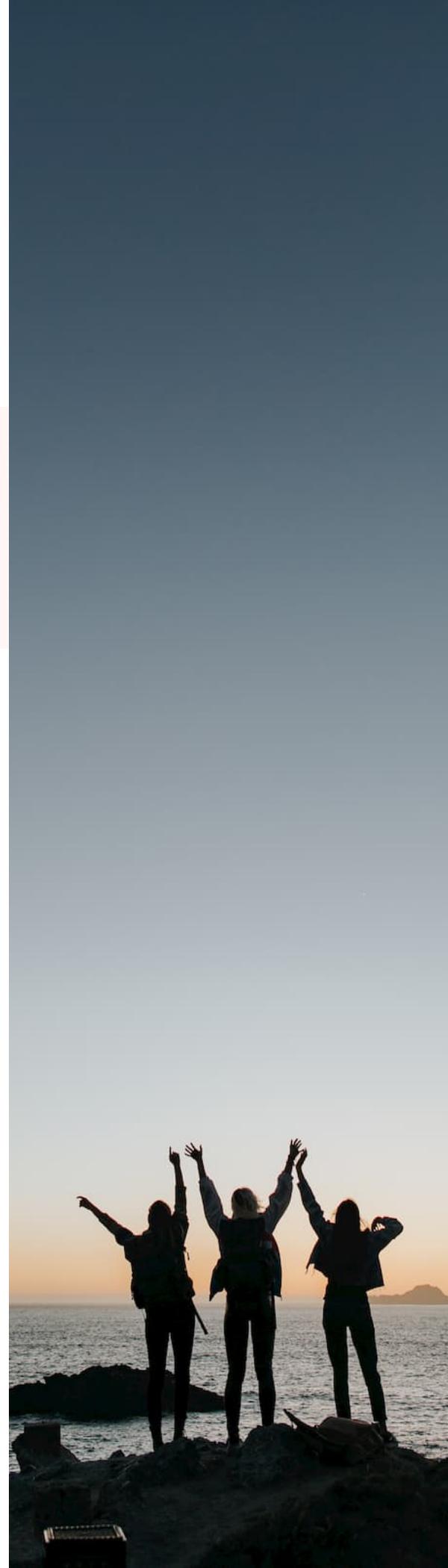
- The Apostle Paul, one of the great evangelists, preachers, and teachers of the early Church! Paul never married and vocally advocated for singleness, even saying: “To the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do” (1 Cor. 7:8, NIV).
- Mother Teresa, famous for founding the Missionaries of Charity and dedicating her life to serve the “poorest of the poor.”

- Corrie Ten Boom, a single Christian woman who was sent to the Ravensbruck concentration camp after Nazi soldiers discovered her and her family hiding Jewish friends and neighbors in their home. She witnessed many miracles in the concentration camp and many came to Christ through her witness.

We all, universally, desire intimacy--it's part of our design!

- Martin Luther wrote his 95 theses, changing the course of Christian history, several years before his eventual marriage.
- Jackie Pullinger, who was single when she ministered to hundreds of drug addicts in China and started St. Stephens Society, a rehabilitation center for drug addicts.
- Michelangelo, whose famous works include the Sistine Chapel's ceiling and Madonna and Child. Much of his art was inspired by his devotion to Christ.
- And, of course, Jesus, whose singleness in devotion to his Father was the impetus for the redemption of the world.

Because the above figures were single, they were freed from the commitments of marriage (and possibly children) to make huge positive impacts on world history and on Christianity. Single people can devote their time to missional pursuits in a way married people may not be able to, they can devote more time to God, and they can devote more time to serving Christ's people and the Church.



Without singleness, some of the world's greatest missionary endeavors never would have been started, entire denominations may not exist, and thousands upon thousands of people may not have come to belief in Christ!

Marriage is not to be heightened while singleness is lowered. Instead, the Bible presents to us the beauty of both. Marriage, on the one hand, is a beautiful and unique representation of Christ's relationship to the Church. Christ, as the bridegroom, gives himself wholly to his Bride, who in turn gives birth to new life. Singleness, on the other hand, was designed to display the Church's love and devotion to Christ!¹ Singles can be devoted to Christ in a way that married people, who are concerned with the cares and well-being of their spouse, cannot. In this way, singles can be a wonderful example of the devotion to Christ that the entire Church is called to have.

For some of us, singleness is a lifelong calling. For others, it is a stage of life before marriage. All different states of singleness should be celebrated and lived into, and not seen just as a waiting period or a preparation period. In fact, celebrating singleness while you're in the thick of it will help you if you are eventually called to be married. You won't be looking for someone else to complete you, because you're already whole.

1. "Singleness with Purpose," Brooks Waldron, The Gospel Coalition.
2. "Living with Unsatisfied Desires," David White, Harvest USA.

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Singleness, on the other hand, was designed to display the Church's love and devotion to Christ!





However, while some singles will be called to marriage, others will be called to lifelong singleness. For some, this can be painful, and it does no good to shove this pain under the rug. It needs to be acknowledged, brought to light, and worked through so singleness can be celebrated. We must especially acknowledge the real, painful loss that comes with the absence of sexual fulfillment. 2

We all, universally, desire intimacy--it's part of our design! Fortunately, the Bible tells us how we can fulfill this desire for intimacy as singles, which we'll discuss in chapter 3. Even though we can find relational intimacy as singles, living without satisfying romantic and sexual desires is difficult. However, when leaned into, this kind of suffering can take us into a deeper and more intimate relationship with Christ and bring us a new understanding of his love and desire for us. Sharing in Christ's suffering in resisting sexual temptation reveals the longing of Christ for his bride, and our unsatisfied desires bring light to parts of the great mystery of creation and salvation.

In his article "Living with Unsatisfied Desires," David White highlights two aspects of sexual self-denial. First, he says that unsatisfied desires are a place where God meets his people. When we have a longing that goes unsatisfied, we can go to God in that suffering and he can meet us there. In fact, he wants to meet us in our places of suffering! And we can find comfort in the fact that Jesus has been where we are. Jesus was tempted, tried, accused, tortured, and separated from God--in all of this, he can relate to our earthly pain better than anyone. Our unsatisfied desires are an invitation to draw closer to him and to let him meet with us deeply, in ways we would not experience without our suffering.

Second, White says that unsatisfied desires "whet our appetite for the world to come." Living with unsatisfied desires puts us in a period of waiting for an everlasting Kingdom where we'll be forever fulfilled. We will all experience moments of joy and moments of suffering--each of these are reminders that, one day, joy will be everlasting and suffering will cease. In this "waiting period," we can lean into the knowledge that we will join with the angels' praises in the kingdom of Heaven one day.



God wants us to experience his love and joy, and not just when we get to Heaven, but on earth as well

Going without is painful. Waiting is painful. Having unsatisfied desires is painful. Fortunately, we are told of ways to ease that pain on this earth--drawing closer to God, identifying with Christ on the cross, and investing in community, to name a few--but we need to be careful to direct these desires toward Christ, and not toward sinful and fruitless activities. Christopher West phrases it beautifully in his book *Fill These Hearts*, when he says, "When we go to the physical and emotional pleasures of sex and romantic love seeking the definitive fulfillment of eros, we have mistaken the shadow for reality" (171). In other words, when we look to sex and romance to fulfill our desire for intimacy, we'll leave unsatisfied and with a misunderstanding of what God's intent for us. This is true for married couples, too--your spouse won't fulfill you, and marriage isn't the end of what God has for you.

We need to understand where and toward what our desires are likely to be misdirected. That understanding allows us to seek what God intends for us, and to invite him to guide our journeys toward him. As we continue in this book, we'll explore where our God-given desire comes from and how we can healthily direct it as singles, as well as what a healthy single life could look like. God wants us to experience his love and joy, and not just when we get to Heaven, but on earth as well--and he made us with a desire for that experience! To quote Christopher West again: "Behind all our misdirected desires and lusts there is a legitimate desire God put there and wants to satisfy. Uncovering that legitimate desire and entrusting its satisfaction entirely to God is critical to our healing and wholeness" (67).

CHAPTER TWO

Unpacking Desire

First and foremost, we have to recognize that our desire for intimacy is not bad--it is part of the design of humanity! Our hunger for intimacy is a universal longing that everyone has in common. We see this longing as far back as the beginning of the Bible, in the first days of creation, when God says, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18).

We can find much comfort in those words, and in the fact that God was the one who said them. It wasn't Adam who declared war on his own alone-ness--it was God! And out of this declaration came a new creation. God created Eve as Adam's helper, as his partner in this new life. And in the beginning, because sin had not yet entered the world, Adam and Eve were relationally whole with each other and with God, as we were created to be. Nothing was hidden between them. "Eros" was perfectly intact.

Because it is the root of the modern word "erotic," the word "eros" often has a sexual connotation. However, as Plato defines it, eros is "Our longing for all that is true, good, and beautiful." ¹ This includes our zeal for life, passion, appreciation of beauty, and erotic desire. At the beginning of creation, before sin entered the world, all of these desires and passions were bundled into one, beautiful eros. Then sin enters the scene, and eros becomes fragmented. Natural inclinations and desires of humanity could now be directed toward something sinful that separates us from God and each other, instead of toward their intended purpose to bring life and connect us with God.



We know, then, that our longing for intimacy is rooted in and comes from something deeply good and godly. But, because of sin, these desires can become distorted in us, to the point where it's easy to think that all of these desires are bad and should be rejected. Christopher West outlines three types of responses to our desires: Stoicism (The "Starvation Diet"), Sensualism (The "Fast Food Diet"), and Sojourner-ism (The "Banquet").²

Stoicism is rooted in the idea that physical pleasure is evil and should be rejected. In this mindset, the spirit is good and the body is bad. This "starvation diet" attempts to push away the desires of the body instead of directing them toward a good, wholesome, godly pursuit; in other words, we shut down our hearts instead of guarding them.

This attitude stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of desire. We know we have desires, but we've been warned of the ways in which our desires can be misdirected. Fear of allowing our desires to take us down the wrong path turns into a fear to acknowledge desire at all. As John Eldredge puts it:

1. Christopher West, *Fill These Hearts*, p. 7.

2. Christopher West, *Fill These Hearts*.

"There is a nagging awareness inside us, warning that we'd better not feel our hunger too deeply or it will undo us. We might do something crazed, desperate. We are caught on the horns of a dilemma; our unmet desires are a source of trouble, and it feels as if it will get worse if we allow ourselves to feel how much we do desire. Not only that, we often don't even know what we desire.... In the face of this quandary, most people decide to bury the whole question and put as much distance as they can between themselves and their desires.... The tragedy is increased tenfold when this suicide of the soul is committed under the conviction that this is precisely what Christianity recommends. We have never been more mistaken."³

Shutting down our hearts quite literally kills our souls. To turn your back on and refuse to acknowledge desire maims a fundamental part of your creation. Part of the problem, of where this fear of desire stems from, is that we don't know for what our souls are longing. We don't know the direction meant for the desire that builds up inside us. So sometimes, instead of shutting our hearts down, we look to satisfy our desire with whatever is in front of us. When taken to the extreme, we see sensualism begin to bloom.

“There is a nagging awareness inside us, warning that we’d better not feel our hunger too deeply or it will undo us. We might do something crazed, desperate.”





The good news is you aren't alone in this struggle

Sensualism embodies the notion that pleasure is an idol to be indulged. The sensualist, rather than shutting down their heart, becomes abandoned to it. They may try to fill their hunger with whatever they can, such as money, food, or sex. This can result in a loss of self-control and a willingness to pursue false intimacy that will only lead to brokenness. Instead of holding out for true, healthy intimacy, the sensualist is willing to settle for false intimacy and immediate gratification.

But desire directed toward false, temporarily satisfying ends is also evidence that we don't know what we're truly longing for: the infinite. At its core, eros is a desire for infinity. When we look to satisfy that desire with something less than infinity, like sex, we will be left unsatisfied and disappointed. Or, it has also been said, "Any man who knocks at the door of a brothel is knocking for God."⁴

The good news is you aren't alone in this struggle. In fact, Paul, one of the greatest figures of Christian history, can relate to you better than anyone: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.... For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing" (Romans 7:15-19).

Where does all this take us? If we don't want to shut down and push away the desires of our hearts, but also don't want to abandon ourselves to them, what are we left with? Fortunately, there is a third road between these two extremes: the path of the sojourner.

3. John Eldredge, *The Journey of Desire*, p. 32.

4. G.K. Chesterton



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As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?

The sojourner mindset looks at pleasure as an icon that points us to the infinite and Heaven. A sojourner looks to guard his or her heart instead of shutting it down or being abandoned to it; in doing this, the sojourner can walk in wholeness and in a whole relationship with God. The sojourner isn't afraid to acknowledge desire but knows the truth behind the hunger. We see many examples of healthy acknowledgment of this desire in the Bible.

Many come from David's Psalms-- another figure, by the way, who can definitely relate to us in our struggles with desire. One of his most famous expressions of desire is in Psalm 42: "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" (1-2)5. David felt desire, knew it deeply, and knew where to direct it: toward God.

The sojourner is different from the stoic in that he/she recognizes desire, and different from the sensualist because he/she takes desire seriously. To the sojourner, desire has a clear direction, purpose, and end driven by the good news of the Bible: the news that this world is a temporary dwelling, and that we were made for and can look forward to so much more than what this world can offer us. We look forward to eternal life in paradise and perfect union with our creator; this is where our desire takes us.

Moreover, it seems that so many of us need to be reminded that God does not ask us to desire less. “The goal of morality is not morality--it is ecstasy. You are intended for pleasure.”⁶ Christianity is, fundamentally, an invitation to desire; it’s not a moral code or a guidebook that promises if we only follow these rules, we will enjoy good lives. Christianity is an invitation to partake in the infinite and to channel our desires toward infinite ends.

Let’s look at the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15, verses 11-32. The desires of the younger son got the best of him when, one day, he said to his father, “Father, give me my share of the estate.” His father did just that, and the younger son gathered his things, set off, and “squandered his wealth in wild living.” But he had abandoned himself to desires less than infinity; eventually, his wealth was gone, and he was left begging for food fit for pigs. Ashamed and guilty, he decides to venture back home and beg his father to hire him as a servant, lamenting that “[M]y father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!” Fortunately, his father welcomed him back with open arms and a huge celebration. He even killed the fatted calf to celebrate the prodigal son’s homecoming.

