

Single Parents

Daily Grace for the Hardest Job

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I was only two years old when my dad died an untimely death. My sisters were twelve and fourteen. Mom was stunned. She never remarried. She remained a single mom, raising me and my sisters with no co-parent. Her world was hard, her life difficult, her task burdensome.

If you are a single parent, have been a single parent, or know a single parent well, you will likely agree that it may be the hardest job in the world. Seeking to be both dad and mom—breadwinner, cook, chauffeur, comforter, dishwasher, homework helper, disciplinarian, nurse, and role model—can wear down the most hardy man or woman. Single mothers and fathers need sturdy truths from our Savior to equip them for the task.

I am not a single parent, but I know several, and I feel for them. Though I cannot sound the depths of their varied experiences, I hope that the following counsel from God's Word can guide and stabilize any single parent who seeks to know and follow Jesus.

View Yourself Fundamentally as a Christian, Not as a Single Parent

Single parents often suffer from identity confusion. As Andrew Farmer insightfully notes,

A single parent wrestles every day with a basic identity problem. Am I a single person who has parenting responsibilities? Or am I a parent who

basically lives in a single person's world?

It's tough to be both all the time.

Many of the single parents I know seek their fellowship in our singles ministry, but find it challenging to flow in the spontaneous social realm of other singles. Singles often have very little understanding of the pressures of parenting, and may prefer to not even deal with children in their world of singleness.

Other single parents seek identity with two-parent families in a parents' world. This can provide a great environment of security and training for the children . . . but then the couples go home, and instantly the singleness of single parenting once again fills the void.¹

So which identity should the single parent adopt? In one sense, neither. While our marital or parental positions describe our circumstances, they do not give us our identity. Whether you are single, a parent, or that challenging hybrid of a single parent (or parenting single?), that is not who you ARE. Who are you? Hear the apostle's words to all who belong to Jesus Christ:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26–29)

Paul highlights three common categories used to differentiate people in his day—Jew versus Greek, slave versus freeman, male versus female—and tells us that in Jesus Christ these divisions no longer exist. Paul is not blind to ethnicity or racial heritage, oblivious to master-slave workplace dynamics, or ignorant of the birds and the bees. On the contrary, elsewhere in his letters he directly addresses Jews, Greeks, masters, slaves, men, and women—people marked by the distinctions he claims no longer exist.

What is Paul's point? Simply this: Jesus Christ defines us not by our social standing, but by our connection to him. The gospel does not obliterate our social class or neuter our gender; it relativizes them. It subordinates them so that they no longer define and control us. At the end of the day, the bottom line is that we are Christians, sons and daughters of God, heirs of Abraham's promised blessing through Jesus.

How you view yourself matters immensely. I love Donald Sutherland's line in the 2003 film *The Italian Job*. Sutherland plays John, a successful but aging master thief

specializing in high-ticket art and jewel theft. Savoring their \$35 million caper, he laments to his young protégé, Charlie, how he has spent all his life as a thief and never settled down. In a fatherly tone he advises Charlie: “You know, Charlie, there are two kinds of thieves in this world: those who steal to enrich their lives, and those who steal to define their lives.” With a shaking head he adds, “Don’t be the latter. It makes you miss out on what’s really important in this life.”

In the same way I would suggest that there are two kinds of married people: those whose marriage *enriches* their lives (a good thing), and those whose marriage *defines* their lives (a bad thing). If marriage defines you, your spouse’s death or divorce has robbed you of your identity and likely has shriveled your soul. There are also two kinds of parents. If your parenting—as a single parent now or a married parent before—*enriches* you, then you can handle parental ups and downs. But if you allowed yourself to be *defined* as a married parent, then your life needs radical redefinition. It’s time to let the gospel redefine you.

The implications for you as a single parent are limitless. It means that Jesus is, and longs to be, your most significant “other,” far more than any ex-spouse you have had or any wished-for-spouse you have desired.

- “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth