

## Intimacy and Singleness:

Yes, my name is Alicia and I have been single for 33 years and this means that I have mastered the awkward side hug and the platonic high five. When JD asked me to speak on the topic of singleness, my first thought wasn't, 'yes, I want to be the face of singleness' or 'sure, I would love to speak to thousands about intimacy in singleness!' For most of my adult life, anytime the marriage series came around, I'd get squeamish, have a feeling of dread and look for any excuse to hide in the back row, convinced that I am lacking something. The "Don't worry, Alicia, your time is coming" or "some guy will be lucky to have you" comments were endless white noise of positive intent that echoed as discouragement to my ears.

This First Love series has helped me to realize that singleness is not my primary identity. It does not define us. While I desire to one day be married, I am learning what contentment looks like as a single woman. I have experienced great joy and intimacy during this season, but I have also felt pain, bitterness and loneliness watching others receive the blessings I desire. Therefore, I do not stand before you today as a model of "successful" singleness, but rather one who is a recipient of grace and grace-filled teaching from the Spirit of God, the word, this church and a great community of friends that I live life out with.

So, what is it that I want to share with you today as a single person in a sermon on intimacy? It's clear that we live in a culture that treats sex like it's a basic necessity. Singleness is not a big deal in our culture outside the church; over half of Americans are now single and that often comes with expectations of sexual immorality. Our culture tells us that if you desire something go and get it. However, when this worldly thought is applied to sexual and emotional intimacy outside the covenant of marriage it leads to disappointment, despair and sin. In Matthew 16, the gospel teaches us that if we want to follow Christ we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him, because it's the road that leads to life. It's easy to gloss over the "deny yourself." Notice that it doesn't say "you will stop craving fleshly desires." No, being a follower of Christ involves denying yourself, even if it feels good and temporarily fills an emotional or sexual hunger. A few years ago, I read a blog that discussed the idea of denying physical intimacy for singles can be viewed through the lens of fasting. The hunger we feel in this season of fasting is a reminder that He is the Bread of Life and the One who sustains.

Everything begins in the Garden of Eden. Prior to the fall, Adam and Eve's reality was ultimate intimacy with the Creator. My soul's craving for emotional and physical intimacy is to try to restore and regain what they had in the Garden of Eden. As with all sins, we are trying to live outside of God's design in our sinful nature. For me as a non-married person, the enemy tells me that this deep and unquenchable desire can ultimately be found in the feelings and affections of another. In my attempts to fix this, I turn to the things of this world or allow good things to become ultimate things to fulfill this deficiency and as a result, I become an idolater. I am reminded that earthly marriage, as much as I desire it, is not ultimate. Rather it is a shadow of the higher reality—Christ. Only through the Holy Spirit can we find the strength to keep persevering and enduring when all we want to do is give way to the temporary satisfactions of this world or create walls to protect ourselves. He is the one who restores and redeems what we lost in Eden. He has designed us to find our ultimate fulfillment in Him, not in anything He's created.

So, what does intimacy look like for me outside of marriage then? How do men and women have healthy friendships within the body of Christ? For me, 'the phrase body of Christ' indicates that I am to view those of the opposite sex, first as brothers and not in categories such as, 'potential spouse' or 'just friends'. He's not an object to be secured but rather a brother that needs encouragement to live a life on mission as God has called us, independent of our Facebook relationship status. This has helped me navigate my heart

motivations, words and interactions with the opposite sex and discern whether I'm treating them as a brother in Christ or a temporary spouse. A practical question that I frequently ask myself is 'Would this friendship have to significantly change if either one of us got married?'. If the answer is yes, this unveils that more than likely I am seeking emotional and spiritual intimacy fulfillment beyond friendship. The phrase 'body of Christ' also indicates that intimacy can be obtained within community. For me practically, this is my small group, which is made up of men and women, married and single. I have learned to share the intimate details of my life with the body of Christ that God has given me in biblical community of brothers and sisters in Christ.

I know that there's nothing like the discussion of wisdom on sexual and emotional intimacy in singleness to make every one of us feel like we've made grave mistakes and fallen short. Romans 3 reminds us, yes, we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God but we are justified by his grace through the redemption and work of Jesus Christ on the cross. This kindness is what leads me to repentance. This kindness is what leads you to repentance. Our Savior has redeemed our pasts and has great purposes for our future to bring Him glory.

God has also been using this series to unveil my sinful view on relationships, specifically marriage. I have heard great teaching on the gospel and I have heard great teaching on marriage being the ultimate image of Christ and the Church. For the first time, those two have collided. I never realized that I viewed the obtainment of marriage through a works based lens. What I mean by that is that I have always thought I needed to say the right thing, wear the right clothes, crack the right jokes or shape my body to the right weight. This is nothing but legalism! What I've been confronted with in this series is God's grace. If marriage is the image of Christ and the church, then it is by grace and grace alone that any of us receive marriage as a gift. On my worst day, I will not deserve marriage and on my best day I will not deserve marriage.

This is becoming more clear in the unlikely story of Lazarus. In this story Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. I am learning that so often I am Lazarus. What keeps me in the grave are the fears of rejection, not being pursued and being known and not loved. But just like Lazarus, Jesus is calling me out of the grave. Most of us don't remember Martha's response. She objects and says, "But, Lord he will stink". In all honesty, perhaps my greatest fear is that a man will fully see me, know me and in my ultimate state of vulnerability respond like Martha, saying 'she is repulsive'. In those moments of fear, I have forgotten that our identity is a people who was once dead in our trespasses but have been made alive again by grace and grace alone. The story doesn't stop there. Jesus looks at Martha and says, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?". God is asking me, 'Alicia, Do you believe? and He is asking you, 'Do you believe?'. When Lazarus comes out of the grave, Jesus tells the community around him to unbind him and let him go. As a single person, I need the church and community to be a part of the unbinding process so that I may be more like Christ.

So in closing, I want to take us back to Ephesians. Paul tells us the only measure of our lives is whether or not we are living in a manner that reflects the gospel. Those of you who are married, as singles we are not incomplete, but we do need your prayers for this season of our lives to be God glorifying. For those of us who are single, press on, do not waste this season. Live a life not in search of happiness and thinking that comes only in marriage. First and foremost, keep your eyes fixed on him so that you may live a life that is worthy of the gospel.