*Singleness & Courtship* Core Seminar

Week 1—August 28, 2011

**Singleness & Identity**

**Introduction**

Welcome to the brand new *singleness and courtship* core seminar. What are we hoping to cover: weeks 1 – 5 is a basic theology of singleness; and weeks 6-13 deals with dating & courtship. Recognizing that our church is made up of a lot of single adults, the elders have kindly given us permission to add a couple weeks of teaching on singleness to the core seminar hour (weeks 1-5). [GO BREIFLY OVER OUTLINE IN HANDOUT.] For those of you who have been through courtship class before (weeks 6 – 13), you might think, “Been there, done that.” Yet, just wanted to encourage you to stick around for new material that we’ve added, including topics like: dating those outside the congregation, how to break up well, and a new lecture called “Things that go wrong in our courtship culture” (week 12). So we’d encourage you to stick around. Buckle your seat belts and enjoy the ride.

We’ve only got thirteen weeks, so there is a lot we can’t cover in this limited time. That’s going leave a lot of you unsatisfied because your specific topic or pet-peeve or question isn’t going to be covered. Never fear! Zach & I have included our email addresses at the bottom of each week’s handout so you can feel free to contact us as questions arise over time. We’re more than happy to meet up with folks to further pursue this topic.

**How Do We Define Ourselves?**

Our topic for today is singleness and identity. When we come to the topic of identity, we are asking and answering the question, “Who am I?” We spend our time thinking about five categories: (1) single; (2) employee; (3) son or daughter; (4) sexual being; and (5) Christian. This list is not comprehensive, but it gives us a few lenses from which we can view your identity.

***Single***

Historically speaking, I think we’re in a unique time in history to think about singleness. For hundreds of years, the general trend was that most everyone left their family of origin for one primary reason—to get married and establish your own family unit (cf. Gen 2:24). Studies show that in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, single adults made up typically only 5% of the adult US population (3% never married; 1% divorced; 1% widowed), while an overwhelming number (95%) were married. The few studies I looked at put the single population today somewhere around 45 to 46% of the adult US population.[[1]](#endnote-1) 5% to 45%--that is astronomical growth of singleness in the last half century! Why the change? A lot of factors contribute to this: average age of first marriages (early 20’s in the 1950s to late 20’s in the 1990s); rise of divorce and cohabitation; more never marrieds than ever before; and much greater mobility of adult children (e.g., long gone are the days when a child takes on the family business and lives in the same town as the parents).

In a church that has a strong marriage culture, there is a temptation to define singleness as *someone who is not married* and(consequently) someone who is a second-class Christian. There are weddings (it seems like) almost every weekend at the church, and did you get a look at how long the engagement and pregnancy list is in the CHBC newsletter? We will deal with the idolatry of marriage in week 4, but for today, I just want to establish at the outset the fact that your identity as a single adult does not have to revolve around the fact that you are not married.

You can look at a church culture that makes a big deal of marriage, and you can think, “Sometimes it is really hard to be here,” but think about it, our church culture is not the only culprit; some of you have pressure from your parents because you know one of their greatest desires is for you to get married; OR, you struggle with the feeling of being left behind because you’ve watched many of your close friends got to the altar and beyond; OR, have you consider what Mr. Webster says about singleness? How does he define it? The adjective “single” in Webster’s Dictionary means “unmarried.”

To define something according to what it is not doesn’t give you a great sense of what it really is. I would submit to you that the Bible has a much better definition. We will spend a lot more time in 1 Cor 7 next week, but from that text, I think Paul gives us a much richer definition of singleness – i.e., one who has undivided devotion to the Lord (1 Cor 7:35). That’s how we want to start. Our primary definition of singleness will be *those in our church community who have the opportunity and freedom to use their gifts in undivided devotion to the Lord*. We’ll have a lot more to say about singleness throughout the next five weeks, but shifting on to category #2….

