

Fully Alive Celibacy: The Call to Kingdom Marriage

by Stewart Ruch

Celibacy is a gift from God that requires singular devotion, focus, and mission, allowing one to live a fully alive life and imitate Jesus.

Duration: 33:22

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Topics: "Celibacy"

Description

In this sermon, Bishop Stuart Ruch discusses the concept of fully living out one's sexuality in the kingdom of God. He emphasizes that there are two ways to live out our sexuality: through marriage or through celibacy. Ruch explains that both marriage and celibacy are gifts from God, and each comes with its own rigors and demands. He references biblical passages, such as Matthew 19, where Jesus sets a rigorous vision for marriage and explains that not everyone is called to this vision. Ruch encourages his listeners to understand the temporary nature of this world and to live in light of the kingdom of God.

Transcript

This is Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois. This week's sermon, entitled, Fully Alive Celibacy, The Call to Kingdom Marriage, is by Bishop Stuart Ruch and is part five in the series. Several years ago I gave the gift of a book to a mentor of mine, only to have him a few weeks later return the gift to me.

It's a very disconcerting experience. I've always wondered why he gave the book back to me. It wasn't a mistake because I had written in the front like you do when you give the gifts of a book something about how much I appreciated him.

And I've wondered maybe he took it as a repudiation of what he had taught me that somehow through this book I was trying to bring a correction or change his views on something. Perhaps he just didn't like the book, so he gave it back to me. But I really meant it as a gift.

There are two gifts given to men and women that they might be fully alive in this life, in this world, in this journey. One gift is the gift of marriage, often referred to as a gift, the gift of my wife, the gift of my husband. And the other gift, according to Paul and according to Jesus, is the gift of celibacy.

Indeed, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7 that we'll be studying together today, he says earlier in the passage that was read for us that each has his own gift from God, one of one kind, celibacy, and one of another kind, marriage. How often, though, when it comes to the gift of celibacy, is this a gift given back? A gift that is rejected? A gift that's not viewed as a gift nor understood as a gift? Perhaps just because celibacy often seems most marked not by what it's giving or receiving, by what's absent. Celibacy may be marked by the absence of a marriage partner, the absence of family, the absence of sexual activity.

And there are only three different levels of groups who don't view celibacy as a gift. We have the general American culture, which refers to celibates as singles. I'll say a word about that in just a moment, that I would argue does not view celibacy as a gift.

We actually have the church culture, which struggles to understand celibacy as a gift and the place of celibates within the church culture. And then we have celibates themselves and their own personal struggle to receive what can often feel like a great challenge, or even for some as extreme as a curse, rather than a gift. Indeed, in American culture, it's a kind of performance lack.

It's viewed as a flaw in a person. There must be some sexual flaw in that person or relational flaw that they're celibate. Somehow or another, they haven't performed as they should, because if they had, they'd be married.

And I'm not sure that the evangelical church does much better. Certainly, marriage, family is prioritized, and indeed, marriage and family within the kingdom of God understanding is extremely important. And I will speak with Catherine very specifically to that next week.

But celibacy, singlehood, is often called or seen as incomplete. Paul gives some significant Bible real estate to the question of celibacy. It's a matter that concerned him.

And Jesus as well speaks to celibacy. And when they both speak to it, they speak to it as a call to a kingdom life, a life of singular focus, a life of telling the story of the kingdom of God, the story of the kingdom of God that one day, every single human person who has lived in Jesus and with Jesus on this earth will be in union with Jesus forever, that every single person, ultimately, when God's kingdom comes on earth as it is now in heaven, that every single person will have a kind of kingdom marriage to God. And they will not be giving and receiving of marriage as we have known it.

See our gospel reading from today. Celibacy is a call to a kingdom life of focus, a kingdom life of mission, a kingdom life of telling the story of the kingdom. Here's why I use the word celibate and not single.

I am not utterly opposed to the word single, just adamantly opposed to the word single. How's that for a negotiating room? And I've thought about this a lot, and I actually introduced this into Resurrectionist culture several years ago. Who's single if you think kingdom of God? Who's autonomous? Who's on their own? Indeed, I argued in the first sermon that Jesus is not on his own.

