*Singleness & Courtship* seminar

Week 3 – Sept 11, 2011

**Singleness & Relationships**

**Part 1. Relationships in the Christian Life**

We want to think today about what relationships look like in a single person’s life—what does it mean to relate to other Christians, to single adults, to married folks, to families, to children, to seniors, to people not like me, and to people who are similar to me? Not wanting to presume any knowledge, let’s start by laying out a few basics about Christian relationships in general.

***The Foundation for Christian Relationships: Unity in Christ by Faith***

First of all, the foundation for our Christian relationships is based in the unity we have through faith in Christ Jesus. Christ is the ground of any and every Christian friendship. Christians can no more be alien and stranger to one another anymore than our nose can be alien to our face. Think about the way the Bible describes unity among Christians:

* “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, *for you are all one in Christ Jesus”* (Galatians 3:28).
* Jesus prays “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, *that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you*” (John 17:20).

As Christians because we are united in Christ, we are, by definition, to be in relationship with one another. When you think of relationships in church, what (in your mind) is the binding factor? Is it Christ, or is it something else?

***The Goal of Christian Relationships: Spurring One Another on to Greater Faith, Love, Self-Sacrifice and Maturity***

While many singles will struggle with loneliness (and we’ll address this more next week); and it’s wonderful to laugh and have fun in your relationships (Prov 12:25); the primary goal of our Christian relationships is to spur one another on to greater faith, love, self-sacrifice and maturity. Think about how the Bible describes these things as key elements in our relationships:

* “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25).
* “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12-13).
* “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:11-13).
* A good way to understand the goals and expectations of Christian relationships is to do a short study on the “one another” passages through the bible. References include on the handout.

***The Nature of Our Christian Relationships: Family-like Relations***

In thinking about the basic nature of our Christian relationships in the church, we’d describe them as family-type relations. Paul writes in 1 Tim 5: “Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. *Treat* younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and *younger women as sisters*, *with absolute purity*” (I Timothy 5:1-2).

In the church, we are to treat each other as family members, as brothers and sisters in Christ. Obvious Question: What do brother and sister relations look like if they are biblical and healthy? This is not a business relationship, nor a mere acquaintance. They are not to be dealt with at a distance or only at the most superficial of levels.

How would a man treat his sister or his brother? How does a woman treat her brother or her father? There are six things that spring to mind.

*First, with care, concern, service and self-sacrifice.* We should be concerned for each other—about our physical and spiritual well-being. As family members, we should treat each other with great care. How is care demonstrated? By protecting the reputation of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ; and going out of your way to serve one another and to self-sacrifice for each other. In a typical family, we’ll do things for each other that we wouldn’t expect of anyone else. We’ll sacrifice our own needs and time for each other so that others might see the way we love as brothers and sisters in Christ.

*Second, with interest and knowledge.* Genuine family members are engaged with each other, and not emotionally distant. Relationship requires some knowledge. In fact, it is nearly impossible to have a relationship without *any* knowledge. Generally knowing each others’ lives is critical to having brotherly or sisterly relations.

*Third, with encouragement to grow spiritually.* If we are a Christian family, then our greatest priority is to see each other grow to be more like Christ. We want to gospel to be central to our family relationships and to shape how we think, feel, and live.

*Fourth, with love.* It would be easy to try to work or manipulate relationships to meet our needs. But our goal should be to show how a self-sacrificial love towards our brothers and sisters in Christ can make all the difference in the world.

*Finally, with purity.* Paul says at the end of the verse to treat each other with “absolute purity.” Paul knows that sexual sin is a real danger, so he urges men and women to be careful about how they live among each other. He wants our relationships in the family of God to be characterized by pure and holy living. Unless someone in the church is your spouse, they are to be treated as you would your own biological brother or sister.

