

Good afternoon. Welcome to the final session in *A Better Story: God, Sex and Human Flourishing*. As we begin tonight, let's remember the two primary goals we've had for this entire series.

1. to understand more deeply the historic, Christian, biblical doctrine of marriage, sexuality, and gender.
2. And to learn how to hold this doctrine with a posture of love and wisdom that produces a real safety and welcome for LGBTQ+ people, their families, and anyone wrestling with their sexual or gender identity.

We've been on quite a journey together over the last two months. I hope we've learned more about doctrine and posture, like two wings of an airplane: grace and truth. We've dug deep into Scripture to see not only what Christians believe, but why we believe it—refusing to settle for clichés and sound bites. And we've labored to cultivate grace and compassion for anyone who feels marginalized, or like a sexual 'other' because their struggle is different from the majority. I've tried to model a kinder, humbler, more gracious tone in how to talk about questions related to sexuality and gender. And we've asked some gay friends to help us to use the right language, to avoid saying things that are unnecessarily offensive, and to understand how the way we talk and act makes LGBTQ+ people feel.

Our structure today will be the same as it has been for the last few weeks.

We'll start by hearing again from Spencer and Dylan. They are each going to take 3 or 4 minutes to pick up where they've left off over the last few weeks. Today they are going to talk a little about the messy journey sense coming out as queer in Spencer's case, and gay in Dylan's case. And then I'll teach for about 40 minutes, and then we'll have Q&A for about 30 minutes. The first half of the Q&A will be focused on the subject I cover in the lecture. So you should have received 3 slips of paper and an index card. The 3 slips of paper are for questions or observations you have concerning my lecture. The index card is for the second half of our Q&A when Dylan and Spencer will come up here to join me in the conversation.

Alright, Spencer and Dylan come on up. Thank you so much for being here.

Prayer...

Thank you Spencer and Dylan.

Introduction

The Roman empire was a slave society.¹ In fact, ancient Rome organized its life around one of history's most extensive and complex systems of slavery.² Sprawling across five hundred years, and three continents—Rome trafficked in tens of millions of slaves.

At the time Christianity was coming onto the scene, “one in ten families in the empire owned slaves: [and] the number in the towns was probably twice that.” Slaves were everywhere, and that meant sex was freely available. Because, you see, a slave does not own his body.³

And whether it's ancient Rome, or the US South, the sexual use of slaves “is one of the most persistent, cross-cultural features of slave systems.”⁴ And so **sexual exploitation was ingrained in the whole social fabric of the Roman empire.**

About 30 years before Jesus was born, the Roman poet Horace, published his first work, the *Satires*. This exploration of the secrets of human happiness, established Horace as one of the great poetic talents of the Augustan Age. And in this celebrated book we find these lines of poetry: **“If your loins are swollen, and there's some homeborn slave boy or girl around where you can quickly stick it, would you rather burst with tension? Not I—I like an easy lay.”**⁵ You see, Christianity was born in a culture that, in the words of one historian, for freeborn men **“slaves played something like the part that masturbation has played in most cultures.”**⁶

It is so disorienting for us today to think about sexuality, sex, and gender. The gale force winds of individualism and expressivism, along with the deep stories that are everywhere today focusing on a particular view of freedom as choice, and romantic love as the great irresistible force that offers us salvation makes it very difficult for us to understand exactly what is God's good path for our bodies when it comes to sex and gender.

And so I've found it very helpful to learn about the environment in which the early church, Christianity at its beginning...the views of sex and bodies in that first century greco-roman world where Christianity emerged...I've found it helpful to see what Christianity was up against, and how they responded. I've found that this helps us to see more clearly what the truth is about sex and gender and sexuality.

And so for this last session, I'm going to teach what it means for all of us, married and single, straight and gay, cisgendered and gender minorities...what it means for all of us to discover the paths of love, to give and receive love in ways that lead to our flourishing. And to do that, I'll begin by identifying the sexual pressure points on people in the early days of Christianity. And when we see how Christians responded to these sexual expectations and pressures and beliefs, then we'll be able to see more clearly how we should respond today to the pressures we face today.

Transition: Now the pressure you faced when it came to sex at the time of Jesus depended on what group of people you were a part of. And there were three groups: free-born men, freeborn women, and slaves.

1. The Sexual Pressure on Freeborn Men in the Early Church

Let's talk first about the sexual pressure on **free-born men**.