No, he's in total interpersonal communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Indeed, to call someone single is, I think, and I realize I use it sometimes, but it actually speaks of a very, very noxious weed that has grown up from the very troubled soil of the American fixation on the individual. And we in the church have let that come in, and we talk about people as single when they're not single at all.

Everyone is profoundly connected and in union with God and with one another in the kingdom of God. I think it's a word that says something, and we should be aware of what it says, and I will not be using it as I

teach on this. Instead, I want to use a kingdom-rich word like celibacy.

Okay, celibacy can include a lot of different groups of people, particularly in our culture now. College students are in a place of celibacy. They've kind of reached that place of adulthood, or post-high school adults that are in vocational training or have gone right into the workforce that have not married yet.

They're celibates. Some college students and those that are 18 are married, and that can be a good and beautiful thing, but the majority are celibates. Widows and widowers.

The divorced. The settled or the lifelong celibate. Those who have a sense, this is a gift from God.

I'm settled in this calling and want to live it for Jesus. And then a greater majority, the circumstantial or seasonal celibate. Those who find themselves in a place of celibacy, but it's an unwanted celibacy.

Regardless of the particularity of your celibacy, it's critical to understand that according to the Scriptures, you've been given a gift. A gift to understand, it's a gift to accept, and furthermore, it's a gift to maximize the kingdom of God. Your life is not like the introduction to a book.

It is not a preamble to the real text. Your life is not a story waiting to start. Your celibate life is a story.

Your life tells a story. The story of God's kingdom come. The story of God's kingdom not yet, when none will be married to each other, but to Jesus our groom.

I'll do a lot more with that if you're not quite clear on what I mean by that yet. So celibates live with a singular devotion. It's our first main point today.

Two, celibates live the kingdom mission. Three, celibates live the kingdom story. All right, let's go to 1 Corinthians 7. That's in your prayer journal.

If you don't have a prayer journal, we have them back there. Please pick one up before you leave. Also in your bulletin, and it's also in your Bible.

All right, 1 Corinthians 7. Okay, 1 Corinthians 7 itself is so profoundly dense, it would take several sermons to really work all of our way through it. It's a very, very dense, very, very rich chapter. But part of what's happening in 1 Corinthians 7, I think, is a kind of Paul Q&A session, which is what we've been doing here at Rez.

Paul says in the very first verse of 1 Corinthians 7, he says, Now concerning the matters about which you wrote, colon. And he goes into things. So they very likely had written him a letter saying, you know, you, you're our leader.

You're our overseer. The guys that you've got here who appointed to lead us, they can't answer these questions. So what do you think about some things? Here's some things they very likely ask, because here are things that Paul addresses.

What do you think about divorce and remarriage? Sound familiar? Yeah, so that's what we're working on. What do you think about sexuality? Sound familiar? What about married sexuality? What about celibate sexuality? How do you think about these things? What if two unbelievers are married and the believer converts? One person becomes a believer, the other one's an unbeliever. What do you do if the unbeliever wants to leave the marriage? What do you do? So they're Q&A-ing here, and Paul's working

through this.

I don't have time to fully go into this, but one of the reasons why this chapter can be confusing, because you need to get clear on where Paul is saying, you said this, and now I'm responding, or Paul's saying something. That's part of the trick of understanding 1 Corinthians 7. He's actually in a responsory mode. In 1 Corinthians 7, let's look at verses 32 to 35.

Let me read those. He says this. I want you to be free from anxieties, verse 32.

The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord, but the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. He goes on to say the same thing about married women. The first thing that Paul wants to say is that in celibacy, there is a gift of singular devotion.

There is a gift of focus, and in some ways, he's just being very pragmatic. He's not trying to overplum the spiritual depths. He's simply saying that when you're married, there are certain things you must be attentive to if you're a good husband or a good wife that the celibate does not need to be attentive to.