***The Priority of Our Christian Relationships: Membership in a Local Church***

Our Christian relationships are not “context-*less*.” While it is perfectly fine to get to know Christians at work or school or other settings, the healthiest and most helpful context for these Christian relationships is in a local church. Our church is a spiritual community, in which we live out family-like relationships that give honor to God. In a church we make a self-conscious commitment to pursue biblical faithfulness together. That’s what membership is—it is a self-conscious commitment to a local body of believers; committing yourself to grow and persevere with a particular group of brothers and sisters in Christ. Very appropriately, *our church covenant* describes how we are to live together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

“We will walk *together* in brotherly love, as becomes the members of a Christian Church, *exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other and faithfully admonish and entreat one another* as occasion may require.”

“We will *rejoice at each other's happiness* and endeavor with tenderness and sympathy to *bear each other's burdens and sorrows*.”

“We will *work together for the continuance of a faithful evangelical ministry* in this church, as we sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines.”

These “together” and “each other” statements underscore the corporate and other-directed nature of the local church. So too are my Christian relationships supposed to be essentially a corporate and other-directed enterprise.

Note these lines from the church covenant are not gendered statements. While there certainly are some wise distinctions we would make based upon gender, these statements are not intended to be lived out in gender-based silos. For the covenant to be lived out and for us to have meaningful membership, there must be meaningful contact with all types of Christians. There must be brotherly and sisterly relationship between different members – single, married, old, young, male, and female.

Anonymity and alienation are anathema to the covenant we sign when we join this local church. Not only are relationships encouraged by these statements, they are a beautiful gift of God provided to us through faith in His Son and fellowship in His Church. So not only should single men and women of this church NOT ignore one another, CHBC families, and any other members, you are positively called to serve and to interact with the entire church as brothers and sisters in Christ. Ideally, it’s out of these sorts of relationships that dating and courtship will arise (we’ll get to that in the 2nd half of the class). Note my primary purpose here is not for you to find a girlfriend or a boyfriend, but to help you think about how to build spiritual relationships where you serve and build one another up in the faith.

**Part 2. The Single Life in the Context of the Church**

What we want to do now and shift gears and focus the remainder of our time by thinking very specifically about three categories of relationships within a church community: singles relating to (1) other *same*-sex single adults; (2) other *opposite*-sex single adults; and then (3) everyone else in our church community.

***Relating to Other Same-Sex Single Adults***

There are lots of blessings in relating to other same-sex single adults.

* It’s a blessing to have others going through similar life issues and struggles, like identity questions, work development and struggles, sexual temptation, etc.
* It is great to have others to just have fun with – to enjoy fellowship; shared common interests; to get support and encouragement from; etc.
* It is great to have others to relate to who have more freedom and time than families typically do.

A downfall of relating to other single adults:

* Unless you are talking to a single adult who is a decade or two ahead of you, you generally have less wisdom available to you because you just haven’t experienced certain struggles, accomplishments, and life stages. Why do I bring this up? With a lot of single adults (esp in their 20s) in our church, there is a tendency for single men or women to rely too heavily on their other single friends for advice, guidance, and support. Example: Single woman or man decides whether to continue to dating someone, and he or she only talks to his or her single friends.
* There are particular temptations that can be attached to certain seasons of life. And to only relate to those who are struggling with the same things may make things worse, not better. Examples: Single men commonly struggle with internet pornography. So it is not unusual for a single male struggling with this to relate to another single male who is also struggling, which makes sense: it feels safer to confide in someone who’s also struggling like you are. But he will likely also have way too much patience for your sin and not much wisdom in how to resist it. Or single women often struggle with a desire to get married. Relating only to other single women who struggle with this desire can quickly turn into a pity party. Someone with a spouse and three kids will give you a much different—and perhaps more balanced---perspective than a friend with no more life experience than you do. And how much better to have those conversations with an older Christian who really knows you than simply knocking on a pastor’s door and asking for an appointment.

