*Singleness & Courtship* seminar

***Idolatry, Loneliness & Contentment* in the Single Life**

**Introduction**

There are a few questions that we want to answer in today’s class. (1) What is most central in your life? God’s Word or your Idols? (2) How do you fight the idols of the single life? (3) As a single, do you struggle with loneliness and if so, what can you do about it? (4) How do you find contentment in the single life?

Why should you care about these things? Because idolatry, loneliness, and contentment are three common battles in the single life.

**The Word & Your Idols**

It’s often said that God’s Word is the most powerful force in the universe. As God spoke, the world and everything in it came into existence. Have you ever noticed the cadence in Genesis 1? It’s not, God spoke and everything was made. No, it’s more like, Day 1: “God said..” and it was made (v. 3). Day 2: “God said..” and it was made (v. 6). Day 3: “God said…” and it was made (v. 9, 11, 14, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 29). It’s like a drummer thumping: *[thump on the pulpit]* And God said…and it was made…God said…and it was made… God said…and it was made. This cadence reminds us of the power of God’s Word. God’s Word is the most powerful force in the universe. God speaks, and his words are so powerful, the world comes into existence.

What does your life revolve around as a single adult—God and his Word, or does it revolve around you? Much like planets revolving around the Sun, which sits at the center of the universe, what does your life revolve around? What is central in your universe? Don’t rush past that question…think about it for a moment. Work? Church? Family? Food? Football? Freedom? Independence? Worst of all, maybe what is central in your life is *YOU*?

We make a big deal about God and his Word being central to your life because that’s the only way you’re ever going to survive as a single Christian. The Bible is not just a book; it is a book *from* God. It was written by men, but God used the Holy Spirit to put his own words in their minds and on their paper. Because the Bible is God’s very own Word, in order to thrive as a Christian, you must make the Word central to your life. How else are you going to survive?

The apostle Paul writes in Romans 1: “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen” (1:25). One of the most despicable parts of our sinful nature is our tendency to make idols. Calvin said that our hearts are idol factories; as Paul explains it Rom 1:25, sinners worship idols. God made everything for our good, but in idolatry, we sinfully choose to replace the Creator of all things with the things he created. So, idols are God-replacements; they are anything in our life that becomes more important to us than God. Only the Lord should be of first importance in our lives. Keep in mind the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3).

In our sin, we worship, serve, and build our lives around these idols *instead of* God. What you worship is shown in how you live your life—what you think, how you spend your time, what gets priority in your life. What are you worshipping? What are you building your life around? Is it God, or is it something else? Every Christian is capable of replacing the Creator with the things of this world. No one is beyond idolatry. Are you building your life around something that matters eternally?

One of the greatest challenges in the Christian life is figuring out how to assign the proper importance to the things in our lives and prioritizing them accordingly. God’s Word does that for us, but we’re often reluctant to follow what is says because we enjoy our idols. We take certain things in our life and assign much greater significance than they actually deserve.

What are the idols of the single life?

* *Independence* – No one tells you what to do. You get to call the shots and decide whatever you want.
* *Time & Money* – As a single, you’ve got freedom to spend your time and money however you want.
* *Your Job* — If you don’t have a spouse and kids to care for, then you’ve got the time and energy to push yourself beyond what others might be able to do.
* *Sex* — It’s hard not to think about sex in a over-sexualized American culture. Sadly, this can make you feel like you will never be content without it.
* *Travel & Adventure* – Before you are constrained with a spouse and kids, you want to travel the world and have fun.
* *Children* — Especially for women, the desire to have children can be very strong.
* *Marriage* — You want a spouse because you think it will fix your loneliness, you’ll get to enjoy sex, you won’t have to make decision by yourself anymore, etc.
* *Me* — If I’ve got freedom as a single, then I want to build my life around my wants, my dreams, my favorite things, my goals, etc. If I don’t have the responsibility for a spouse or children, then I’ll live my life the way *I* want.

There are plenty of other idols that we could list, but this gives you a good taste for some of the idols in the single life. Do you indulge idols, if so, why? How can you fight your idolatry? As an example, let’s look at the idolatry of marriage and think about how to fight it.

Three thoughts on the idolatry of marriage. *First, recognize the lies that turns a good thing into an idol.* There are lots of lies you can believe that take a good gift like marriage and turn it into an enormous idol: “I am incomplete if I am not married.” “I am of second importance if I remain single.” “I’ll never be happy if I don’t get married.” “**When I get married, I won’t struggle with lust anymore—I'll be satisfied.” “When I have a spouse, I’ll be more fruitful in ministry.” “People don't want to be around me unless I'm married—it's a vetting process for people who are ‘normal.’”** Etc., etc. Do any of these lies sound familiar to you? And if so, what are you doing about them? If you haven’t thought much about your idols, a simple way to start is to write them out on paper. You might be surprised at how much more real they become when you find words to describe your idolatry.

