

# Imitating Christ in Celibacy

by Stewart Ruch

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*Celibacy is a gift from God that allows us to focus our lives on living for the Lord and becoming like Jesus.*

**Duration:** 34:15

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 7:29

**Topics:** "Celibacy"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on a poetic interlude found in the Scriptures. He emphasizes the importance of living for the Lord above all else. The speaker explains that this does not mean neglecting one's responsibilities, such as loving one's spouse, but rather prioritizing the Lord in all aspects of life. He also discusses the gift of celibacy, highlighting its three facets: singular devotion for the Lord, singular mission for the kingdom, and iconic ministry for the church. The speaker shares a personal anecdote about giving a book as a gift and the unexpected response he received, illustrating the importance of recognizing and accepting the gifts and callings God has given us.

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## Transcript

Several years ago, I read a particular book that grabbed me and stirred my heart, and I did what I often do when I read a book that I really, really like, and I begin to think, wow, who can I share this book with and the ideas that are a part of this book? And so, at that time, I went out and bought a second copy of the book, and I had a man who was mentoring me, and I thought, that's who I want to give it to. I want to give the gift of this book to my mentor. So, I gave it to him, he thanked me, and then a most unusual thing happened about a week later.

I found that the book had been placed in a place where I would be sure to find it, and it was very clear that the message was, I don't want this gift. I thought, oh, he must have thought that I was loaning it to him, until I remembered that I'd actually written a page-long note to him on the title page, as many of us often do, that book, and I'll never know exactly what it was. Did he think I gave it to him to repudiate maybe his teaching or as a kind of corrective of some kind? I'll never know why that gift was rejected, why it was returned, but it's a very powerful and strong thing to reject a gift, and I'm wondering how many of you who are called to what is commonly known as the single life, what I want to talk about as the celibate life, I'm wondering how many of you have in some way returned the gift.

Perhaps you didn't understand that it was a gift. Perhaps you understood that it was something and you just don't want it, but the teaching of Scripture is that the purpose of our lives, and we've been working on

this together now for the last two weeks, this is the third week, the purpose of our lives is to imitate God, that boldly put forth by Paul in Ephesians chapter five, verse one, is be imitators of God, and we've talked about how he explains what that means by the next verse, verse two, where he says, walk in love as Christ loved us. The purpose of our lives is to become those who love, who love in Christ and actually, miraculously, supernaturally, we become those who love like Christ.

We actually, in the life journey of the Christian, can become like Jesus. We imitate him as a design and a destiny of our lives, and there are two ways that Jesus and Paul, in following Jesus and providing teaching on Jesus' teaching, there are two ways we can live the imitative life, two ways, and two ways only. One is the married life, and one is the celibate life, and both of these are referred to very specifically as gifts, I think marriage is commonly viewed as a gift.

You'll hear newly married people say often, oh, my husband, he's such a gift, oh, my wife, she's such a gift, oh, marriage, what a gift it is to me, but it's rare to hear the celibate say, oh, my singlehood, it's a gift. Rare to even hear it further elucidated, it's a gift from God. It's a gift from God so that I might live the imitative life.

Now often, this isn't usually even viewed as a gift. A gift, in a necessary play on words, is a present. A gift has to do with the presence of something or someone, and so often in celibacy, it seems like an absence.

Celibacy, more often than not, is defined as what's not there. I'm celibate because I don't have a husband. I'm celibate because I don't have a wife.

Actually, my life is marked by a sense of lack, not a sense of fullness, and generally speaking, the American culture is not gonna help you move out of that perspective. Generally speaking, in a culture like ours, which has, as we've talked about so many times, a kind of underpinning of performance, the celibate, the single, is often viewed as those who, for whatever reason, they haven't succeeded. There's some problem with them, which is ironic, right? We looked at the stats last week about how many people are unhappy in marriage, but we'll leave the ironies for another time.

What happens is there's this view that somehow the celibate, there's a flaw. There's a reason why there's an absence in their lives, and I'm not sure that the evangelical church, the conservative Protestant church, I'm not sure it's much different in its perspective. I actually think a lot, in the evangelical church, look at the one who is single and think, wow, so sad, so incomplete.

That's not the teaching of Holy Scripture. That is not the practice of the life lived throughout the traditions of the Holy Church. Indeed, celibacy is understood very clearly and very explicitly as a gift given for life in Christ.

If I have to define celibate, I'm not gonna use the word single. As a matter of fact, I chafe at that word biblically, theologically, because no person is single. No person is somehow living their lives in a vacuum.

All persons come, as we are taught in Genesis, from Adam, who's a living being. Indeed, all persons are made to have life with God in no way single and life with one another. Now, the celibate is someone called to the chaste or virginal imitate of life in and of the Lord.

Celibates have all kinds of backgrounds and ways in which they've come to the celibate gift. There are those who are post sort of high school adults, at 18 plus, young adults. And I wanna very explicitly speak to our college students this morning, for you to understand your life in a celibate vocation.

That for those of you who aren't married, which is most of you, there's a celibate calling on your life as students. The widow and the widower are called to the celibate life, the divorced. There are those who have a kind of lifelong celibate calling, a sort of settled celibate calling.

Some make holy vows within different traditions of the church, and others just have a sense or a kind of agreement between them and God. This is what I feel like I am called to for the rest of my life, and I set my compass in this direction. And then there are those who have more of the circumstantial celibate life.

It's like a seasonal celibate life. Yes, I'm celibate, I'm living celibate right now, but I wanna be married. And I feel, by the way, a healthy desire to be married.

I think I'm living it for a season, regardless of the particularities of your celibacy. I don't want you to think that as a celibate, you're still living in the introduction of the novel of your life, that somehow you're still in the preamble, and it's the part that everybody kind of moves through to get to the real meat of the story. You're not waiting for the story to start if you're living a celibate life now.

If you're living a celibate life now, you haven't sort of fallen into it by happenstance, regardless of your circumstances. If you're there now, you are in the gift of God. This is what God has called you to do.

It's a vocation and a calling, and you are empowered to live this life in an imitative way in Christ. You're not waiting for the story to start. This gift, scripturally, has at least three facets, three components to it as we look at it.

One, there's the gift of singular devotion for the Lord. Two, there's the gift of singular mission for the kingdom. And three, there's the gift of iconic ministry for the church.

That's just completely obvious, isn't it? Are you tracking with me? Iconic ministry, what do I mean? We'll do that. We're gonna get there. But let's do singular devotion and singular mission first, okay? And then we'll unwrap what it means to have the gift of iconic ministry for the church.

Look with me in 1 Corinthians 7. Here's what's going on in the church in Corinth as best as we can tell from the context and history on Corinth. There was certainly a tension in the church of Corinth. There were those, some well-intentioned, some not so well-intentioned, that wanted to live the spiritual life, the life in the spirit.

There was always a question for the leaders in Corinth, who's spiritual and who's not? And often that was used as a kind of manipulation or spiritual elitism for the leaders to decide who gets to be in the inner circle, who's in the outer circle. And what they've done is they'll capture different issues. Here they've captured the issue of marriage and celibacy.

And they've captured it out of an attempt to sort of draw a line and decide who's above the other. And what sort of created this issue is the betrothed. A betrothal is something like, it seems as best as one can tell, like engagement in our current society, although perhaps with a greater commitment moving toward marriage.

But the idea of betrothal, not unlike engagement, is that it's sort of in between. The betrothed person is on their way to marriage, but they're still officially and in reality a celibate. So it seemed like there was a question, what about the betrothed? Because if it's really spiritual to not be married, then they should not marry.

What do you do, Paul? And so that's why Paul begins, now concerning the betrothed, what he's really trying to answer is, now concerning the reality of the spiritual calling of marriage and the spiritual calling of celibacy. Prior to verse 25, which you don't have in your bulletin, but what's very important as an interpretive umbrella that sort of rides over this whole section on Paul's teaching is 1 Corinthians 7, verse 7. Paul says this. He says, now some have one gift and some have another.

I'm paraphrasing, but both are given a gift in the Lord. Paul's saying some have the gift of marriage. See Ephesians chapter five that I taught on last week.

Some have the gift of celibacy. Both are gifts, both are necessary. And then he goes on to teach from there, but he says here, there is an advantage, he says, to the calling of the celibate.

They can have a gift of singular devotion for the Lord. They're given a gift of focus. Look at verses 32 to 34.

He said, I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. Down to verse 34, the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and in spirit.

But the married woman, she's anxious about the worldly things, how to please her husband. What Paul is setting forth in this teaching is stemming from Jesus's teaching, which we'll look at in a minute from Matthew 19, which is a radical new teaching. And that is that celibacy is a vocation and gift in itself.

Several different historians of scripture will look at the Hebraic way and tell you there really wasn't a super clear understanding of celibacy in the Hebraic way. And even in the Old Testament, as you do your readings, you don't see celibacy and the call to celibacy lifted up and taught on and clarified. Indeed, marriage was the pathway to living your life in God.

And what Jesus does is he actually breaks that wide open in Matthew chapter 19. And Paul is stemming from that. And Paul is saying, oh no, there are two gifts, celibacy and marriage.

It's a radically new gift. And what Paul is saying, part of this gift is that you can focus your life not on the one you're also called to be one with, but actually you can focus your life on a kind of singular devotion to the Lord. You can have even more time and emotional and spiritual energy focused on living your life in the Lord.

If celibacy is a gift, and whenever we hear the understanding of gifts in the New Testament, it always has echoes of the great gift, the gift given at the Feast of Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. You are not called to the gift of celibacy without the gift of the power of the Holy Spirit, the gift of hope, faith, and love, as our opening colleague gave us. You don't go into the gift of celibacy unequipped or unprepared.

Now Paul's saying there's a gift given here, and it's a gift of living in the Lord, of putting your roots deep within him, that you can never know the Lord too much, that you can never come too close to a life in the Lord. And we know there are many examples of this singular devotion to the Lord. Of course, in Christ himself, we have this life of celibacy.

Now in Christ, we get a both and. He is celibate, and yet we know from Ephesians 5, he's also married to the church. It's the mystery of Christ.

In Paul, we have a very clear celibate life. In the 20th century, we see many Christian celibates who live full, engaged lives. C.S. Lewis, who thought he was a lifelong celibate, becomes a seasonal celibate, marries at the end of his life.

Edith Stein, a most important woman, and thinker, and philosopher, and nun, a convert from Judaism in the 20th century. John Stott, our own Anglican priest and leader. What Paul wants to be clear is that as you live your life in the Lord, and you live in the power of the gift of the Holy Spirit, you have everything you need as a celibate to imitate Christ.

Your life is not defined by absence. Your life is actually defined by presence. As a matter of fact, brother and sister celibates, there are things in your life that you can do in your life with the Lord that a married cannot do.

There are ministries and callings and a way of living life that you've been given that those who are called to the joys and the challenges and trials of marriage cannot live. But there's a temptation. The temptation is to refuse the gift, and you have the freedom to do so.

There's a heart refusal, which is the motions of the heart that simply is always seeking a way out of the celibate life. Always thinking, hoping, not even imagining oneself as celibate, but sort of rejecting the gift by living the imaginative life that one's not really celibate, that just around the corner, just around the moment is that special relationship, that special man, that special woman, that somehow, someday, you're gonna get out of this celibate life. It's a kind of, it can become a kind of unhealthy, it's a very healthy desire for husband or wife, but kind of unhealthy, almost obsessive desire to marry, and that can be a heart refusal of the gift.

Now, attendant with the heart refusal is a kind of bodily refusal. It's a refusal with your sexuality to receive the gift of celibacy. There are two ways to imitate Christ, marriage and celibacy.