Sex was considered **a drive, a need, like the need for food**. It was a basic human drive. And society was organized "to deliver sexual satisfaction" to free-born men "cheaply and easily."⁷ If you were a slave, you had no rights, and no business expecting rights. you would be exploited... and quite likely from an early age.⁸

So try to imagine how counter-cultural it was for the great Christian bishop, John Chrysostom, to say, as he did in one of his sermons from the 4th century: It is wrong for a married man to have sex with prostitutes or slaves. "I am...aware that most think it is adultery only to violate a married woman. But *I say* that it is wicked and licentious to have an affair even with a public whore, a slave-girl, or any other woman without a husband."⁹ And then he said, I know that "this is illogical—but it's true."¹⁰

And so, this helps us to come to grips with the fact that God's design for sex is not always accepted by society, and it doesn't always make sense to us. **We must never underestimate the remarkable oddity of Christians from the very beginning insisting that sex belongs only, exclusively in marriage.** A marriage between a man and a woman. This was so odd, even Christians found it illogical in the days of the early church spread throughout the Greco-Roman empire. And that helps us to today to remember that our society can form our viewpoints so that our own moral intuitions are not to be trusted. In that we, what we're going through now is something the church has gone through before.

2. The Sexual Pressure on Slaves in the Early Church

And this brings us to the second pressure point regarding sex for the early church: the sexual pressure on **slaves**. Remember, many, many of the first Christians were slaves. When you gathered to worship on Sunday with your church, a significant percentage...sometimes the majority of the Christians in a church were slaves.

And for them, there was a constant and unavoidable requirement to have sex, regardless of your gender or age. A slave had to satisfy the sexual demands of the freeborn males. This was an inconceivably brutal existence.

The most chilling evidence of this reality "is an iron slave collar, a typical means of preventing or punishing slave flight, discovered at Bulla Regia in North Africa; found still clasped around the neck of a skeleton, the collar's inscription reads, 'I am a slutty whore; retain me, I have fled Bulla Regia.'"¹¹

One of the most learned Christians of the 4th century was Eusebius of Caesarea. He was the Bishop of Caesarea Maritima, a great Bible scholar, and a well-regarded historian of Christianity.

He wrote the first surviving history of the Church. One of the stories he tells is the story of a woman by the name of **Potamiana**.

Potamiana was a slave, and she was a Christian. She refused the sexual advances of her owner. And here is what Eusebius wrote about the price she paid:

Endless the struggle that in defense of her chastity and virginity, which were beyond reproach, she maintained against lovers, for her beauty — of body as of mind — was in full flower. Endless her sufferings, till after tortures too horrible to describe...she faced her end with noble courage — slowly, drop by drop, boiling pitch was poured over different parts of her body, from her toes to the crown of her head. Such was the battle won by this girl.¹²

Like countless early Christian martyrs, Potamiana died because she chose to be faithful unto death rather than violate the grain of the universe, the ways of God, the will of God, the design of God for sex. And her commitment to chastity was what caused her to be turned into the government as a Christian.¹³

Transition: So we've seen the sexual pressure on free-born men, and the pressure on slaves, and finally what about the sexual pressure on freeborn women?

3. The Sexual Pressure on Freeborn Women in the Early Church

Well, to understand what a **freeborn woman** faced, we need to imagine something that is completely outside of living memory. And that is, **we need to imagine what it was like to live at a time when the average life span** was far, far shorter than it is today.

Did you know that here in the United States, in the year 1900, the average life expectancy for those who survived birth was 47 years old? This is something we've forgotten.

We live on the other side of what historians are beginning to call, "The Great Transition."

- In the 17th century in parts of Northern Europe, significant changes began to occur that gradually transformed human life expectancy. These changes had to do with agricultural technology and transportation resulting in better food production and distribution.
- Then in the 18th century, and into the later 19th century, medical innovations, including vaccines and sanitation, began to take effect along with a much better distribution of wealth and a result of all of this was a series of major advances in treating disease and applying health care on a wide spread basis.

So, in Europe, overall, the life expectancy increased from 33 years in 1800 to almost 80 years in the year 2000.

Now imagine life in the high Roman empire, when Christianity was beginning.

- The infant mortality rate was 25%—so you could count on a quarter of your children dying as infants.
- And for those who survived infancy, the ranks thinned out drastically as the years passed.¹⁴
- And for the babies who survived, the average life expectancy was in the mid-twenties.

And this is a primary reason that freeborn women were expected to marry as soon as they went through puberty. The bottom line, the unavoidable reality, was that for a woman, the ironclad pressure of society, when it came to sex, was to get married & bear children for the Roman empire.