Meanwhile, the older son deeply senses the unfairness of the situation. His brother, who wasted his entire inheritance and turned his back on their family, was being freely offered another chance and a party to go along with it! We can feel his anger in the lines that follow:

“The older brother...refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours’ (28-31).

The prodigal son in this story is the sensualist. He’s allowed himself to become abandoned to his desires, which led to ruin instead of infinity; he tried to temporarily satisfy what only God can eternally fulfill. He almost didn’t return home because of his shame, and when he did return, it was under the expectation that he could only hope to become a servant in his father’s house. He never dreamed his sonship could be restored.

The older brother, on the other hand, shows strong hints of stoicism. He’s been “slaving” for his father, always doing the right thing, expecting that morality will give way to blessing. If he can just push back his desire and behave well, in the end, he will be rewarded. At least he won’t be living frivolously, like his brother.

5. While this Psalm is attributed to the “sons of Korah,” it is widely believed to have been penned by David when he was prevented from returning to Jerusalem, because of either the persecution from Saul of Absalom’s revolt.

6. John Eldredge, *The Journey of Desire*, p. 49.

But he, too, is left unsatisfied and feeling more than a little jipped. So he confronts his father--how could you treat me like this? How could you give him everything and me nothing? Don't you see how good I've been, how I've followed all the rules, how I've been loyal and faithful to you?

The wonderful, wise father has the best response to the situation--you have always been with me. Everything I have is yours as well. You just never asked.

When we trust God, we don't need to run to the temporary safety of stoicism or the temporary satisfaction of sensualism; instead, we are freed up to acknowledge our desires and let ourselves feel the passion that comes with them, knowing God will fulfill it all one day. And here we come full circle, back to where we started, at the beginning of the Bible and before the fall of man. Adam and Eve were in union with God and had unlimited access to the tree of life. They trusted God to satisfy their desires, and it was all good; however, Satan tempted Eve to see what satisfaction could be found by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He tempted her to doubt God's goodness and to take matters for her happiness into her own hands. Eros splintered, lust and confusion entered the world, and what was once clear and whole became muddied and broken.

Since then, humanity has been consumed with a fundamental and good desire to get back to the infinite ends, the oneness with God, that we were meant for. But the picture has become crumpled, distorted such that we can lose sight of the truth behind our desire.



“There is a desire within each of us, in the deep center of ourselves that we call our heart. We are born with it, it is never completely satisfied, and it never dies.

We are often unaware of it, but it is always awake.... Our true identity, our reason for being, is to be found in this desire.”⁷ Desire is not meant to leave us forever unfulfilled and pining, but to guide our souls back to the place where we belong, and the One whom we were meant for.

We long for the infinite goodness of God's riches that we will only get to experience the fullness of when we are united with him in Heaven. Here on earth, however, we can have glimpses of it--and God wants us to have these glimpses! These tastes of infinity are meant to point us toward the infinite end that we are offered. It matters, however, what we do with our desire.

“What we do with eros--where we take it--will determine whether we are consumed or consummated, whether we are brought to ruin or reunion...with whatever that ‘something’ is we're seeking.”⁸

7. Gerald May, *The Awakened Heart*, quoted in Eldredge, *The Journey of Desire*, p. 2.

8. Christopher West, *Fill These Hearts*, p. 8.

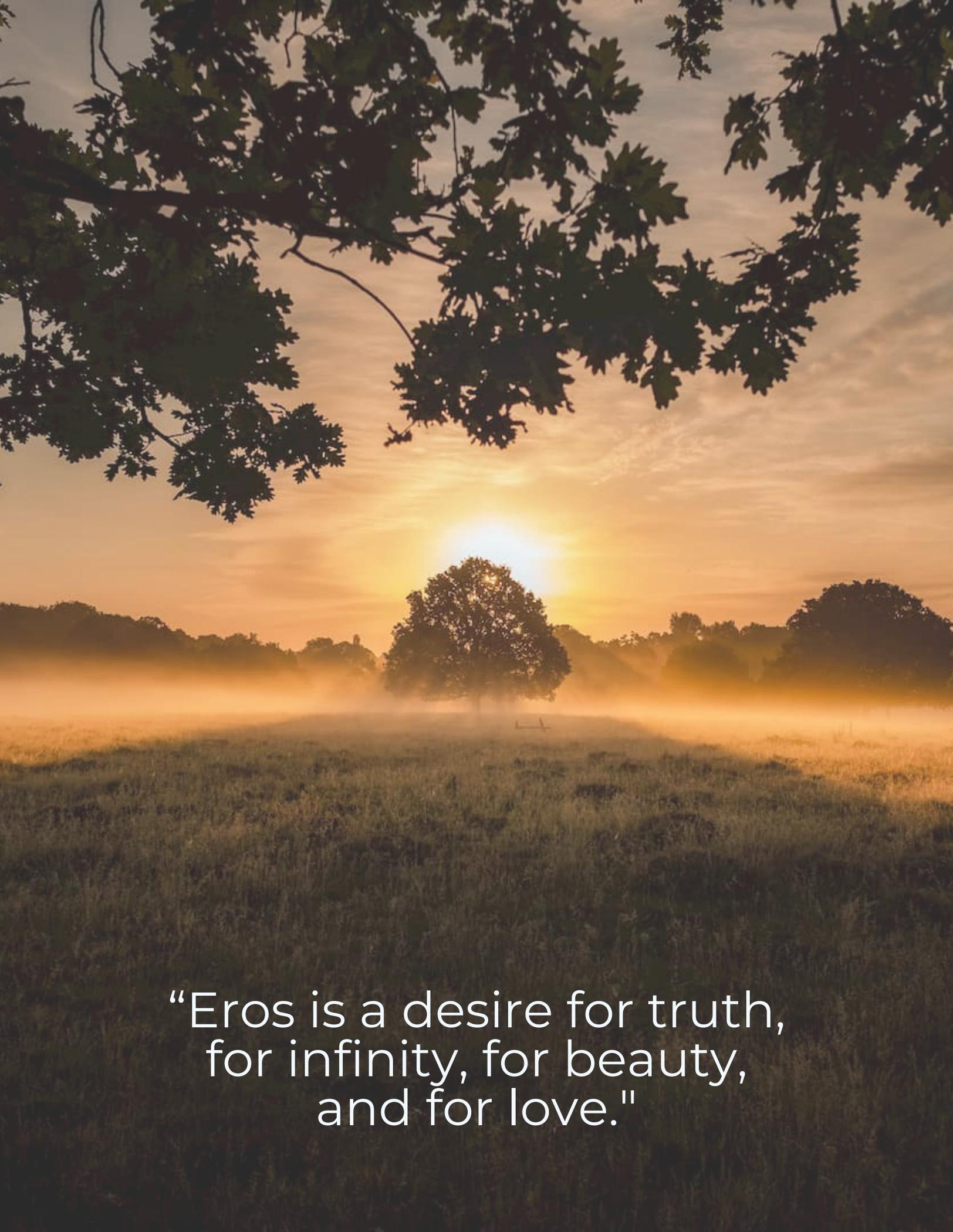
CHAPTER THREE

Fulfilling the Need for Connection

We have desire embedded within us, an eros desire. We don't want to shut down that desire, nor do we want to abandon ourselves to it; how do we follow the path of the sojourner? How do we chase our desire toward the infinite?