He's not saying the celibate doesn't live in deep community. They must. He's not saying they're not attentive to relational dynamics.

They need to be. But there's a certain intensity to the marriage dynamic that will take a great deal of your time and energy. And he's saying if you're celibate, you've been given a gift of a kind of singular devotion for the sake of the Lord, for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Scholars who have studied this have said that it's very likely that celibacy was not a well-known or embraced mode of living in the Hebrew world, in the Arabic world, or in the ancient Near Eastern Greek world. So in some ways, Paul is sort of pushing into something based on the teaching of Jesus. He didn't just make this up, and we'll get to Jesus' teachings.

He's pushing into a new area, which may be one reason why something that sounds like, wow, I mean, should anybody get married? This guy really prefers celibacy, and maybe even think it's kind of working out of his own story because he's celibate. But we know that he's not teaching against marriage because in 1 Timothy chapter 1, he critiques those who critique marriage as being so super spiritualized. They're not willing to talk about the beauty of marriage, including married sexuality, which he thinks is a very good thing.

No, he's pushing. He's pressing into new areas. He's trying to create a new understanding based on Jesus' teaching that celibacy is a way of living your life in the kingdom of God.

Indeed, now that the kingdom of God has become so clear, it's all about learning how to sacrifice your life for another. It's learning how to give your life in love for another. He's saying a celibate can give their life for love just in the same way that a married person give their life for the sake of love.

That both are called to self-sacrificial lives. And that, by the way, is how you are fully alive. And with that understanding of the kingdom of God, Paul is pushing into this and saying, we need to understand celibacy.

It's actually very important. Now, we know scripturally, as I talked about this in the Sermon on Manhood, that when we want to live an imitative life, which has to do with an embodied life and seeing those who are fully alive, we see throughout the Scriptures one example, one imitation after another of a robust, fully alive celibate life. Certainly, our Lord would be the first example.

Our Lord never married. Paul himself is an example. John the Baptist, Mary and Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany, who created this amazing ecosystem of community for the Lord Jesus in his years of ministry.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, great mind, heart, Christian leader of the mid-20th century. Dorothy Day, remarkable Roman Catholic who forged new ground for the sake of the poor mid-20th century in New York City. John Stott, Anglican scholar and luminary who maximized his celibacy.

And it's called to travel the world and teach wherever he was called to teach. You, as celibates, have everything you need to imitate Jesus and live a full, fully alive life. Indeed, there are ministries and lifestyles and kingdom adventures that you can live that a married man and a married woman cannot.

And Paul would have you realize this. Paul would have you get very strategic and clear about your celibate life and how you are to maximize it, which could happen in a hundred creative ways for the kingdom of God. But there will always be a temptation to refuse the gift, to return or attempt to return the gift.

This kind of heart refusal, always seeking a way out of celibacy. There could be an unhealthy desire for marriage. Let's be clear again.

There's a healthy desire to be married and to want that. I see nothing scripturally that would say otherwise. But there can be an unhealthy desire for marriage.

Indeed, the celibate, the married, the church, the greater culture can have an incredible idolatry around marriage and family. I know it's ironic because sometimes we feel like there isn't enough value put on family. And yet there's a certain idolatrous value put on a certain kind of picture of family.

Midwestern pastor and author Kevin DeYoung puts it this way, and I'm paraphrasing him. He said, you know that family road trip in the minivan speeding south going to Disney World? He said that can be such a sweet moment, but a wretched idol. What he's saying is that family picture can be beautiful and sweet, or it can be a wretched, demanding idol.

There can be a heart refusal to the gift of celibacy. There can also be a body refusal to the gift of celibacy. We are given two ways to live out our sexuality as human beings in the kingdom of God.

One is marriage. One is celibacy. Both require living out your sexuality in holy and beautiful ways.

Often though, celibates want to live out their sexuality as if they were married. This can be true in how a celibate relates to another person's body. This can also be true in how a celibate relates to their own body.

And this is true at all ages for those who are living celibate lives. But I want to say a specific word to our university and college students about this. It's especially easy in this kind of unusual four- to five-year season that undergraduates live in to think that you're not celibate or married, you're in a pre-married state.