Women in the ancient world did not have the freedom to delay or avoid marriage.¹⁵

One woman who tried was **Saint Agatha of Sicily**. (This was in the early part of the 3rd century, 231–251 AD.) God called Saint Agatha to be single. To devote her life to prayer. And there was this powerful, Roman senator who was smitten by her. And he proposed marriage numerous times. But God had called her to be single, so she declined the proposal. And so the senator had Agatha tortured—including, at least according to legend—having her breasts cut off. She was 20 years old.

A few years later, and in a town about 50 miles away, there was young woman named **Lucy** who was born to a wealthy family.¹⁶ Like Agatha she made a vow of celibacy. And then she gave her fortune away to the poor. A man who wanted to marry her, denounced her as a Christian. She was brought to trial before the Governor of Syracuse. He ordered Lucy to burn a sacrifice to the emperor's image. When she refused, she was sentenced to forced prostitution which she refused to participate in. So they burned her, and killed her with the sword.

Radical Faithfulness

Today, we live in a time that has some relevant similarities to that ancient Greco-Roman culture. For example, sex is considered by many today to be a necessity for anyone who wants to live a happy and healthy human life. And furthermore, in the protestant and evangelical church, we tend to elevate marriage as the epitome of the happy Christian life.¹⁷

“I wonder if it’s possible for us to imagine why any woman would make the choices Lucy, Agatha, or [Potamiana]...made.”

Our foremothers “embodied the possibility of a very different life from what the empire expected...for women. They wanted to live as though it were really possible for our whole lives — including our bodies — to be *for* the Lord. And people noticed.

Eusebius tells us that [Potamiana's] martyrdom was the catalyst for the conversion of Basilides, her executioner. Her complete devotion to the Lord — signified by her virginity — was a witness, one that God used to bring someone else to Christ. Radical faithfulness spoke powerfully” in the early days of Christianity, and it will again today.¹⁸

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are able to be faithful in the way that Jesus Christ is faithful. And it is through this faithfulness that the Christian view of sex, the Christian story of sex, a far, far better story than our society is offering—it is through our faithfulness to the Lord in our bodies that the better story of God, sex, and human flourishing will go public in our world today.

Christians have always acknowledged two routes for being sexually faithful. We've always had two routes for publicly declaring and displaying that God is faithful. The first route is celibacy as a single, and the second is faithfulness in marriage.

“In both conditions, Christians testify, with their bodies, to the power of God.”¹⁹

Transition: Let's talk about these two ways that we Christians are to bear witness to Jesus Christ with our bodies today. And both of these ways are acts of radical faithfulness.

Radical Faithfulness through Being Single

So first of all, let's talk about the radical faithfulness of bearing witness to God with your body today while being **single**.

Look in your Bible at **1 Corinthians 7:7**. *“I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.”* And then look at **v8**, *“To the unmarried...”* Now skip down to **v10**, *“To the married...”*

What's going on here is that Paul is describing both marriage and singleness as a gift, a calling. Being single is a calling, a gift, a vocation.

And as we've seen over and over in this series, in **Matthew 19:1–12** Jesus does a similar thing.

Now think about how radical this was in the society I described earlier.

Remember, the New Testament was written in the midst of a society where women were “considered to be valuable *as long as they were married and had lots of children*. Infertile women, especially widows or divorced women, were considered less valuable.”²⁰

And then Christianity comes along and we hear the message that in God's kingdom this is not the case. And so suddenly you find these remarkable singles! People who have found the Kingdom of God to be the source of their identity. And so to remain single and chaste, whether you were

male or female, this was a radical act of declaring “that God was your everything, so much so that you had no need of marriage and children to secure your place in society or your legacy after you died. God, and not the empire, was the meaning of life. Service in the kingdom of heaven, and not family or country, was the measure of a life well lived. Conversion through Jesus Christ, and not birthing babies, was the way to everlasting life. Holy virgins...were a powerful testament to what God could do.”²¹

This is strange to us today—the idea of being a celibate single as a calling, as a vocation for God’s kingdom. And there are two reasons that it’s hard for us to think about being single who does not have sex as a gift and a kingdom calling.

First of all, it’s difficult for us because we’re filled with the stories of our society. The stories we analyzed in our 2nd, 3rd, and 4th sessions...