Eros is a desire for truth, infinity, beauty, and for love. Eros is passion, a passion for life that goes beyond just our physical sensations. Society readily associates passion simply with sex; however, God intended passion to go far beyond sex. For this desire, especially this love-desire, to be genuine, it has to be in a relationship. We see this emphasized most dramatically in the union of the Trinity. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are engaged in a constant dance where love is constantly being given, received, and reciprocated. Love by its very nature requires another--it requires someone to be the recipient of love and that toward which love is directed.

It follows, then, that if we are made in the image of God, and God is fundamentally relational and loving, we are designed for relationship! Our deepest God-given desire is to know and be known by God and one another; to be in relationship. We all feel the need for relationship, and those of us who are single may feel that need especially poignantly (though we should recognize that married people can also experience extreme loneliness). Our need for connection will not go away; it's another part of our design that points us toward the infinite and drives us to seek out relationship with God and with others.



“Eros is a desire for truth,
for infinity, for beauty,
and for love.”



Relationships are part of how we experience the heavenly kingdom here on earth. We can experience the love of Jesus when a friend helps us in a time of need. We may experience healing when a close friend listens to us as we go through a hard time. In fact, this is why God created us with a deep desire to be in community. He knows community is how we'll experience intimacy with others, and a way we can draw closer in intimacy with him. This applies to all of us--not just those of us who are single!

We have a responsibility to devote ourselves to fellowship with one another, and we are promised that goodwill spring forth from community. This is stated and modeled for us numerous times in the Bible. To quote a few passages in particular:

- "Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves" (Romans 12:10)
- "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7)
- "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2)
- "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" (James 5:16)
- "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17)
- "For where two or three gather in my name, there I am with them" (Matthew 18:20)
- "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:12-13)
- "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24-25)



Relationships are part of how we experience the heavenly kingdom here on earth.

- “But God has put the body together...so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Cor 12:24-27)
- “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8-11)

The list could go on almost infinitely. The Bible is, after all, a love story--the story of a God who would not stop fighting to bring a people whom he loved back to him. Being created in the image of God means we were created in the image of Love itself. Love, along with the need to express it, share it, and receive it, is part of our DNA.

We cannot be fully who we were created to be in a vacuum; we were designed to be known, to be in community, and we can't pull away from that. So how can singles dig into community in a way that is life-giving and Jesus-centered?

Before we can get into healthy community, we need to focus on our own self-care and self-awareness. Our deepest desire is to be fully known by God and by others, but we also have to know ourselves! Once we're intentional about that, we can be intentional about getting into a healthy community.

When we are in healthy states of being, we are more likely to seek and develop quality relationships with other healthy people. Ask yourself the following questions to examine your current level of health:

- Are you taking care of your body? Are you fueling it with nutritious food and exercising regularly?
- Are you emotionally well? For some of us, this may involve seeing a counselor/therapist. Make sure you're rested and regularly observing the Sabbath.
- Use the acronym HALT as a regular self-check-in: are you Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired?

A deficit in any of these areas might indicate that you should seek help before engaging seriously in healthy community. This could mean talking to a therapist or a trusted individual/mentor figure in your life. It might also mean a lifestyle adjustment is needed--maybe you need to make sure you're engaging in restorative periods of rest, or spending more time with the Lord.

Let God expose any of these things in your heart so they can be worked on;

You should also take some time to think about how you're wired, especially in terms of how you interact with other people. Are you an introvert (someone who gains energy/recharges by spending time alone) or an extrovert (someone who gains energy/recharges by spending time with others)? Do you prefer large groups of people, smaller groups, or one-on-one time with others? Are you someone who usually starts conversations, or are you more of a listener? Knowing the different ways you engage with others can help you find community opportunities in which you'll thrive.

There are other things that can get in the way of finding healthy community, and we have to sort through those with God and with the help of trusted individuals in our lives before we can really engage in community well. In particular, single people can be frustrated by a feeling of unfulfillment or dissatisfaction in day-to-day life. This makes it easy for notions of being unworthy or lesser-than (which we already know are untrue) to cloud our own self-image. Let God expose any of these things in your heart so they can be worked on; then you can look at what being in a healthy community might look like for you.



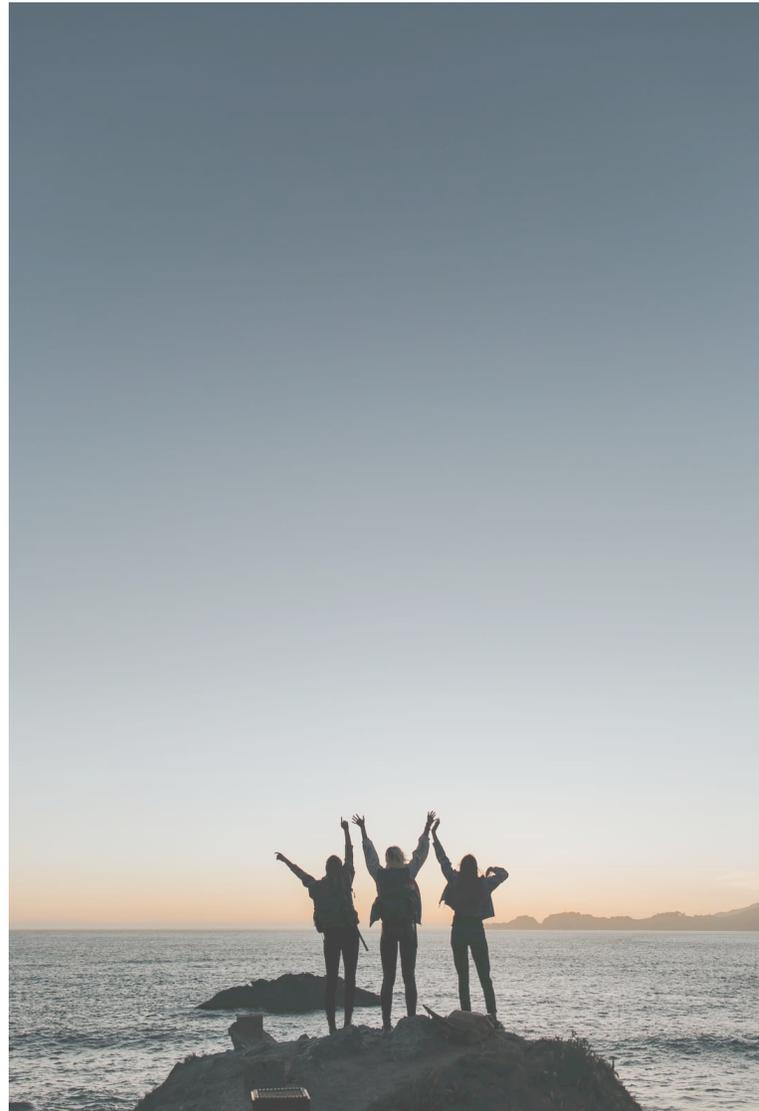
Once we're in a place where we're ready to explore being in a healthy community, we need to know what kind of community to look for. What are the signs that will point us toward a good community where we can find quality relationships?