And there are two ways to live out your sexuality, marriage and celibacy. We talked about this two weeks ago, that the design of the body as man or as woman points us to the reality that we're made for something other, that our bodies are made for something outside of us. But often celibates, this is true of all ages, but there's a particular dynamism in the college years, in the college community, where you sort of view yourselves, particularly as college students, in a kind of never, never land, sort of a gray area where I'm not yet married, not yet, please, but I'm not necessarily celibate.

That's a little heavy. I'm kind of in between. So my sexual life will sort of reflect that in between.

I'm not gonna do everything because I'm perhaps a conservative kind of Christian student, but I'm gonna do a lot. And I think that stems from a lack of understanding of the gift you've been given as a celibate. Indeed, the ancient term is your call to virginity, to the virginal life.

And you mustn't let culture and society somehow convince you that the virginal life is a naive life or a disconnected life. Within Christendom, the virginal life is an engaged life. It's actually a life that can lead to immense wisdom and understanding.

The kind of holy street wise that you truly need to be to live your life in Christ. This is not, students, the sort of season of experimentation where you can try this and try that sexually and kind of figure things out in that way. No, this is a season of celibacy where you're called to live a virginal life for the Lord in fullness and joy and engagement.

This isn't a season to somehow get free from the repression that's been a part of your life and from rigid church rules that once a part of your life. No, you're called to honor your brother, women, to honor your sister, men. It grieves the Lord when you don't treat your bodies like a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Maybe you haven't fully understood this. A word of grace and peace, perhaps you've just imbibed the water so long that's coming out of the cultural faucet that you haven't been clear on this. I think that's possible.

I think it's possible you went to a Christian school or part of a Christian youth group and you haven't gotten clear on this. But never in Holy Scripture, never in the traditions of the church has there been a calling for celibates to live out their sexuality engaged sexually with another. Now, is there appropriate romantic expression between man and woman as they date and date with the kind of intentionality? Yes, I'd say we're pretty confused about that and I don't have time to go into the details on that.

But if you're just wondering, never had anybody come to their married day and say to me, wish I'd done more sexually. Never. Here's one thought about how we understand this as a gift, concretize the reality of this as a gift.

And that is that you perhaps need some kind of concrete gift in your life that you regularly interact with that reminds you of your celibate vocation and calling. For the married in our culture, it's a ring. And it might be that a ring, I know some parents give purity rings to their adolescents as they're growing and perhaps you need a ring on your finger that reminds you of that.

Perhaps it's a necklace or it's a painting or I don't know what concrete expression it might be, but you may need something that reminds you, I didn't just fall into this and I'm not just living my life in this sort of gray existence, I'm a celibate and I'm called to celibacy and it's a gift from the Lord. But there's more. As one celibate at resurrection said to me and I talked with several, those living celibate life resurrection before this homily, they said, but you know, it became clear to me that celibacy had to be more than just being able to have a longer quiet time.

I think that's good. And just having a longer quiet time is not enough for the celibate life. Singular devotion is important, but Jesus is really clear in Matthew 19 that when he sort of inaugurates the office of celibacy, when he sort of sets this reality into place and speaks authoritatively, when he does so, he does so not for the purpose of devotion but also for the purpose of mission.

That's about a gift of singular mission for the kingdom. Look at Matthew 19, 11. We've had this read for the last three weeks as our gospel reading and the disciples are reacting to Jesus's teaching on marriage and on divorce.

And I say to him in verse 10, such as the case of a man with his wife is better not to marry. And he says to them, not everyone can receive the same, but only those to whom it is given, only those to whom it is a gift. So there are some who are called to the gift of marriage, but Jesus is very clear, not everyone's called to the gift of marriage.

You don't have to get married. If you get married, please be aware, Jesus is saying, this is a great, great calling and one with great trial and challenge. That which God has joined together, let man not put asunder.

Jesus is very clear. In the beginning, it was not so, but not everyone's called to this gift. And they say, this is the case, but not to marry.