- the stories of romantic love which have convinced us that love, true romantic love is our salvation.
- stories about identity. Stories that assume that people need to have sex to be happy, to be fulfilled, and to live a full and flourishing human life.
- And the **stories about freedom that have made a fetish out of choice**. And remember, this is one of those things that Christians seem to be just as committed to as non-Christians. What I’m saying is that the way our culture, both inside and outside the church, is committed to the **ideal of choice** “can make it harder for us to see how God is working in the unchosen circumstances of our lives.” Eve Tushnet, one of the most articulate gay Christians I’ve come across, wrote in her most recent book, “I’m not ‘good at’ celibacy and I would not have chosen it for myself. I don’t perceive a special call to it. Over time I think I am learning to love it, but that’s because I’ve accepted it.”²²

Second, the vocation of singleness can sound strange and threatening to those of us in the church because “Christianity, especially protestant Christianity, has reversed the early church’s celebration of celibacy. Many Christians now act as though marriage — and with it, sex — represents the fullest life possible. I frequently hear Christians equate maturity with marriage.” But we must, we must remind ourselves that while **sex is good, sex is not everything.**²³ **And sex is not the most important expression of love.**

And being single is not a character deficiency.

And not having sex is not about a lack of wholeness.

And so, for those of you who are single. When you don’t have sex, when you live as a single without having sex,

- you are a “witness to the dignity and the purpose of the body.”

- You are bearing “witness to the fact that being human is not about selfish pleasure, [that] being human is about glorifying God.”
- You are bearing “witness to the fact that there is more to life than easy indulgence.”
- And you are a “witness to the faithfulness of a God who empowers us to be faithful in singleness.”²⁴

You see, a vocation to celibacy is not just about denial, it’s not just about avoiding something. The vocation of celibacy is “a calling **into** something. Celibacy is much less about giving up and much more about opening up.”²⁵

- If you’re single, don’t wait around for life to start, for kingdom work to start. “There’s kingdom work to be done,” books to be written, cars to be fixed, hikes to go, “art to be made, friendships to cultivate, and a big world full of people desperate for an embodied witness to Jesus Christ.”
- And for all of us, instead of talking to people as if we expect everyone to get married and have children, we should talk as if everyone’s body matters and that everyone’s body can be a sign of faithfulness to God.
- Instead of saying to children, “When you get married...”, [or when you have children] we need to correct our speech patterns.
- We need to say to our children, “There are two ways Christians can live for God in this world, marriage and singleness.”
- Let’s stop telling our kids, “When you get married and have kids...” And let’s say things like, “If you get married...”

You see, we need to stop assuming that marriage is what our kids will do when they grow up; **that marriage is the default option for healthy human beings.** We need to recognize that “films like *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *The Little Mermaid* point to...marriage as the ultimate answer to life’s pain.”²⁶

- Let’s stop saying to single men and women, “When are you going to settle down?” or “Seeing anyone special?”
- Instead, let’s learn to say, “I’m blessed by the way you live for God.”

We’ve got to change the way we talk to people who are not married. Because our language, our speech patterns betray our wrong views.

- Singles aren’t in *transit*,
- Married people haven’t *arrived*.

- Single people are not *incomplete*,
- married are not *complete*.
- Single women who buy houses aren't spinsters [and] older singles aren't losers.²⁷

Men and women are precious. Period.

- And your “preciousness is unconditional...there is nothing we can do, nothing that can happen to us, that can take away our status as free, image-bearing children of the Creator.”²⁸

So if you are a single person, **the central calling of your life** is to grow in your affection for God and your neighbor. That is what it all comes down to. And that applies, by the way, to married people to.

Transition: And so now, let's talk about the radical faithfulness of bearing witness to God with your body through marriage.

Radical Faithfulness through Marriage

Okay, there are three things about marriage that we desperately need to learn in the church today, because Christians today have forgotten these three important facts.

1. For the first one, go back to that passage, **1 Corinthians c7**, that we looked at earlier.

1 Corinthians c7v7. *“I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.”* And then look at **v8**, *“To the unmarried...”* Now skip down to **v10**, *“To the married...”*

Do you see that in **1 Corinthians c7** marriage, like singleness, is a **calling**? It's **not a right**. And this is something that God teaches us as absolutely fundamental to marriage, but we've forgotten it. And so we must learn it again.

No one has a right to get married. Marriage is not a right, it's a gift. It's a calling that God gives to some of people.

Now it can be hard to think of marriage in this way. And the reason it's hard for us to know this is not because of anything from the Bible. No, it's because of our culture. Here in America, beginning in 1967, the Supreme Court has ruled on several occasions that marriage is a “basic civil right,” an issue of freedom and equality.²⁹ **And so over the past half-century, this view has seeped into our minds.**

This is the reason that we think of marriage as a civil right. But it's not. Not for gay couples. And not for straight couples.