Perhaps the best biblical example of a healthy, vibrant, Jesus-centered community is found in the book of Acts. Appropriately, we see the foundations of the community in Acts built upon the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Peter preached about the coming of the Holy Spirit and the resurrection of Jesus, and pleaded all those who could hear him to "Repent and be baptized" (2:38). Following his message, three thousand people were baptized and came to Christ. Acts 2:42-47 goes on to discuss "The Fellowship of the Believers":

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

“

All the believers were together and had everything in common.



This passage is pretty packed with information. First and foremost, this community was built by the Holy Spirit--he inspired their repentance, baptism, and the subsequent unifying of this new group of believers. Healthy community should be God-centered. We also see the healthy balance of activities this community engaged in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, breaking bread together and praying. Their community did not only focus on formal learning, nor did they only socialize or only pray together. They recognized the importance of doing all of these activities together and engaged in all of them intentionally.

They were also deeply invested in one another. They shared their belongings with one another and with those who were in need. They met together often (daily!) and this time together was enjoyed and anticipated! They celebrated with one another as Jesus loved to--with food and drink, praising God together. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Did you notice that last verse? First, we are regaled with the activities that this community engages in with each other and the love they have for one another, the joy they experience spending time together; then, out of this type of community, people are brought to faith in Christ! Isn't that incredible? It's because Jesus-centered, committed and intentional community is attractive and inviting. After all, this is how God designed us.

We now know what type of community we should look for: one that gathers regularly, is committed to learning about Christ, praising him, and enjoying each other's company, that cares deeply about one another, and one that is attractive to nonbelievers. Where do we, as a healthy single person, fit into this type of community?

In the community you find, look for opportunities to engage with your spiritual giftings. Maybe you have a gift of serving. You could use this to build community by inviting people into your home and being hospitable, or reaching out to members of the community who may be in need to see if you can serve them. A gift of administration could be used to plan gatherings. A gift of teaching could be used to host a series of talks with you community members; a gift of counseling could help you talk to someone who needs a listening ear.

A good community will be full of people with whom you could develop healthy, close friendships. The success of any friendship depends on having two people who both give and receive, who mutually pursue a deeper relationship with one another. The two people should respect and honor one another and have similar values.

There is a business in our current culture, what we call restless activism. We are distracted, always on the go. Some of us are so busy that upon arriving home, we are so tired that all we can do is crash into bed. Being caught up in restless activity may limit our capacity to be fully engaged in healthy community. It may keep our relationships on a shallow level because we don't take the devoted time to become known relationally on a deeper level. We have acquaintances in place of true friends.



Close friendships should be made with people of substance, who can talk about the impact they want to have on the Kingdom and who are givers. These people should walk in integrity--you should be able to trust that they will stick to their word and do the right thing in tough situations. You also want to find people who can hold you accountable. Remember that iron sharpens iron--a good friend should be one who you can trust to tell you hard truths when you need to hear them. It's important to find these few close, reliable friends so you don't fall into a state of dangerous isolation. They are people with whom you can laugh, cry, and enjoy fellowship.

You might find many friends in your community, but not everyone will be your best friend, nor should they be! There will be different levels of friendship as you get to know different individuals. Think of it in terms of concentric circles: there may be many people you chat with at social gatherings, fewer people you engage with outside organized gatherings, and even fewer people with whom you are comfortable sharing deeper, intimate things like your hurts, hopes, and dreams.

Be discerning when building these close friendships: these people will have access to your heart, and you want them to be able to handle it well.

Community is vital if we want to live in a state of healthy singleness. It helps abate some of the loneliness and allows you to find people you can deeply share your heart with who isn't a spouse. If you need help finding such a community, ask around at your church or another local church. There are likely some bible study or home group-esque options for you to engage in. Remember, it won't happen all at once--getting into a healthy community takes time, effort, and investment. Don't become disheartened if it seems to be taking a while, or if the first community you find doesn't seem like a good fit. Pray for the Lord to bring you into a healthy, welcoming community, and be on the lookout for opportunities to join in fellowship with other believers.

CHAPTER FOUR

Healthy Singleness

If you are in a state of singleness, be careful not to see it as a holding pattern. Look at it as a time to grow in the knowledge of yourself and draw deeper in intimacy with God and others. As a single, you may find that there is actually more time and space in your life to devote to God, community, and yourself--be grateful for that!

However, sometimes singles can easily slip into a state of isolation in part or all of their daily lives. Because singles may not always have someone constant in their lives who is looking out for them, it's important they recognize and put into practice some practical means of being a vibrant, healthy single person.

We talked last chapter about the importance of community and what a good, Christ-centered community might look like, which brings us to our first stop on the path to healthy singleness: Healthy single people are not isolated, but connected, relationally intimate, and integrated into the body of believers and the lives of families.

Let's break that sentence down a bit. First, healthy singles are not isolated and lonely. If you feel a sense of isolation or loneliness, it's an immediate warning sign that there's something missing in your life, and the remedy is most likely to be found in renewed intimacy with community and fellowship with the Lord.

Be on the lookout for warning signs of loneliness or isolation before you find yourself stuck in it. These warning signs look different for each person but can be feelings of lethargy/apathy, suddenly spending more time than usual on your own, doubting God's goodness, or purposefully drawing away from the Church. Progressing down the path of loneliness and isolation leaves the enemy ample room to come in and attack you and your faith, and it can also send you off to seek false intimacy; try to be preventative and seek help whenever you think you may be starting down this path.

Let God expose any of these things in your heart so they can be worked on;

We all experience loneliness in varying degrees whether we are single, celibate, or married. Part of the ache of loneliness is our desire to know Jesus in His fullness, without barriers or hindrances. Until the day we join Him, there will always be a bit of that longing within us. The danger occurs when we begin to practice the presence of loneliness, allowing it to dominate our thinking and feelings. We become overly self-aware of loneliness. We must invite Jesus into the midst of our loneliness; processing it with His grace and presence. Caught in the grip of loneliness creates a vulnerability that often leads to choosing false intimacy.

Healthy singles are connected and relationally intimate. This embodies the opposite of what we've just discussed. Connectedness and intimacy are the antitheses of (and cure to) isolation.



For most single people, this will look like what we talked about in chapter 3: investment in a good community. Community fosters a sense of connected belonging. While you won't be relationally intimate with everyone in the community (nor should you be!), you should find a few friends with whom you can trust with your heart.

Connecting with other single people is another good way to protect yourself (and them!) from isolation, as you spend time with others in the same state of life as yourself. Bring other single people who may not be otherwise connected into your community. Remember, you don't just have to look for a community to join; you can create community, too. You might host a Thanksgiving (or "Friendsgiving") dinner with your other single friends. Or, you could have weekly gatherings with other singles centered around a theme, like a bible study or a game night. Maybe even organize a weekend getaway with your single friends. The possibilities are endless! Also, don't be afraid to invite married friends to some of these gatherings. Fellowship is connecting with people no matter what their relational state.

A healthy single is also integrated into the body of believers. This broadens the scope of the above community that we are immediately connected with to include the global body of Christ. For most of us, integration into the wider body of believers means being involved in a worshipping church. There is something surreal in knowing that as you worship on a Sunday morning, hundreds of thousands around the globe are worshipping with you.