And he says, well, there are eunuchs. There are those from birth. There are those who've been made eunuchs by men, but he says, there are also eunuchs, and this is where he's inaugurating this office, who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

Know that the one who's able to receive this gift, receive it. What Jesus is teaching here is this. When we hear eunuch, we think first and foremost, castration.

Let's just say it and get it on the table. It's there now. Okay.

But what our Lord is saying is not to be absolutely clear. One is to castrate oneself. He's not teaching that.

Eunuchs were those who were castrated, but they actually had another very full meaning. It was a part of the culture. And that's that the eunuch was a kind of head to the king.

The eunuch was that one who understood the heart of the king, worked closely with the king, and executed the mission of the king. And what Jesus is saying here is this. There are those who will be eunuchs for the kingdom.

There are those who will not engage sexually in marriage, but they will live a kind of chaste, virginal sexuality. And they will live that for the kingdom of God. Jesus is saying this is for the mission of the kingdom.

Indeed, imitative celibacy. Celibacy that is made to imitate Christ will make no sense without the mission of giving your life away for others. Having longer quiet times is not enough.

Indeed, heart of celibacy in the Christian understanding is to give your life away. It's self-donation. Christopher West, a Catholic thinker who's done some wonderful thinking on sexuality in the contemporary context says this, quote, our sexuality calls us to give ourselves away in life-giving love.

The celibate person doesn't reject this call. He just lives it in a different way. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a little bit closer to our own tradition as Anglicans, lived the celibate life.

He was engaged to be married. He was betrothed but never married and was executed in Nazi Germany before his marriage. He had 40 years as a celibate.

He says this, the essence of celibacy, the essence of chastity is not the suppressing of lust but the total orientation of one's life toward a goal. Every woman a mother, every man a father. The goal of indeed seeing spiritual children throughout the church, throughout the community.

Celibacy is not detachment. It is profound and full engagement. There are so many within this community that are living engaged and full celibate lives.

If you don't know what that looks like, come to our women's ministry. Come to our men's ministry. Get engaged.

You will find role models in this church and people who are deeply understanding these realities. We couldn't build this church without our celibates. I just want to be really clear.

We can't do this without you. The temptation in light of this mission calling though is not to necessarily reject the gift but it's to remake the gift. It's sort of to take it and exchange it in some way.

Say, oh, I've got the gift but I'd like to reform it. I'd like to remake it. Indeed, I'd like to remake this gift to my own image.

The great temptation here is not to live for mission but for kind of self-actualization. To say, hey, I've got a little bit more time and I may have a little bit more financial resources. Why not invest them in myself and in my desire for a full life and what I determine is a full life? Self-actualization sort of overcomes self-donation.

When the truth of the Christian way is self-donation leads to an actualization of the true self. Now, this is a calling of receiving profoundly from the Lord in singular devotion and in giving in a kind of singular mission for the sake of the kingdom. This is, by the way, not a place to hide if as a man you have issues with the opposite gender or as a woman you have issues with the opposite gender and somehow living a celibate life is a way that you never have to deal with the opposite gender.

Indeed, if that's the case, then there's a healing needed in the soul to bless woman if you're man and if man to bless man if you're woman. And somehow celibacy being a haven where you can hide for that perhaps well-intentioned is not because it's still self-donation. You're still a spiritual father.

You're still a spiritual mother. One of our celibates put it this way. He said, I also believe that I cannot fully embrace all the goodness of the celibate life until I can truly acknowledge how good it would have been to have been married.

And indeed, I think the true, vice versa is true as well. For the marriage, imagine, had God called me to it, how good it would have been to have been celibate. Finally, there's a gift of iconic ministry for the church.

Look back to 1 Corinthians 7, 29 to 31. What we have in verse 29 to 31 is, I think it's like a poetic interlude on Paul's part. And I think poetry is one of the ways to understand what's happening here.