***Employee***

Think about the expectations about being a single adult and an employee in Washington, DC. I’ve sometimes heard comments CHBC singles like, “I’m expected to work hard, work long hours, and party hard.” Because you spend a good portion of your week at work, it shouldn’t be surprising that much of your identity revolves around your job and what you do as an employee.

How can we think about our work distinctively as Christians? Because you are in your 20s, 30s, 40s, or beyond, you’ve got to sustain yourself with a decent income and a roof over your heads. Paul writes: “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need” (Eph 4:28). And from Proverbs, there a whole host of verses on work: “All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty” (14:23). “The sluggard’s craving will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work” (21:25). “Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men” (22:29). “He who works his land will have abundant food, but the one who chases fantasies will have his fill of poverty” (28:19). The bible makes it clear that as a Christian and a single adult, you have a responsibility (1) to work to provide for yourself, (2) to work hard for those who have authority over you in the workplace, (3) to work so that you have something to give to church and share with those in need, (4) to work so that one day you have the ability to provide for a wife, children, and maybe even your aging and feeble parents.

Just a few things pastorally I want to say to you as singles about your work: (1) take advantage of the freedom you have to get established in your career and to get your educational training done *now*. It is much, much more difficult if a husband or a wife and children come along to get these things done, which means you need to make up your mind and get moving on these things while you are still in this season where you have greater freedom. One young lady said to me about her work: “*I am more focused on career and not on family as a single. I am in a position to be able to dedicate time and resources my work environment without the constraints of family time.”* That*’s* agood way to view this season of life. Prov 24:27 “Finish your outdoor work and get your fields ready; after that, build your house.” The author of proverbs encourages sensible preparations before building your house. (2) Don’t set such a ridiculous pace at work because of your freedom such that it can’t be sustained, especially if you get married. Another comment from a CHBC single: *“As a single person there is the temptation to let work consume a large part of my life because I do not have a husband or family waiting for me at home.”* Be careful about this temptation! Your work should always be secondary to your spiritual priorities. Luke 14:28-33 - There is a cost to following Jesus, so no one should become a Christian without *first* considering what it requires of you to follow Christ. In regard to what we are talking about on this point: you shouldn’t let your work or school so dominate your life that they make the normal responsibilities of following Jesus impossible (or at least really hard to pursue). [#1 and #2 are meant to balance one another out.] (3) As best you can, build your life around a church where you are prospering spiritually; not around your job or your educational training. You don’t want your work or educational choices to jeopardize your spiritual growth. What you shouldn’t do is pick a new career, or apply for an education opportunity (for most here that would be graduate work), and have absolutely no consideration of where you are going to go to church. Don’t choose a new job or a new degree in another city if you don’t know if there is a good church in that same city. To do that is make your spiritual life secondary to your career and educational choices; and that is just flat out dangerous. (4) Here’s where you can run into a quandary as a single woman. Question given to me: “*“As a single woman it can be hard to know how to have right ambition in terms of making career decisions while wanting to be married - how far ahead do I think?”* Great question. Here’s my suggestion: Plan as if you were getting married (example: as a single women, don’t take on a ridiculous amount of graduate school debt; that can over-burden a marriage), so make decisions in light of the fact you might get married one day. But also plan as if you might have to provide for yourself.

***Son or Daughter***

We all come from families that help to define who we are. As a part of God’s created design, God put us in families to provide a place where we can develop as image-bearers. The good and the bad of our families shape us whether we like it or not.

It seems like the biblical pattern is for women to remain under the mantel of her father’s authority until she can be given in marriage to a husband (Gen 2:24; Judges 21:1, 7; 1 Sam 18:17; Matt 24:38; Luke 20:34). (But I’ve known some who have argued that both men and women are under their parent’s authority until married.) Whichever position you take, keep in mind you don’t have to live with your parents to be under their authority. For those who have good relationships, this works out great as your parents try to care for you, even from a distance. But for many of you, *functionally*, your relationship with your parents is not all that engaging (and for some, essentially it is non-existent), i.e. some phone calls, some visits, but essentially you live a very independent life.