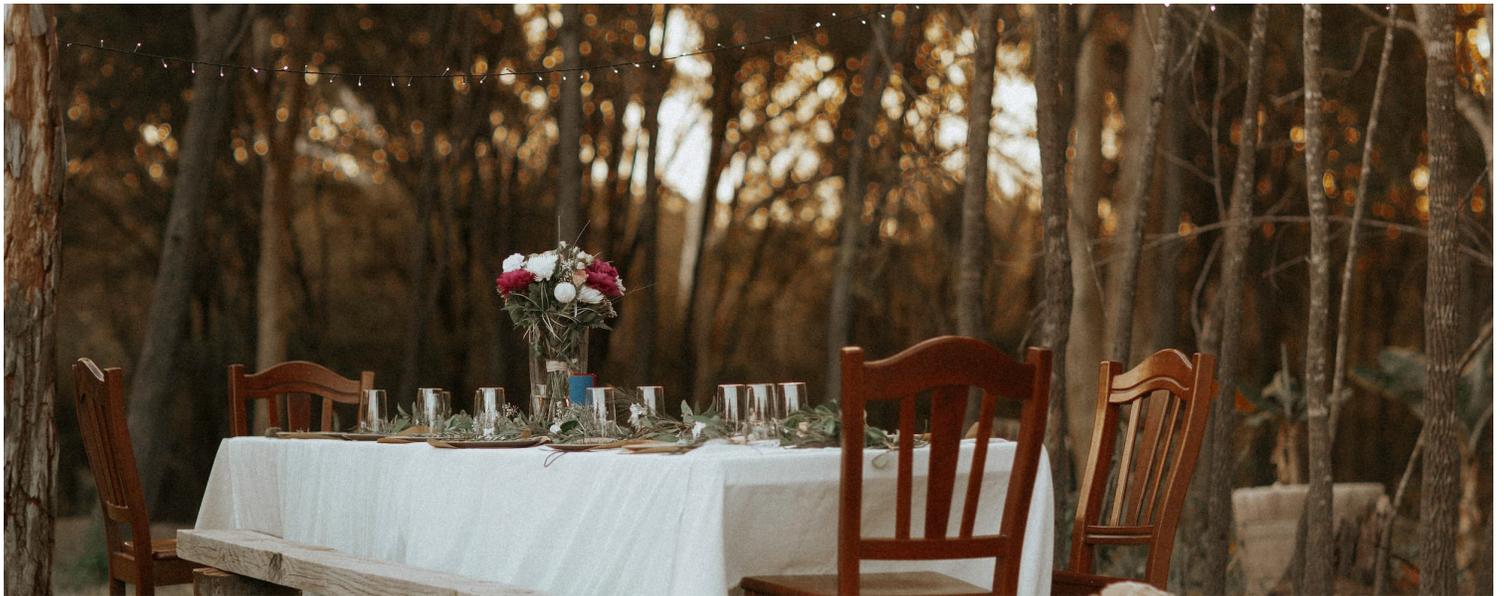
Being a part of the wider body of believers may also mean awareness of Christianity around the globe and, if you feel so called, participation with other nationalities of believers.

God has used single people many times throughout history to minister to other believers (and non-believers) around the globe. Digging into the body of Christ may mean such a thing for you.

Finally, the healthy single is integrated into the lives of families. The family unit is a wonderful and unique way to experience Christ and the love between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You are still meant to experience that love and joy, even though you may be celibate or not be married. Single people joining into the lives of families is a beautiful creation of a larger, Christ-built family unit of which we are to be a part.

This could take a lot of different forms for each person. For some, it may look like having dinner regularly with a family you are close to. It could mean a more involved role in day-to-day family life, like taking the kids to soccer practice, helping with household chores, or joining in on family game nights. Being a real, intimately involved member in the life of a family can do wonders to abate any feelings of loneliness and to build another connection to the wider body of Christ.

Life with families and singles could be something even more intimate, like creating a household where single people live together with families. In such a household, it's helpful to have structure and a schedule that involves every household member. For example, designated chores for all household members and regular dinners as a household serve to build intimacy and a deep sense of belonging among everyone who lives in the home. In such a situation, all parties benefit greatly--single people have a regular support system and accountability, parents have other adults to help with cooking, chores, and the kids, and kids have more adults to look up to, learn from, and play with!



Households are an extreme example of integrating single people into the lives of families; if you want to start such a great endeavor, that's wonderful! If you don't, you can still benefit from family life by being regularly involved in other ways.

The key to digging into healthy singleness here is to take steps so you aren't alone and isolated. Again, this will likely look different from person to person; however it looks for you, make sure it feeds your need for connectedness and is life-giving!

Healthy singles are in touch with their true identity, and do not embody a false identity of "second-class," "outsider," or "lesser than." Healthy singles are not self-pitying, but live a life full of mission and purpose. How do you identify yourself? Do you wear "singleness" as a label that defines your personhood? If someone were to ask you who you are, what matters to you, or what you are reaching for in life, how would you respond?

Much of our identity comes from our backgrounds. If you feel that singleness is a deficit or means being less than, it may be because the environment you were raised in trained you to have that pattern of thinking. You can examine yourself and what you think about your identity by asking yourself a few key questions about your background.

Think about your family origin and the culture you grew up in. What was it like? What values were prominent in your family? Were your parents in a healthy, stable relationship, or was there fighting that ended in divorce? If you have siblings, are they single or in a relationship? What did your parents teach you about relationships and singleness? What were your beliefs about God growing up--did you believe he was loving and wanted the best for you, or did you see him as judgmental, with standards you had to meet? Have there been any other cultural or socioeconomic influences on your views on relationships, marriage, or singleness?



Don't forget that this is a process.

Think also about your dispositions. Do you know if you're more disposed toward stoicism or sensualism? Maybe you have a healthy sojourner spirit in you. Are there any events or environmental characteristics in your upbringing that may have made you more disposed to one or the other? Recognizing this can bring healing to past wounds and help you start down a healthy path to wholeness.

The answers to any of these questions can reveal a lot about why you've identified yourself. Many children self-blame when parents fight or divorce, and there are a lot of churches that talk about strict morality and omit God's good grace. Growing up in poverty can give way to the belief that marriage will bring financial relief. Any number of things present or absent in your formative years could have contributed to how you view yourself now.

As you do this self-examination, do it prayerfully and with a trusted counselor or mentor. Let God reveal the areas in your life that may have impacted how you view your own singleness. This process can bring up areas of pain--don't get stuck there, but work through it and let God bring healing to any wounds that may surface.

Finally, healthy single people draw deeply from fellowship with God. He is a well that they drink from, a place of refuge in which they can rest. This intimate fellowship requires an intentional walking with God and being present with him daily. Remember, it's intentional--we have to purposefully seek that time with God. As we do so, he will reveal to us the truth of our desires. Things hidden may come to the surface. Take time to reflect and engage with these thoughts or feelings, and let other trusted individuals into them.

Don't forget that this is a process. Learning how to walk with God every day, no matter where your heart slips will take time; it does not happen instantaneously. We are engaged in a lifelong process of sanctification.

Instead of looking at singleness as a place to be before marriage, single people should understand that the goal is holiness no matter what your marital status. Your focus is centered on becoming the man or woman God has created you to be for himself, not just for a spouse. Some single people believe that if they just follow a certain series of steps, they will be led to a spouse. Instead, they should be asking the question: What does it mean to become a mature follower of Christ?