Kind of in a gray never-never land. You're waiting to get married, and so you're going to kind of practice marriage, sexuality, prior to actually getting married. You don't view yourself as a celibate.

You view yourself as a pre-married. But to become sexually engaged is not simply experimentation or finally living unrepressed from those rigid family rules you grew up under or those rigid church rules that are there. It's not experimentation.

You're actually, particularly if you have two believers, you're exploiting in your sexual practice another celibate, brother or sister. See, there's a demonic inversion that's come into the understanding of the American universe of your college life. And by the way, for those of you who are Wheaton College students, I mean, those of us who are close to you know this is very true at Wheaton as well, and those of us who were you know because we were you.

Okay. So I'm not thinking isn't it great that Wheaton is a complete exception to that rule. Unfortunately and heartbreakingly, it's not.

There's a demonic inversion that says rather than college be a time for chasteness and celibacy, so you have a focus on your studies, a focus on the kingdom of God, a focus on learning a craft or a skill, a focus on developing profound friendships and relationships that can strengthen you throughout your life, a kind of holy kingdom adventure focus of doing things you could never do when you're married or with kids, rather than seeing this kind of chasteness and this celibacy as kind of propelling you forward and this great kingdom opportunity, know it's viewed as a time for profound sexual experimentation. It's a time to like to leave chasteness behind. That's an absolute demonic inversion of what is really meant to be.

You are meant in your college years to experiment in risk for the kingdom of God. But the confusion is so replete, has been so profound that all this energy and time, not to mention the heartbreak and bodily giving away of oneself is wasted. I mean just the hours alone that are wasted that could be spent for the kingdom of God.

I am not saying don't date in college. It is a great time to get to know others of the opposite sex and gender, to date in beautiful and appropriate ways. But you need to be really clear about what it means to date and stay chaste.

In the first sermon, Father Brett felt like I didn't get clear enough because he works with college students. He said that wasn't enough just to say that. Is this enough? If you're listening right now, I have my hands around my face.

Don't go anywhere below here. You don't even have to go here, by the way. But don't go beyond here.

Don't kid yourself that because you're not having intercourse, you're not sexually engaged or bonding bodily. If you cross some lines and you're here, and you're a couple and you're here, or you're a celibate and you're here, there's the power of repentance and confession and the cleansing power of Jesus. And don't leave without getting that.

The married and the celibate fight the common enemy of lust, which is a challenge for both. If you're a celibate, don't think that getting married is finally the absolute outlet where your lust can be completely satisfied. If you're not sure about that and you have close friends who are married, you can have a confidential conversation.

Talk to them. They will tell you that self-control is a key part of a healthy married sexuality as well. Don't reject the gift from God, either in your heart or in your body.

Indeed, instead, live the mission of the kingdom of God. This is not in your bulletin, but there's a fascinating section in Matthew chapter 19 about living the mission for the kingdom of God. This is where Jesus teaches on celibacy specifically.

What we see is that he has a vision for life in the kingdom of God, and he actually describes it in the context of eunuchs. In Matthew 19, disciples are talking to him about marriage, and Jesus has set the kingdom vision for marriage. It's a rigorous vision.

It's a demanding vision. It's a sobering vision. So much so that disciples say to him after he casts the vision in Matthew 19, they say, if such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.

Then Jesus says, oh, you totally misunderstood me. That's not what I meant. I don't mean to be that stern about marriage.

No, he doesn't say that. He said that everyone can receive this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. What's he saying? If you've been given the gift of marriage, you can receive this teaching.

And the grace, the gift, is a part of being married in the rigors of marriage. But not everyone can receive this. So then what do we do for those who don't receive this gift? He says, well, there's eunuchs who have been so from birth.

There he very likely speaks of a birth disorder that we actually addressed in our Q&A two weeks ago. You can listen to that online. There are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men.

These are like the official kingdom eunuchs who were castrated so they wouldn't be a threat to the king and to others they may be engaged with or be bribed, etc. And then there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. And get this again.