A few pastoral thoughts: (1) Regardless of how much contact you have with them, you are still required to honor and respect your parents (Eph 6:1). What practically does honor and respect mean as an adult child? Listen to what they say, build as much of a relationship as the Lord would allow, but you’ve got no biblical requirement to obey them like you did when you were a child living in their home. You are grown adults; and you have established your own faith, your own finances, your own career, and even your own home, so you are no longer under their authority. Not being under your parents authority is a gradual process, though.  Normally, you're more under their authority when you're living on your own at age 22 than at age 42 even if you're still single in both situations. (2) There is a distinct difference in how you should engage Christian and non-Christian parents. For many of you who have Christian parents, for the most part, relating to them is a joy. Some of the sweetest lines I read this week was from CHBC singles describing their relationship with their Christian parents. Much harder though is to relate to non-Christian parents. As adults, you’ve got to choose your own values, your own priorities, your own life path, and that will often come in conflict with the hopes and desires of non- Christian parents. It is okay to disagree with your parents (especially if they are not Christians), and the more that disagreement is rooted in Scripture, the more certainty you can have about your disagreement. Examples: If you get a really good job offer, and you turn it down to stay in a good church, your non-Christian parents are going to think you are ruining your future. Expect conflict; but do your best to graciously disagree with them; to continue to listen to them; and to show them respect and honor. (3) An interesting question to ask is, “When I need to look to someone who is older and wiser for direction, encouragement, guidance, and support, who do I turn to?” Most of you live far from home; you don’t talk to your parents daily; you don’t seek their advice about every decision (and for some, you almost never seek their advice). You live a fairly independent life apart from your parents. Yet, you’ve still got questions and things to sort through in life. Your other single friends are great, but they’ve got about just as much understanding and wisdom about life as you do at this stage. Here’s where I’d like to appeal to you, especially if you are single, to put yourself within striking distance of older men and women in the congregation. The answer biblically to the question I just posed (i.e., who do I turn to as a single for guidance?) comes from Titus 2 and Heb 13:17. Don’t stay connected only with single adults; but be deliberate about soliciting time from older men and women in the congregation. The model is for older men and women to be pouring into younger men and women. This type of discipleship is normative for the Christian life, so if you are not experiencing it, my encouragement to you is to step out and ask for it. You want to develop older “fathers” and “mothers” in the faith, who can mentor you through life’s challenges. And I say this especially to single women, the families in this church would love the opportunity to speak into your life. Don’t ever, ever be scared to approach an elder or a family you respect for advice or counsel. According to Scripture, the elders are given the task of having a “fatherly” role (1 Thess 2:11; 1 Tim 3:5). It is a myth to think that unless you are a single male who desires pastoral ministry, you’ll never get a conversation with a pastor. Not true! On behalf of the elders and the elders’ wives I can say that we are eager to shepherd you through all of life’s challenges. (But don’t limit it to just elders’ families.) Especially if you are single woman who doesn’t have a good relationship with your father (or both parents), I want you to hear me loud and clear: Our church (and especially our elders) desire to help.

***Sexual***

We live in an over-sexualized culture, so for most of you, there can often be daily struggles with your sexuality. Mark has commented:

*“Some people think of world religions as Christianity’s main competitors. Yet I think it can be fairly said that the main competitor that Christianity faces today in the West is not Islam or Judaism. It is not atheism or Hinduism. It is eroticism—the increasingly uninhibited search for fulfilling our sexual passions in whatever form we please.”* (Dever, Promises Made: The Message of the Old Testament, p. 548)

There is lots of pressure from our culture to be sexual—people will think it very strange if you (as a single adult) are not having sex regularly (or at least trying), and even worse, if you profess to be a virgin.