2. **Now a second thing** we need to see about marriage is back in another passage we looked at earlier, [Matthew c19vv1–12](#).

In this passage of Scripture we see that since marriage is a gift, a calling, a vocation—**it is more than simply your private choice to enter a union**. It “involves a call from God *and a response* from two people who promise to build, with the help of divine grace, a lifelong, intimate and sacramental partnership of love and life.”³⁰

So here’s how this impacts what we’re talking about in this whole series: **the call to marriage is a particular way of serving God and the world**. And Jesus’s response to his disciples in [Matthew 19](#), clearly indicates that those who “believe that they cannot fulfill the obligations” that God places on the vocation of marriage, this person should not get married.

We’ve not only turned marriage into a right, we’ve also redefined marriage as a personal paradise, a personal choice, a way of fulfilling our personal dreams. Think about how far short we fall of helping our children and ourselves think about marriage as a calling, as a way of serving God. We really, really, really need to get this sorted out.

When I was falling in love with Janielle, I went to my dad one day. This was 26 years ago, and I can still remember, I can still remember it with crystal clarity. Dad was in the garage, which he had turned into a wood working shop. It was a Friday or a Saturday. He’s standing at the table saw, and I said to him, “I think I want to marry Janielle. How do I know if that’s God’s will or not? I’m in love with her. How can I see clearly?” And Dad’s response was exactly right. He said, “Son, the question is, can you serve God better married to her than you can being single?”

Dad knew it! He knew that marriage is for the service of God, first and foremost. **Do you know that?** Those of you who are married, do you know that your marriage is for God and his kingdom? It’s the way God has called you to serve him? Do you know that your marriage is for God, first of all?

3. The third thing we need to see about marriage is even more challenging. **The family created by marriage is NOT the most important relationship a person can have**. Let me show you what I mean.

Look at [Luke 14:26](#), **[read]**—“Jesus refused to be simply one more name in a long list of loved ones.”³¹

Flip back to [Mark 3:21, 31–35](#), **[read]**—“Here we see Jesus taking a radical step for a first century Jew. He is **redefining the family in terms of a family based on loyalty to himself**. In a culture in which ties of blood had become everything...Jesus” said there is a set of

relationships that are more important, more basic, more fundamental, and they are “based not on blood ties, but on the obedience of faith.”

Turn to **John 19:25–27**, **[read]**—Once again we see that faith and belief and obedience to Jesus transforms our familial relationships.

Now Paul picks up on this, and in his letters which fill most of the remainder of the New Testament, in these letters Paul constantly refers to the church as a *“household,”*³² and fellow churchmen as his *“brothers.”*³³

In the Old Testament, the structure of Israel was family-centered. The family was the most important, the most basic unit of society. And there are reasons for this.

But in the New Testament, things shift. The family is still important, but the church is the most basic unit of society, the most important set of relationships.

We just looked at three of the instances where Jesus is surprising his followers with this shift.

Now, this in no way jeopardizes the fact that God still has a very important role for the biological family. The New Testament is full of instructions about family life that need to be studied and obeyed. The New Testament still praises marriage and childrearing as honorable and critical vocations.

But the point that needs to be understood here is this: **the family is no longer central; it's the church that's central.**

- “The family is not God’s most important institution on earth.
- The family is not the social agent that most significantly shapes and forms the character of Christians.
- The family is not the primary vehicle of God’s grace and salvation for...[the] world...
- **Remember, “sex is not the most important expression of love...The most important expression of love and intimacy in the life of the Christian is meant to be experienced in Christian community, in the church.”**³⁴

The church is God’s most important institution on earth.

- “The New Testament views the church—rather than marriage—as the primary place where human love is best expressed and experienced.”³⁵

“Unfortunately, we know that the church often comes up short on being a community that reflects genuine love.”³⁶ Too often followers of Christ are not able to experience true intimacy in the church. But this is our charge.

- The church is supposed to be the social agent that most significantly shapes and forms the character of Christians.
- And the church is the primary vehicle of God’s grace and salvation for a waiting, desperate world.”³⁷
- The local church is the transforming power at the center of life, the only place on earth where Word, Sacrament, and Community come together.

“But this is our charge, and the church’s success in reflecting love and intimacy may make the difference in how people respond to the idea of walking out a life trajectory of faithfulness to God in sexuality and sexual expression.”³⁸

Transition: Now let’s circle back to the vocation of singleness in light of what we’ve just seen about marriage and family.