Pull back from hurried, rushed feelings. Pull back from the idea that to be whole, all your future plans and God's plans for you must happen now. Like Paul, it is a process of learning how to be content (Philippians 4:11). Allow God to come in and help you guard and search your heart. He does this when we have quiet times with only him, and when we allow him to speak to us about our hearts, with our minds open to whatever he may say or reveal. Ask him to help you celebrate where you are in your journey as his daughter or his son and ask him to help you become more whole in the present moments.

Our deepest longing is for Christ. We long for the promised fulfillment of sacramental life, for the ultimate arrival of Christ and union with him. Our highest desire is for Christ to fill that longing, for us to see it come to fruition. Seeking after that is, in itself, a lovely adventure. With open minds and open hearts, God continually makes, forms, and shapes us. We are surprised along the way when we grow when all of a sudden one day we seem more mature and stronger. We look back at the journey and notice where God has shown up and realize that even when he seemed to be absent, he was always in the picture.

Walking down the path of wholeness and holiness is fulfilling in its own way. We don't know all of the steps we will take on the journey, but we know the end. That end motivates us, propels us, keeps us walking even when times are dark. And we are blessed with the opportunity for seeking; as Christopher West puts it, "And so 'the seeking' itself, when we embark on it wholeheartedly, offers a rich kind of satisfaction in this life." 1

Keep seeking, keep learning, grow in health and wholeness with Christ and with others. You may be surprised by your discoveries, in awe of how God grows you. Your end purpose is not marriage (though that may come along the way) but wholeness in union with Christ. Let that end be what drives you to become a healthy, self-aware, and thriving single person in the state of life you are in right now.



CHAPTER FIVE

5 For the Church: Addressing the Value and Needs of Singles

Singleness, celibacy, and marriage each bring with them different trials and liberations, different joys and sorrows. Sometimes these differences seem so pronounced that it's tempting to alienate one group from the other. The companionship of marriage can seem foreign to the single person; the freedom of the single person to serve God and the Church is a distant memory to a spouse. However, in this stanza from the hymn "Take My Life and Let it Be," we find a very important patch of common ground for single, celibate, and married people: foundational devotion to Christ.

Marriages are more likely to falter if each person is not committed to Christ. Likewise, the life of a single person is less likely to be fruitful and satisfying if the single person is not wholly devoted to Christ. This common focus that we are all called to as God's children is a good starting point when thinking about addressing singleness and marriage in the Church. It also helps us expand our definition of "family" to include all members of the body of Christ, instead of being limited to a biological family.

If all of God's children are part of his "family," then the responsibilities and benefits that come with being part of a family applies to everyone, not just married couples or those who have a biological family.



We are called to care for one another, serve one another, fellowship with one another, break bread together, mourn together, and live life together.

This means that everyone, single and married people alike, are responsible to one another in the family of Christ. We are called to care for one another, serve one another, fellowship with one another, break bread together, mourn together, and live life together. Under this expanded definition of “family,” singles are not really single--they have a larger family they are called to serve and live life with. Likewise, families and married couples are also called to help serve single people. Living life in this way, viewing married and single people as part of the family of Christ, gives us a glimpse into Heaven. Jesus says in Matthew 22:30, “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage: they will be like the angels in heaven” (NIV). In resurrection life, we will not have the same types of bonds with one another as we do on this earth. Our family will not have biological distinctions, but will be made up of everyone who has been saved and joins us in resurrection life!

In the Church, there is a tendency to separate single and married people because their states in life are different. Each group may have their own seminar, their own fellowship opportunities, even their own sermons.

None of these are bad--in fact, it's important to have Christian teaching geared toward both single and married people and to have places in the Church where each group can connect with people in similar states in life. However, we must also take care to connect single and married people to one another. We should encourage them to view each other in light of the fact that they are all members of one family. Create avenues for biological families to invite singles into their lives; likewise, encourage singles to connect with families in a way that is life-giving and nurturing for everyone involved.

Pastors and other leaders in a church have a special role, in that God has entrusted them with the care of their flock. Therefore, pastors have the responsibility of cultivating spaces where all members of their congregation can be nurtured and fed; that's no easy task!

One of the most important ways a pastor can benefit their congregation is through regular self-examination. It becomes difficult to lead a flock well if the pastor has a self-view that differs from what he preaches. For our purposes, this is especially important for single pastors who desire to lead single people well.



Leaders who are single should not see their singleness as a deficit. This doesn't mean single pastors shouldn't desire or seek after marriage; rather, the single pastor should search for the gifts of his or her singleness. If you are a single pastor, ask God how being single has enabled you to live out his mission for you. Maybe you have more time to connect with members of your congregation or to serve your community well. Or, you might have the special ability to bless other single people in your congregation through the example of your singleness. If you still struggle with viewing your singleness in a negative light, ask God to search your heart, and share these struggles in prayer with a trusted friend or mentor.

Because single people can easily feel like their singleness is a disadvantage or a deficit to them, pastors should take care to address singleness in a way that highlights its potential benefits and gifts. Emphasize the particular and unique value of single people to the body of Christ and to the world.

As God's children, we all are called to spread his word:

"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:14-16).

"Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age'" (Matt. 28:19).

Because single people often aren't responsible for nurturing a family of their own, they have the unique ability to "shine" and "go" in ways that married people cannot. We see a prime example of this in Jackie Pullinger, a missionary who lived in the infamous "Walled City" of Hong Kong and helped dozens of drug addicts discover a relationship with Christ. Countless other missionaries and influential Christians were able to serve Christ in great capacity because of their singleness; we mentioned some of these figures in chapter 1.

How else can pastors address single people in their congregation in a beneficial way? Two things are important to keep in mind: inclusivity and intent.

Inclusivity is especially important when it comes to the age range of the group you're addressing. While many single people in a congregation will be younger, there's likely a significant amount of single people over the age of 35. Make sure this older group of singles isn't overlooked when you address the single people of your congregation.

As a pastor, be intentional to reference singleness as frequently as marriage.

The topic of marriage is a frequent topic of sermons. Too often, singleness is an afterthought or rare sermon topic. Demographically, singles are becoming a larger, if not the largest demographic within some church congregations. Exposition on 1 Corinthians 7:25-38 is noticeably absent from sermons, yet these verses are so significant to those who are single. As a pastor, be intentional to reference singleness as frequently as marriage.

When a pastor plans to address the single people in their congregation, they should also spend time thinking about the intent of their message. What, specifically, are they trying to communicate, and will it help single people see their singleness as a gift? Many conferences and seminars are intended to prepare single people to become a good spouse; this intention furthers the message that singleness is a deficit, or a stage to pass through as quickly as possible. Take care to consider the way your message will be received, and the impact it could have on how the single people you're addressing view their singleness.



It's also easy to fall into the trap of teaching singles what not to do, what to stay away from, or what they should wait to do until marriage. These messages likely have good intentions behind them; for example, they may be intended to teach singles how to live into their singleness well, or how to cultivate a close relationship with the Lord in their single state. However, the negative language these messages often employ can make single people focus on what they're missing out on by not being married. Focusing on what they shouldn't do or should wait to do can even be counterproductive, and may drive single people toward the activities you're encouraging them to avoid.