Lust is a reality for both men and women. Masturbation (and for a growing number of women pornography) is a problem for both genders. There can be a real confusion as a single adult to know what to do with your sexual desires.

A few pastoral thoughts: (1) *be honest and open instead of ashamed and secretive*. Sex is a very private topic. It’s embarrassing to talk about it with anyone, let alone your spouse. You’d rather suppress your sexual desires (because the Bible tells you can’t have sex before marriage) rather than be honest about it with others. My advice: open up to a small circle of friends. It will be awkward to talk about it at first, but eventually you’ll find it a relief to have a few folks walking through life who support you in this area. (2) Be really careful about the temptations that come with a sexually pure life. The devil knows you are fighting this battle so he’s going to work overtime to undermine it. i.e., single women will feel a strong temptation to receive the overtures from non-Christian men for intimacy and emotional connection because you’re not getting the same type of attention from Christian guys at church; (3) One of the greatest dangers of singleness is the ability to isolate yourself. Another quote from a CHBC single: *“It can be confusing to know how to relate well to others and share my life when no one else sees all of my life but only that which I tell or show them about.”* Can you relate to that? Let me warn you: don’t isolate yourself. Build around you at least a few folks for whom you can be totally transparent. References: Gen 3 (Adam and Eve hid from God; from the very beginning hiding has been a consequence of sin; Prov 18:1 (“Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment”); Eph 5 (the general trajectory of Scripture is movement from darkness to light). (4) Those of you who have active sexual pasts – whether that is sex with someone or struggles with porn and masturbation – I want to remind you that the blood of Christ covers your sin (Rev 1:5 “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood”). I am here as your pastor to say God has forgiven you, and you don’t have to walk around like a white sheep with black spots all over your coats. The blood of Christ makes that coat whiter than snow. (5) If you are struggling now with some type of sexual sin, don’t fight this battle alone. We (the church and the elders) want to help.

***Christian***

We have been pursuing the idea of identity, answering the question, “Who am I”? What you find is that there are a variety of things that shape and define how you understand yourself as a Christian single. Sexuality, family background, education, work—all can have a significant impact on your identity.

What should be primary in our identities? First and foremost should be God’s perspective on our identity. Where we often get in trouble in life is when we let the things of this world—experiences, abuse, ethnicity, family, education, work, even psychological labels—become more important and more influential than God’s perspective. As Christians, we want Scripture to be the most influential in shaping and defining our understanding of ourselves. We want God and his Word to authoritatively define who we are.

As Christians, *identity confusion* occurs when we let the things of this world define us more than God’s Word. Much of the dilemma is that our experiences and our own personal interpretations about life become *authoritative* in how we define ourselves. What I know to be true (God’s Word) does not matter. What my family was like, or how I was trained, or what I do for work, or how I feel (despite how irrational they might be at times), or my difficult sexual past, all of these things become more important than God’s Word. They can temporarily rule the day.

Your fundamental identity as a single adult is that of a Christian, e.g., one who follows Christ. Just listen to how Scripture describe you: Read Eph 2:1-6; cf. Eph 4:22-24; Gal 3:26-28.

The ultimate destination for your singleness is heaven, not marriage. All other ways in which you define yourself need to be viewed through this one and most fundamental lens—that you are a Christian.

One thing I want to get across today about your singleness and your faith—I want you to see this as a unique season to take greater ownership of your faith. To many singles hear from their married friends about the unique ways that marriage help you to grow, and they assume that as a single they are limited in the ways they can grow and have to wait until marriage (if it ever comes). That is just not true. I’ll argue next week that your freedom to live without the same restraints as married folks provide wonderful opportunities for your spiritual growth.

[PAUSE FOR QUESTIONS]

1. Albert Hsu’s Singles at the Crossroads has it at 46.5% (never married; widowed; divorced; married but separated from spouse). The unmarried project ([www.unmarried.org](http://www.unmarried.org)) had it at 45% in 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)