If you’re single, and you’re “lonely and longing for human relationship, there’s absolutely nothing wrong with your desire for intimacy. God isn’t capricious. He doesn’t want for you to be lonely. He doesn’t delight in broken hearts. It’s okay to long for human companionship.

But...we’ve been lead to believe that...[a romantic relationship] is God’s answer to our loneliness.

For years we have believed and taught that marriage is God’s approved way of making us complete...

- But **marriage is not God’s remedy for loneliness.**
- In the Bible, **loneliness is consistently addressed** through **fellowship** and **friendship** within the **Christian community.**³⁹

“Think of the many places in the New Testament where intimate fellowship is envisioned, like **1 John 4:7–21**, or **1 Thessalonians 2:6–8**, or Paul’s famous love poem in **1 Corinthians 13**, or Jesus’ farewell discourse in **John 13–16**...**Marriage doesn’t come up in any of these passages!...We can find real answers to our loneliness apart from marriage within the church.**”⁴⁰

This is, hands down, one of the most important issues in this entire series.

Here is how Greg Johnson, a remarkable Christian man has recently put it: “Alongside shame, the soul-crushing reality of loneliness is the largest challenge faced by many gay people” today.

And the sad fact is that “it’s a challenge that often becomes even more troubling after Christian conversion...Loneliness is brutal.”⁴¹

So think about this. For the gay Christian, “sexual attraction to members of the same sex is only one component. Another very large component is an absence of sexual attraction to members of the opposite sex. [And] for many that is the much more painful reality. Sexual temptation is something we all have to deal with. But a lack of sexual desire for members of the opposite sex is the reality that puts marriage out of reach for for so many” gay Christians. And that mean living permanently ‘uncoupled.’⁴²

Now, “imagine what it’s like for the teenager who realizes she’s gay. The thought of being alone for an entire lifetime can be crippling. Think of the older woman in [our]...church as it dawns slowly on her over the years that she will probably never marry. Think of all the pain, sorrow, and despair that might fill her heart at such a loss. And then take the couple in” our church who are trying “to conceive a child, only to realize that every promise ends in failure and every new hope becomes a dead end. Think of how hard it is for them to watch the baptism of a child or a Christmas program or to pass by the nursery at church. Think of how hard it is for them to come to church on Mother’s Day. Think of the heartache they experience when they attempt genuinely to be happy everyt ime another couple announces they’re expecting a baby. Enter into the pain of realizing God is denying you something for which your body was made. Now take all of that pain and all of that sorrow, heartache, and loss which is spread out very slowly over decades. Take all of that sorrow and loss—both of that couple with infertility and that older woman in [our] church...who will never marry. Combine all that pain. Then front-load all of it—all at once—onto a sixteen year old girl in...[our] youth group. That is her reality. Weep with her. Make sure she is not alone in that.”⁴³

Now how can we address this beast of loneliness? Well, let’s learn from Jesus.

Remember “when Jesus’ mother, Mary, and his brothers were wanting a word with Jesus, someone reminded Jesus that they—his family—were waiting on him.”⁴⁴ And Jesus pointed to his disciples and said, ***“here are my mothers and brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother”*** (Matthew 12:48–50).

Jesus redefined family for his followers. The church is family with all of its mutual duties and obligations to one another.

Church as worship service is not enough.⁴⁵

We do not need to get married in order to overcome loneliness, because our true family is the Church. “The good news of the gospel is that in Christ strangers can become family. Marriage might even hinder our life together in the church family, for it can distract from the primary goal of becoming a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁶

And we need to be the kind of church where singles can experience this reality. We need to be the kind of church where if you're single,

- we are a safe and healthy place,
- where you don't feel like a second class citizen,
- where your vocation, your calling is taken **seriously**
- and given honor and dignity.
- And being a person who is single is just as important as being married. It's just as serious, and challenging, and rewarding, and beneficial to God's kingdom as being married is.

And all of us, married people and single people, we all need to raise the children of our churches to have a **deep sense** that **God has a calling for them**, it may be marriage and it may be singleness. And may we be the kind of church, that no matter the calling, they know their loneliness will be met with deep friendship.

Because when we look at Scripture, we see that water is thicker than blood: **the waters of baptism are thicker than the blood of relatives.**

Chastity for All

And so, so as we come to the end of this series, let's remember...