***Relating to Opposite-Sex Single Adults***

When this class was originally taught, the elders moved quickly to the dating and courtship piece, thinking that there was generally agreement on friendship among single men and women in the congregation. However, as we taught biblically on marriage and courtship and were silent on friendship, we noticed an unhelpful trend. The elder’s silence was, it seems, being interpreted as a denunciation of friendship among single men and women in the church. Because of the carefulness and deliberateness espoused so strongly in the marriage and courtship sections, some took friendship as too much trouble and possibly confusing. Seeking to avoid any possibility of confusion or misunderstanding, friendship was exchanged for being acquaintances. We, as elders, think friendship among single men and women is an important part of being brothers and sisters in Christ in the same church. (Repeat and emphasize!) If as a guy you don’t know how to relate to a woman as a friend, how on earth will you ever relate to one as your wife?

So, what is *Christian* friendship between a single male and female? What does it mean to have brother-sister friendships?

The temptation is to treat other women or men as only a potential spouse, or to only have casual relationships, or to disregard them all together. If you approach the opposite sex through the lens of *“Am I interested or not?”* then you are not thinking biblically. You first and foremost disposition is to treat the opposite sex as brother or sister in Christ, not a potential spouse. Does that at all describe you? Do you generally approach the opposite sex as a potential mate? Or do you think of them more fundamentally (and treat them more fundamentally) as a brother or sister in Christ? If you are not at all sure how to have a biblical friendship with the opposite sex, what would it take to start today? Do you even know what it would even look like?

**The Single Friendship Continuum**

 ***Promiscuous*** ***Biblical Friendship*** ***Paranoid***

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 Leading them on 1 Tim 5:1 Fear of rejection

 “Interested” Family-like relations Protecting hearts

 Flirting Brothers & sisters in Christ Not Interested

The continuum helps to portray a spectrum, and the extremes are where the problems occur.

To the Right - *Paranoid* means: you are so scared of rejection (either because you’ve been rejected often or just because your fearful) that you don’t engage; you hear so much language about protecting the other person’s heart that you are very conservative about ever engaging (apart from casually at church or group settings); you put most folks in the “I’m not interested in them as a future spouse” category so you don’t waste your time trying to relate to them.

To the Left – *Promiscuous* means: you see every person who is attractive in the “interested” category so you do everything you can to flirt with them when opportunity is provided, either in person or on facebook or texting or email. Or you just like attention from the opposite sex, which leads you to be a bit of a flirt. You don’t really consider that you may be leading them on.

In the Middle—Biblical Balance means treating every single of the opposite sex as a brother and sister in Christ. This could include good things like protecting their heart, but a guarding of their heart emotionally and spiritually doesn’t mean the only other option is to disengage. You can relate to them in a pure, prayerful, holy, self-sacrificial and Christ-honoring way as a friend.

What helps is to get our minds about what this biblically balanced/1 Tim 5:1 category might look like. Just a few examples in this church of how I’ve observed friendship-promoting behavior among the men and women: Men try to lead spiritually focused conversations at MAC or lunch after church or in any other group settings (both formal and informal); men walk women home when it is not safe to be alone; men and women ask each other how to pray for one another; both men and women have more-than-surface-level conversations; men and women are not scared to cover a wide variety of topics but are sensitive to topics that should only be talked about with others of the same-sex; men and women demonstrate hospitality and facilitate group events that encourage fellowship among single men and women and couples or families; singles deliberately crossing over to be friends with couples and vice-versa; single men help single women with tasks that would be difficult on their own, like moving a couch or fixing a carburetor; single men or women writing thank you notes; etc. One of my many favorite stories as a pastor about the singles in this church: Non-Christian women shocked that single men would take a Saturday out to serve the women of the church by laboring behind the scenes at the Christmas tea. What a wonderful evangelistic witness.

***Relating to the Rest of the Community***

Outside of relating to other singles at church, what would it look like to relate to families, children, and seniors?