But as we move into this, you remember last week when we looked at the profound mystery of marriage and we talked about the meaning of mystery and the theological understanding of mystery. I'm not gonna do all that right now, but all of those words aren't here. It's the same dynamic.

We're now moving into a profound mystery. We take off our shoes at this point. We're walking on sacred ground here.

And we have some understandings that are implicit in the scriptures made more explicit by the early church. But let's look at this little poetic interlude here, 29 to 31 first. This is what I mean, brothers, brothers and sisters.

The appointed time has grown very short. Topic sentence for the poem. Watch that.

From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none. And those who mourn as though they were not mourning. And 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. For the present form of this world is passing away.

What is Paul saying? Didn't he say in Ephesians five that a man is to love his wife and give up his life for her? And yet now he's saying, live as if you have no wife. Here's what he's saying. It's emphatic and it's poetic.

And his point is, live for the Lord first. Whether you are married or you're a celibate, live for the Lord first. Care about him first above all things.

What is kind of happening here is this kind of dynamism that occurs between what theologians call the already and the not yet. That the already is that Jesus is already resurrected. Jesus is already present in his body and in his sacraments.

Jesus is here and yet he's not yet fully here. And yet we come into a season like Advent where we wait for him and we expect his return and he hasn't fully come back and there is still evil and disease and death. And we're caught between this already where the reality is the supernatural signs and wonders are here and present and yet not yet.

And that already and not yet actually gets concretized in celibates and marriages. Marriages are a kind of icon. They're a kind of picture, that's what they mean by icon, a kind of portrayal of the already.

In marriage we see the already reality that Jesus loves the church and he's given up his life for the church on the Holy Cross. Marriages live that out. They're an icon of that.

The church needs them to reflect that reality. But it's in celibates that we get a kind of icon of the not yet. If marriage is a kind of sacramental dance, in celibacy we have a divine dance which shows us that ultimately all of our fulfillment will be found in God and God alone.

That the reality of this world is fading away and we don't live by sight but we live by faith. And the celibates are the ones who have the courage and the calling to live that kind of immediacy. It's a not yet but it's not yet now.

And you're living that kind of closeness with the Lord and that singular focus on the Lord that all of us will one day live. We're not going to a particular marriage in heaven. Jesus said very clearly in Matthew 22, there'll come a day when the resurrection fully occurs and Jesus returns, there's not gonna be the giving and taking in marriage.

There'll be one marriage, the people of God, with God himself and we're all heading that direction. But celibates, you live that icon now. And do you understand that we as marrieds need you to live that icon? We need you to live out in concrete reality that we must not idolize our children or our wives or our husbands but that we're all going the same place, ultimate life in Christ together.

See, it has to get concretized. It can't just be in our heads. Be all ready in a not yet.

And we actually share the living out of that tension now in the church. Do you see the stakes if you reject this gift or don't understand it? But there's a temptation. I mean, as my wife Catherine has taught, celibates remind us that we must expect more of heaven and less of earth.

But there's a temptation because it's hard on earth. And there's a temptation not necessarily to reject the gift, that's one temptation, or to remake it. You might understand that it's coming.

You might understand you have a celibate calling and you resent the gift at times because the specter of loneliness is always right there when it will come crashing down on you. And you can resent this gift. The celibate life like the married life requires great sacrifice.

And the arena of loneliness and facing into the reality of loneliness is one of those great sacrifices. The marriage, the marriage of children, they have their sacrifices, they have the cross. The celibates have theirs.

Oh, might we form a kind of cross-based solidarity where we bless each other. And we look at the celibates and we say, thank you. Thank you for leaving this icon of the not yet.

And the celibates say, thank you. Thank you for the sacrifices you make of leaving this icon of the already. And we bless one another and we care for one another.

Celibates, for the sake of the kingdom of God and the work of the church, the marriage needs you. And marriages, the celibates need your marriages. Imitate God, Paul says.

Walk in love as Jesus loved us and gave himself for us. An offering and a sacrifice to God. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

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