*Second, distinguish between a good and godly desire and a self-centered demand.* Marriage is a good thing. Solomon writes: “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD” (Prov 18:22). If you hope to be married and have a spouse one day, that is a good and godly desire. But any good and godly desire turns into a demand if we find ourselves unable to live without it and therefore insisting that God *must* give it to us. Do you feel entitled to marriage? And if so, on what basis? God never guarantees marriage for anyone. No, those of us who get married should give thanks daily because we didn’t deserve to have a spouse. A spouse is a gift from God (James 1:17).

*Third, don’t revolve your life around what is uncertain and unguaranteed, but around what is certain and sure*. If you’re not guaranteed to get married and you idolize marriage—turning a good desire into a demand—you’re foolishly revolving your life around something that is uncertain. Why do that? Why build your life around something that is so tenuous? Imagine yourself standing in front of a ravine and two bridges are ahead of you. One bridge is strong, sturdy, and much more certain. It’s labeled, “Faithfulness in singleness right now.” The other bridge is old, rickety, and the planks are not very certain. It’s labeled: “An uncertain future of marriage.” Which one would you walk across? You’d walk across the sturdy bridge, right? Here’s my point: You can choose to build your life around an uncertain future of marriage. Or, you can be faithful with whatever the Lord has asked of you *right now* in your singleness. It’s good to desire marriage, and even pray for and pursue a spouse, but don’t let your entire life become captive to this one desire. Leave your future and your hope about marriage in the Lord’s hands (Matt 6:25-34).

[PAUSE FOR QUESTIONS]

**Loneliness**

One the hardest parts about being single is *loneliness*. As a Christian, how do you deal with your loneliness? It isn’t easy for anyone to feel alone, especially when you desire not to be.

There are a lot of practical suggestions I could share about fighting loneliness, like not living alone. But I want to spend our time thinking about the lies associated with loneliness that can be particularly hurtful. Let me give you a few pastoral thoughts about these lies, and in so doing, hopefully I can give you some perspective on your loneliness.

What are the lies about loneliness in the single life?

* *There must be something wrong with me if I am still alone* – You should not reason backwards, i.e., just because I’m alone I am not worthy. Loneliness is not an indicator of your merit or worth.
* *God is far away OR must not care for me if he has left me alone* – It’s tempting to think loneliness is the equivalent of God having abandoned you. But often times, we turn a blind eye to the many ways that God is caring for us. If this characterizes you, one thing you can do is to write out evidences of God’s grace in your life, and then stare at them for a while. Loneliness, not being married, being by yourself—these things should not be blinders to the good things that God is doing in your life.
* *No one understands how I feel nor cares to understand* OR *Nobody else seems to feel alone -* Really? In a church with 900 people, do you really think you are the only one going through this? As a pastor who is on the front line of people’s problems, let me assure you that you are not the only one struggling with this. This church is your family. We shouldn’t be lonely, especially in a big family. My standing up here right now is a testimony to the fact that God really does care. He cares that you are struggling with your singleness.
* *I will always be alone* – You don’t know your future. God does. Don’t take the future out of God’s hands. If you keep saying this to yourself, you’ve got the danger of becoming a self-fulfilling prophet.
* *Because I can’t help feeling lonely, I’m not responsible for it; therefore, I get to complain about it* – This is no different than saying, because my circumstances are difficult, I’m going to whine about it. Having a pity party never gets you anywhere. And in a sense, this lie is blaming God for your situation, i.e., because you are not giving me a spouse, I’m going to complain about it.
* *If I had a husband or a wife then I wouldn’t feel alone, because I have someone share my life and burdens* – The false assumption here is that only single people experience loneliness. But lots of married people struggle with loneliness, too. So don’t assume you’ve got a unique lock on loneliness.
* *Being alone is always a bad thing* – As an extrovert, I used to hate being by myself. No surprise, I read very little and spent all of my free time with people. Yet, in 1995, I went through a period of burn-out and depression. The Lord used that season to help me slow down and appreciate what he can teach me in learning to be quiet before him. Meditating, reading, reflecting on God and his Word, being silent before him—these are all hard things to do in a crowd. Even as an extrovert, the Lord used that season to show me how he can use times of being alone to strengthen my relationship with him. Is that the case for you? Are you ever okay with being alone, or is it always a bad thing for you? If so, was it wrong for Christ to retreat to quiet places by himself in order to pray (Luke 5:16)? Can you use your time alone for redemptive purposes?

How does God speak to us about our loneliness?

* As Joshua is about to enter into the promised Land with the Israelites, God says to them: *“It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed” (Deut 31:8).*
* In Isaiah, the Lord says to people of Israel: *“fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (41:10).*
* *“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps 46:1).* The psalmist confesses that he must turn to the Lord in the midst of his trouble. God is his refuge – a place to hide and find solace in the midst of difficulty.
* In speaking to his disciples, our Lord Jesus says, *“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:18).* Whether this is a reference to Jesus returning after his resurrection, or to the Holy Spirit’s coming, the point is that God does not leave us as orphans. He will come to be with us.
* The author of Hebrews reminds his readers to be content with what they have because God will never abandon them. *“Keep your life free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (Heb 13:5).*
* *“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God’” (Rev 21:3).* In the end, the ultimate hope for everyone in this room who trusts in Christ is that we will dwell with God for all eternity. The greatest hope for every believer is that in the life to come, we will have perfect fellowship with God, whether single or married.