Let the one who's able to receive this receive it. See, Paul's just picking up on Jesus' teachings that this is a gift. He's not saying those who castrate themselves.

That is very likely not what Jesus is saying. There have been some misunderstandings around that with some early church fathers. That's not what Jesus is saying.

What he is saying is those who have received and accepted the gift very likely of celibacy for what? To be a leader in the kingdom of God. To be like a eunuch who is close to the king and serving the king, who is the head to the king. Celibacy will make no sense without a clear kingdom mission of giving away your life for others.

I think one of the reasons why celibacy can be such a torment is there hasn't been a pimp for some celibates where they are in a cul-de-sac. They're not on a highway. It's a kingdom highway where they're living their lives self-sacrificially for others.

And living our lives with mission not only makes sense of celibacy, it makes sense of your sexuality as a celibate. Roman Catholic thinker Christopher West says this, Our sexuality calls us to give ourselves away in life-giving love. The celibate person doesn't reject this call.

He or she just lives the call of giving their life away in life-giving love in a different way. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who I mentioned earlier as a celibate, wrote this, The essence of celibacy is not the suppressing of lust, but the total orientation of one's life toward a goal. I would add toward a kingdom goal.

One of the places where this can be lived out and where I see it lived out at resurrection is that celibates get involved in families. They come into families with the joy of serving that family and their mission of being involved with their children. Not all celibates, but many celibates need connection with children in some capacity and have watched this happen in families.

This, of course, requires that families have a vision for opening their lives to celibates. And they understand that the gift they've been given is a gift that they are called to share. And what you get in these mutual gift-giving moments are celibates coming into families, which can help to abide with certain kinds of loneliness.

Families being involved with celibates, which can help in the building up of their families. And there's a beautiful thing that can happen, but that requires openness on both parts. Celibacy, to be clear, is not a detachment.

It's full engagement. And let me just stop right now and say, Church of the Resurrection would not be Church of the Resurrection without all of our celibates. I think if you did the math, and you included college students, we have a majority of celibates compared to marriage.

If we were allowed to count celibate children, the celibates have it. But I think we're pretty close without the kids. So I've led this church for two decades.

There is no way we would be who we are without you. No way. Singular devotion.

Constant sacrifice. Hear all the time. I would have name upon name if I gave the name of a hall of fame of celibates who have helped build Church of the Resurrection and are building her now.

I'm just so thankful for you. For your prayers, for your fasting, for your life sacrifice. Finally, we live, celibates live the kingdom story.

They live a kingdom story. Let's go to 1 Corinthians 7 again. Let me read to you a section there that can seem kind of confusing.

1 Corinthians 7, verses 29 to 31. This is what I mean, brothers and sisters. The appointed time has grown very short.

Okay, what's Paul saying there? What he's saying is, the time before the kingdom of God is fully consummated on earth, as it is in heaven, the time when Jesus establishes the kingdom of God is relatively very short. Other places, other thinkers talk about the fact that a day is like a thousand years. Our thousand years is a day in God's sight.

He's saying, there will come a time. He wants to press in rhetorically. This is kind of a poetic section here, piece of poetry.

He wants to press in poetically to say, this is not going to last long. Either you're going to die or the kingdom of God is going to return. And both are going to happen, relatively speaking, in light of the kingdom of God in a very short time.

You need to understand that, he's saying. The appointed time has grown short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none.

Those who mourn as though they were not mourning. Those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing. Those who buy as though they had no goods.

Those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. It's kind of a poetic building there. Okay, so he's working poetically at this point.

For the present form of this world is passing away. What is he saying? What is happening? Okay, first of all, what he is giving us a picture of is that one of the core callings of the celibate is to tell the story of God's kingdom not yet. We often speak of the kingdom of God as already and not yet.

In the resurrection and crucifixion, God's kingdom is established already. And yet we know that there's a consummation. There's a fullness of the kingdom still to come.

It's not yet. In the way that marriages tell the story of God's kingdom now. Marriages tell the story that God, through Jesus, wants to marry humanity bridegroom to bride.