Instead of heavily discussing the negatives, try teaching singles how they can live a vibrant life as a single person. Minimally mention the word "marriage" unless absolutely necessary for clarity. Focus on the positives rather than the negatives. In this way, instead of focusing on what they're missing out on, single people are more likely to realize the gifts their singleness offers them and the body of Christ.

Keeping in mind inclusivity and intent will help pastors to encourage those who might be called to lifelong singleness, and those who may desire marriage but are currently single.

In addition to addressing singleness in a positive light in the Church, pastors and leaders should also be cautious of overemphasizing marriage. Because marriage is meant to be an earthly image of Christ's relationship with the Church, and the imagery and metaphors present in marriage are so beautifully rich (just read anything by Christopher West!), it wouldn't be hard to preach countless sermons on the beauty and wonder of marriage.

Especially in today's culture, the importance of marriage may seem like a necessary topic more than ever. However, overemphasizing marriage (or speaking more about marriage than singleness in mixed settings) can send the subtle message that you aren't whole if you're not married. Try to balance time spent discussing the unique giftings of marriage and singleness; this will help each group see the benefits of their own state in life, and recognize the unique value of the other.

Fellowship is incredibly important for everyone involved in the Church; as we've already discussed, we are all members of one large family, and should view and treat each other as such. Fellowship is especially important for single people, however, because of the higher likelihood for loneliness to develop in someone who isn't married.

There are several things the Church can do (and has done) to encourage fellowship among single people. Many young adults groups have been formed for this purpose. Young adults groups run by a church typically meet weekly and gather people as young as early college or as old as their early 30's. While they aren't exclusively for singles, many attendees of young adults groups are often single because of the typical age bracket.

Young adults groups are a great way to encourage fellowship among young single people, but what about single people over the age of 35? Unfortunately, this particular demographic is often unintentionally overlooked by churches. Also, remember that singles include those who are divorced and widowed. If you are in a church that doesn't facilitate something that regularly gathers older single people, consider bringing up the need with church leadership.



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We want to encourage single people in their singleness, not focus on preparing them for marriage.

What should singles groups look like? For starters, be cautious of anything that may give the group a “matchmaker” vibe. We want to encourage single people in their singleness, not focus on preparing them for marriage. In addition, make sure to provide ample time for fellowship. This is often most successfully done around the dinner table (or the brunch table, or the tea table). Sharing food together cultivates a special kind of intimacy that lets you go deeper than surface level with people--take advantage of that!

Healthy, balanced singles groups also include the presence of those who are married. The presence of married individuals who function as volunteers or assist with events provides the positive affirmation that singles are valued and worth their attention. Including married couples who want to support the singles in their church helps alleviate negative feelings about singleness.



Take my love, my Lord, I pour
At thy feet its treasure store;
Take myself, and I will be,
Ever, only, all for Thee,
Ever, only, all for Thee.

Make sure your singles group has fun together! It's easy to fall into the weekly bible study routine. While reading the Word together is a good and necessary part of fellowship, having fun with others is one of the best remedies to loneliness. Take a retreat together, go kayaking or pumpkin picking together, have a potluck movie night or a game night! Not only will this grow your singles group by making it attractive to others, but it creates a perfect and natural setting for singles to make deep connections with people they may not otherwise.

As single people, it's incredibly important that we stay connected to the body of Christ. We've already learned about the nature of our desire and how it's meant to drive us toward fellowship with God and with others. If we don't seek after and meet that need for deep, intimate friendships, we're more likely to chase after false intimacy. Often, because of a lack of healthy singles communities in the Church, singles are connecting to other singles outside the Church in non-Christian environments. It's not wrong to have non-Christian friends, but too much time spent intimately engaging with others in worldly environments can lead us to eventually engage in behaviors that are not indicative of one who follows Christ.

Single people have a unique mission, a unique purpose, and a unique joy in this life. There is something wonderful about singleness in that it makes you more available to God, and less distracted with worldly cares. Singleness is not a punishment, and there is nothing "taken away" from single people--you were designed uniquely, to do something only you can accomplish. This is a miracle that calls to rejoice!

When seen in this light, finding enjoyment in singleness is not mandated but inevitable! Matt Chandler phrased it beautifully when he said, "Anybody that remains single and doesn't get married... you really get shortchanged if you spend the rest of your life in self-pity, and don't enter into what God can do through the singleness. I mean, you've gotta say, 'Well, Lord it looks like I'm not going to be married. I'm asking you to turn this into something beyond anything I could imagine in terms of blessings.'"

As a young woman, Corrie ten Boom had her sights set on a young man named Karel. As their friendship grew, by all appearances the interest was mutual. Corrie had every reason to believe they were headed for marriage. The following is an excerpt from ten Boom's *The Hiding Place*, and details Corrie's reunion with Karel after an extensive time apart.





I did not know

One glorious, nippy November day when all of Holland was singing with me, the doorbell rang. I was washing the lunch dishes in the kitchen, but I ran through the dining room and down the steps before the rest of the family could stir.

I flung open the alley door and there was Karel.

Beside him was a young woman. She stood smiling at me. I took in the hat with its sweeping feather, the ermine collar, the white-gloved hand resting on his arm. Then a blur seemed to move over the scene, for Karel was saying, "Corrie, I want you to meet my fiancée."

.... Somehow the half-hour passed. Somehow I managed to shake her hand, then Karel's hand, and to wish them every happiness. Betsie took them to the door. Before it clicked shut, I was fleeing up the stairs to my own room at the top of the house where the tears could come. How long I lay on my bed sobbing for the one love of my life I do not know. Later, I heard Father's footsteps coming up the stairs.... "Corrie," he began, "do you know what hurts so very much? It's love. Love is the strongest force in the world, and when it is blocked that means pain.

"There are two things we can do when this happens. We can kill the love so that it stops hurting. But then of course part of us dies, too. Or, Corrie, we can ask God to open up another route for that love to travel.

"God loves Karel--even more than you do--and if you ask Him, He will give you His love for this man, a love nothing can prevent, nothing destroy. Whenever we cannot love in the old, human way, Corrie, God can give us the perfect way."

I did not know, as I listened to Father's footsteps winding back down the stairs, that he had given me more than the key to this hard moment. I did not know that he had put into my hands the secret that would open far darker rooms than this--places where there was not, on a human level, anything to love at all. 1

Corrie never married, never birthed her own children. However, she cared for the Jews she harbored in her home with the tenderness of a mother. She became a mother and sister to many lonely women in Ravensbrück concentration camp. She gave birth to a rehabilitation center for concentration camp survivors in the Netherlands following the war. Had she married Karel and gone away with him, the six Jews she saved in her home from the Nazi regime likely would have died, and countless women would not have come to faith in the concentration camps.



Corrie, who wanted to be married, remained single for the duration of her life. Though she experienced sorrow in her singleness, singleness was ultimately not a loss, but a gain for her and countless others. It was a victory that would have been much harder to win had she been married with children.

Corrie lived into her singleness, not perfectly, but wholly, beautifully, and always learning about love. Her passion, refusal to shrink from desire, and determination to follow the Lord are a prime embodiment of the eros we are born with. She created opportunities for fellowship, sought to do the deepest good, and channeled the love God had given her to multitudes who would come to Christ. May we all live into our singleness this beautifully. Go forward with this prayer on your lips:

**Father, align my passions with your passions,
my heart with your heart, my will with your
will, so I can bear the image of Jesus.**

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