What do you see in all of these verses? Consistently, through each one of these verses, you see how the Bible points you to God as the answer for your loneliness. Turn to him and trust him.

Do you do that? Does that characterize you? Are you quicker to distract yourself? Or do you turn to God to trust him with your singleness? Think about how you dealt with your loneliness over the last month. How much was God a part of your fighting this battle?

**Contentment**

Our discussion of idolatry in the single life and the struggle with loneliness naturally leads us to our final question: Is there any hope for me to be content? The Bible’s answer is a resounding: YES! Listen to how the Apostle Paul describes contentment in Philippians 4:10-20. [READ vv. 10-13, 19] Paul is giving thanks to the Philippians for their gift to him (4:10) and he assures them that God, in turn, will supply all of their needs (4:19). Paul explains that he was thankful for the Philippians generous gift, yet in thanking them, he didn’t want to be misunderstood. He didn’t want His ‘thank you’ to come across as a subtle request for *another* gift. So he was clear—he wasn’t in need—he had learned the secret of being content in every situation; whether he had much or little.

How might we describe contentment in the single life?

* Contentment is *not* doing what I can to just *barely* get by as a Christian, i.e., minimal effort in my spiritual life.
* Contentment is *not* building my whole life around me. Since when did selfishness ever become a recipe for happiness in the Christian life? Never!
* Contentment is *not* having plenty or having all of your needs met.
* Contentment is *not* getting married. There can be just as many (if not more) problems in the married life as there is in the single life.
* Contentment is *not* fighting your way through life on your own, though you might be tempted to do that as a single adult.

What, then, is contentment for Christians? Notice what Paul says in v. 11, “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.” Isn’t it remarkable? Paul says he learned to be content. The great apostle Paul…who was used by God to write 2/3 of the New Testament and bring the message of the gospel to the Gentiles…he had to *learn* contentment. That should give you some hope. Despite all that he knew about God and the gospel, he had to learn contentment. And if Paul had to learn it, you can learn it, too.

Paul is telling us that contentment is a satisfaction that can come independent of your circumstances or conditions or surroundings. Does that mean we are to walk around, completely indifferent to circumstances God put us in? Not at all. God uses difficult circumstances to teach us to lean on Him and rely on his grace (2 Cor 12:7-10). God calls us to be responsible even when we face difficult circumstances. Thus, we’re commanded to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling… for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13).

If we are struggling with discontentment, the million-dollar question is: What’s the “secret” of contentment (v. 12)? How can you as a single Christian be content in every circumstance you face? Paul was single, and he found contentment, right?

According to the passage, contentment comes when we do everything through him who gives us strength (v.13). You can’t make it on your own as a single Christian. You have to lean on Christ to give you strength, or you won’t make it. What an appropriate way for us to end our class on singleness—look to Christ. Look to Christ as the hope and strength for your singleness. What greater hope can we have than Christ himself?

What does contentment look like for a single Christian?[[1]](#endnote-1)

* Look to Christ, knowing that your conditions are always changing, and therefore you are not dependent upon conditions (Philippians 4:10-12)
* Look to Christ’s example of serving others rather than building your life around yourself (Mark 10:43-45; James 4:1-6).
* Look to Christ’s body, the church, in order to build redemptive relationships that protect you from this world and point you to the cross (Eph 4:11-16).
* Look to Christ to find wisdom to balance time, money, and work in a such way that they don’t become more important than they should (Ecclesiastes 3:1-15).
* Look to Christ, trusting that the Father’s plan is best and the situations and you’re in have a good purpose behind them (Rom 8:28).
* Look to Christ for patience as you continue to wait on God (Heb 6:12).
* Look to Christ, living in light of the Father’s will being done (Matt 6:11). As a single Christian, align your desires with God’s desires so that you can participate in the kingdom’s advance.
* Look to Christ, knowing that you have a loving heavenly Father who is concerned for you. Nothing happens apart from his sovereign plans; even the number of hairs on your head are numbered (Matt 7:11; 10:30).
* Look to Christ, remembering that God uses circumstances and conditions to make us more and more like Jesus (James 1:2-4)
* Look to Christ, remembering what matters most in this life is your relationship with Him (Phil 3:8). Your ultimate satisfaction in this life will only come through him.
* Look to Christ, recognizing that whatever your condition is right now, it’s only temporary. This life will pass, and nothing can rob you of the joy and hope that ultimately await you in Christ (Rom 8:35-39; Pet 1:6-7).

If you are overwhelmed by this list, know that you can’t do this on your own! Look to Christ!

[PAUSE FOR FINAL QUESTIONS]

1. Half of this list comes from Lloyd-Jones, Spiritual Depression, p. 284. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)