We'll work on that next week. That's the story that marriages tell. Husband and wife tell that story.

Okay. But the celibates tell the story of God's kingdom not yet. They tell the story of God's kingdom come.

When we pray to our Father, we pray, Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Come now, come not yet. The married are an icon of the already.

They're an icon, a kind of sacramental dance of husband and wife that echo for us the great sacramental dance of Jesus and the church. But the celibate is an icon of the not yet. It's a divine dance of humanity with God.

It tells the story of God's kingdom come. It tells the story that one day there will be no receiving and giving in marriage where we will all be married in Christ to God in union with Jesus. You're like prophets.

Those of you who are called to be celibates. You're living ahead of those of us who are called to be married. You have a kind of spiritual leadership role in that way where you're out ahead.

You're saying this is what matters the most. Our relationship with Jesus is what matters the most. That's what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 7. Now he's saying whether you're married or whether you're celibate.

He's not saying if you're married, leave your wife. He's not saying that. Of course he's not saying that.

No, he's saying everyone should have a life of singular devotion. Everyone should be so radically sold on the profundity of the kingdom of God that you would sell an entire field and give it all away for the kingdom of God. He's rallying everyone to say see the celibates, see how they live? Well, if you're married, live like that too.

Gregory of Nyssa, mid-4th century, writes an essay called On Virginitly. He's not talking about virginitly in this essay. He uses virginitly, as Paul talks about things here, to say virginitly is like a singular focus on Jesus.

In On Virginité, mid-4th century, he's critiquing the idolatry of family. He's saying everyone thinks that family is the ultimate end. For some, it is an earthly end, but not even for all.

But everyone should live chaste lives. Everyone should live virginal lives, which is to say everyone should live lives sold for the kingdom of God. Paul's not saying stop doing business, don't do commerce, don't deal with the world as if you have no dealings with it.

He's not saying don't do that. He's saying may the kingdom of God be so prominent in your heart and mind and body for everyone. He says this to marriage earlier, by the way, in 1 Corinthians 7. He says husbands, you have a sexual responsibility with your wife.

Why do you have a sexual responsibility with your husbands? But there will come seasons, you'll set apart, where you will not have sexual engagement as well. For what? Fasting and prayer. So this is the vision that Paul is putting forth.

It's a powerful vision. And you see the role you celibates have to teach us and to embody where we're all going. Now one question that could be asked if you've been tracking with the series is, wow, we've put so much on the image of God over and over again.

Image of God, image of God, right? Male and female, made in the image of God. Image of God, union with distinction. Male and female together through this union with distinction.

And they echo the reality of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit insofar as they're a union with distinction and God the Trinity is a union with distinction. So what about a celibate? How does a celibate fit in that? That's an important question. Here's the response.

The celibate fits in that, not in that they're called into physical, sexual union with a husband or a wife. They fit insofar as they are the result of a union of a man and a woman. That the celibate in themselves are a picture of the fact that husband and wife, or male and female, had to come together in some union at some point.

And no, I cannot get into artificial reproduction technologies right now. Because some of you just went there. Just don't go there yet, please.

Or it's another 50 minute sermon like last week. So celibates are an icon of the image of God insofar as union with distinction was necessary to create them. And they carry that.

Why am I saying that? Because I want to be clear with you celibates, you're not lacking anything in your work in the kingdom of God. Dr. John Clark does phenomenal work on this in a book on the Resource page, The Incarnation of God. The celibate reminds the church, as Catherine, my wife, has said so often, to me and to us as a church, we must expect more of heaven and less of earth.

Finally, celibates, you live a life of great sacrifice. It's a very sacrificial life. It's a life of longing.

Part of what you embody is not only that call to the kingdom come, but you embody a longing that is a longing for all of us to ultimately be known as we have known. That's a great sacrifice. It's very costly.

But in your longing and the longing that you embody, so you teach us that we all have an ultimate, deep, fully alive longing. A longing to live a life like the life of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. A longing of unity with deep distinction.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Thanks for listening.

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