“For all believers, single and married,” gay and straight, the most fundamental issue about our lives is “that we all live our lives faithfully before God, committing ourselves to him and growing through the Holy Spirit's work in our lives to greater Christlikeness. We do this in the context of our daily struggles, becoming better stewards of our sexuality, trusting God and growing in faith, recognizing that we can see our lives in the context of God's sovereign and redemptive plan.”⁴⁷

And so when it comes to sex, the will of God is chastity for all of us. By chastity I mean “the integrity—the harmony between flesh and spirit—we receive when, by God's grace, we obey Christian sexual discipline.”⁴⁸ This is God's will

- For teenagers
- for men and women who are married
- and for men and women who are single
- for those of us who are attracted to members of our same sex

- for those of us who feel deeply out of place in our own bodies,
- for those of us who wish we were another gender

We are all given the **hard, high, and ultimately infinitely valuable** calling and challenge of **chastity**.

“And chastity means far more than disciplined control of one’s appetites. Were that all it meant, there would be no need or place for chastity in heaven, when we no longer will experience the pull of sinful appetites.”

The call to chastity means that all of us, gay and straight, single and married, teenager and widower, all of us are called to

- offer our sexual life back to God,
- presenting our bodies *“as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.”* (Romans 12:1).
- Chastity means not being *“conformed to the world but being transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect”* (Romans 12:2).
- And, of course, this means discipline and control.
- All of us must restrain our sinful impulses — impulses which, if given free rein, would often satisfy themselves outside the bounds of sex within marriage between a husband and a wife.

You do not have to enter into a sexual relationship; you can, either by choice or by necessity, bypass that and seek to devote your body directly to God as members of Christ’s bride, the church.

And if you do give yourself sexually, then we have seen that “it must be done in accord with the order God establishes in creation.”⁴⁹ Remember, in **1 Thessalonians 4:3** we’re told, *“This is the will of God, your sanctification, that you abstain from porneia.”*

As a church, “we need to know how to celebrate and sustain marriage, [and] how to celebrate and sustain celibacy, and how to counsel and comfort those who, in either state, find themselves overwhelmed with conflicting and contrary desires.”⁵⁰

Conclusion⁵¹

And now, to wrap all of this up. Let’s remember Jesus’ words. Please turn to **Matthew 11:28-30**.

The governing ideas hovering in the background of this entire series of teaching are here in Jesus' amazing invitation.

[[Read the passage.]]

Jesus offers us his yoke. It is not burdensome, it's an easy yoke. A yoke is "a work instrument." Isn't it striking that when Jesus calls weary, restless people, he doesn't say,

- "Here's a mattress to lie down on."
- Or "Take a vacation."

No. What Jesus is showing us, what he's offering us is this astonishing fact: **the most restful gift that God offers to the tired is a new way to carry life, a fresh way to bear responsibilities.**⁵² Or, really, any burden.

You see, "a yoke is not a sitting instrument; it is a walking instrument. Jesus does not say, 'Take my chair and learn from me.'"

- We learn from Jesus "along the way," "by living in obedience to him."⁵³
- Life lived without Jesus, life lived in disobedience to him is, in the long-run an intolerable burden.
- We may in the short-term find shortcuts and quick fixes, seeming solutions to our problems that make life easier and happier and more fulfilling.
- But only Jesus' yoke is a restful yoke.

And here's why. The yoke, you see, is not something you carry on your own.

The picture is of a pair of oxen. And the yoke is a double yoke that would bind two oxen together. And maybe the image here is of a young, unbroken ox that is paired up with a seasoned, mature ox. And the mature ox would carry most of the load. And together they do the work, and young animal would be broken and guided and learn from the older one, as together they walk side by side.

Here's what Jesus is saying, "Become my yoke mate, and learn how to pull the load by working beside me and watching how I do it." Jesus is there, next to you, carrying most of the yoke's load. Bearing your burdens.⁵⁴ Gently, humbly teaching you. Giving you rest. Isn't that beautiful?

Remember that image as we move forward with our lives. Life without Jesus, or life out of step with Jesus is a crushing burden. Life in step with Jesus requires taking his yoke, being disciplined to his will, but it does give rest—because *he* will bear your burdens for you and with you.

Recommendation

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³ Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 27.

⁴ Kyle Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275–425* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 284.

⁵ Horace, *Sermones*, 1.2.116–119. Cited in Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 27. This is the tamest translation I could find of the infamous quote. E.g., “You don’t do you, when your penis is swelling / and there’s a maid or slave boy available / ripe for assault, prefer instead to burst with a hard-on?” in Magnus Hirschfeld, *The Homosexuality of Men and Women*, trans. Michael A. Lombardi-Nash (New York: Prometheus Books, [1913] 2000), 36.