Relating to Families: The most common excuse I’ve heard from singles in relating to families is “they always seem so busy” or “I hate to be a burden to them.” Don’t let thoughts like this be an excuse to stop you from getting to know families in the church. Husbands and Wives/Fathers and mothers in this church feel a Titus 2 obligation. That is, they see that in Scripture discipling those who are younger in age and younger in faith is a normative part of the Christian life. So despite how busy they might seem, many families have made it a priority to invest in other families and singles in this church. Unfortunately in many church cultures there is a divide – the singles spend time with singles; and the married couples spends time with other married couples; and rarely do these two groups intermix. A question I most often get from singles who want a discipler who is married and even a parent: How do I get to know families in the church? My answer is not going to be profound: Initiate and ask until someone says yes. Take the responsibility to seek out a discipler if you don’t have one already. Take responsibility and seek out family if you don’t already know one. The single lady most invested in our family (Rejus) is not someone we sought out; she actually initiated the relationship with us. And we consider her as an adopted daughter. Two tips: (1) Don’t expect families to have the same freedom you do to meet up outside of their home. Example: If a single female calls my wife and asks to meet her at Starbucks for coffee, she would have to say, “no.” (As homeschooling mom and mother of 4, that’s nearly impossible!) If that same female asked if she can come over and hang out with her and the kids, she is much more likely to get a “yes.” Use your flexibility as a single adult to bend around their families less flexible calendar. (2) If you are willing to step in the family’s world rather than expect them to come out and meet up with you, you are much more likely to have more time to connect with them. And if you are willing to step into their world, you get the blessing to see Christian families “live and in action.” There are a thousand mundane moments you pick up as you observe husbands and wives/parents and children as they move through the day to day things of life, and as you have a first row seat to observe. Think about it this way, if you are single, what’s the one thing you can’t learn from your other single friends—how to be a family; that is, how do you parent kids, how do you relate to your spouse, how to manage a home, etc. Even if you never get married, that knowledge will make you dramatically more effective as a single Christian. / If you come from a good Christian family, seeing other families “do life” helps you to see how similar biblical principles can be worked out differently in different families. If you don’t come from a good Christian home, then it becomes even more of an imperative for you do this, or else when it comes your turn to start your own family, you’ll basically be figuring it out on your own. / If you want to build a relationship with a family and you don’t know where to start or you are sacred to even attempt this, call Zach, myself, or any of the other elders. We would love to help you think through this and make this a part of your life. An exhortation for families: If you haven’t ever considered folding singles into your family life then I’d challenge you to consider this as an important part of your Christian discipleship, and to see that as a clear and concrete way to demonstrate the love of God to fellow believers.

Relating to Seniors: While you might be really concerned with injecting yourself into a young family, the older folks who actually have a lot more time on their hands are the seniors in our church. There are not many left in our church. Have you considered what a blessing it might be to care for a senior adult by occasionally visiting, reading Scripture to them, praying with them or for them, helping them with task that are difficult for them, or giving them rides to church? I think you would be surprised how much blessing you’ll reap by taking the time to do this. Talk to Luke and Erin Murry if interested.

Relating to Children: One of the best opportunities you have to grow as a Christian is to take time to invest in the children of the church. I say this particularly to the single men of the church because single women volunteer much more often than men ever do. I’ve known single men get involved in CM because they want to be better prepared to be a father one day. *The blessings of trying when you don’t have kids yet: Story of Drew & Emily Bratcher watching JLM do model teaching, and how they “got it” after they saw how to engage with 4-5s.*

As a single adult, if you hear these three categories (families, children, seniors) and have absolutely no interest in trying to engage these groups, and you really prefer to just hang out with your single friends, then I’d question whether you really understand what Christianity is. If you as Christian only want to hang out with folks who are just like yourself, then you are not getting the gospel. Feel free to ask me more about this in just a minute as I answer questions.

**[PAUSE FOR QUESTIONS]**