⁶ Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 27.

⁷ Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 74.

⁸ Beth Felker Jones, *Faithful: A Theology of Sex* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 49.

⁹ Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World*, 281–82.

¹⁰ Saint John Chrysostom, *In illud: Propter fornicationes autem unusquisque suam uxorem habeat*, 1.4 in J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae cursus completus...series graeca* (Paris, 1857–86), 51: 213. Cited in Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World*, 281.

¹¹ *Inscriptiones latinae selectae* 9455. Cited in Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 48–49.

¹² Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, trans. G. Williamson (New York: Penguin, 1991), 184–85. Cited in Jones, *Faithful*, 61.

¹³ Jones, *Faithful*, 61.

¹⁴ Ephraim Radner, *A Time to Keep: Theology, Mortality, and the Shape of Human Life* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 24.

¹⁵ Jones, *Faithful*, 62.

¹⁶ Saint Lucy, also known as Lucia of Syracuse. 283–304 AD.

¹⁷ Jones, *Faithful*, 62–63.

¹⁸ Jones, *Faithful*, 62–63.

¹⁹ Jones, *Faithful*, 63.

²⁰ Preston Sprinkle, “A Biblical Conversation about Transgender Identities,” Pastoral Paper, The Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender, 14–15.

²¹ Jones, *Faithful*, 64.

²² Eve Tushnet, *Tenderness: A Gay Christian's Guide to Unlearning Rejection and Experiencing God's Extravagant Love* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2021), 48.

²³ Jones, *Faithful*, 64.

²⁴ Jones, *Faithful*, 98.

²⁵ Chris Damian, "The Meaning of Vocation," on www.spiritualfriendship.org.

²⁶ Laurie Krieg and Matt Krieg, *An Impossible Marriage: What Our Mixed-Orientation Marriage has Taught us About Love and the Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2020), 125.

²⁷ Dan Claire, "Marriage in the Beginning," a sermon preached on May 5, 2013 at The Church of the Resurrection, Washington, DC. Accessed online.

²⁸ Jones, *Faithful*, 92.

²⁹ *Loving Et Ux. v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1 (1967); *Zablocki v. Redhail* (1978); *Tuner v. Safley* (1987).

³⁰ "The Vocation of Marriage," Accessed online, www.foryourmarriage.org.

³¹ Rich Lusk, "The Church and Her Rivals: Challenges Facing the Church in Twenty-First Century America (Working Draft 2.0)," 7. Accessed online.

³² E.g., 1 Timothy 3:15

³³ E.g., 1 Corinthians 14:20

³⁴ Mark A. Yarhouse, *How Should We Think about Homosexuality*, in *Questions for Restless Minds*, ed. D. A. Carson (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022), 86–87.

³⁵ Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*, Updated and Expanded (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, [2010] 2016), 111.

³⁶ Yarhouse, *How Should We Think about Homosexuality*, 87.

³⁷ Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 67–8.

³⁸ Yarhouse, *How Should We Think about Homosexuality*, 87.

³⁹ Claire, "Marriage in the Beginning," 4.

⁴⁰ Claire, "Marriage in the Beginning," 4.

⁴¹ Greg Johnson, *Still Time to Care: What We Can Learn from the Church's Failed Attempt to Cure Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2021), 223.

⁴² Johnson, *Still Time to Care*, 223–24.

⁴³ Johnson, *Still Time to Care*, 224.

⁴⁴ Johnson, *Still Time to Care*, 224.

⁴⁵ Johnson, *Still Time to Care*, 225.

⁴⁶ John Thompson, "Marriage in the Fellowship of the Faithful," 37.

⁴⁷ Mark A. Yarhouse, *How Should We Think about Homosexuality*, in *Questions for Restless Minds*, ed. D. A. Carson (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022), 91–92.

⁴⁸ Tushnet, *Tenderness*, xx–xxi.

⁴⁹ Gilbert Meilaender, "The First Institutions," *Pro Ecclesia*, VI: 4, p449.

⁵⁰ N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion* (New York: HarperOne, 2016), 398.

⁵¹ This entire section is from Matthew Mason's lecture, "The Wounded it Heals: Gender Dysphoria and the Gospel" delivered as the third plenary session for the 2016 Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Christ Our Hope. You can find this lecture, along with two others, at <https://www.adhope.org/media>.

⁵² Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: Matthew 1-12* (rev. ed; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004), 538.

⁵³ Bruner, *The Christbook*, 539.

⁵⁴ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 129. Cited in Bruner, *The Christbook*, 541.