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**Core Seminar**

**Singleness & Courtship**

**Session 8: Intimacy and Accountability**

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#### **Introduction**

Last week we looked at a courtship relationship as a series of stages. This week is the first in a number of classes when we look at different issues that you’ll face as you pursue marriage across all of those stages. So today we’ll spend most of our time looking at intimacy in the relationship—and then we’ll finish up by thinking about what it looks like to conduct a relationship in a community of other believers.

Upstairs I asked the question, “How far is too far?” And if that’s a question you’ve ever asked yourself, my hope is that today’s class can be a paradigm shift in how you think about intimacy in relationships. Because in many ways, it’s the wrong question to ask. Like playing with matches in a room full of dynamite. You know the results: spectacular and destructive. Same thing happens when we misunderstand the role of intimacy in a dating relationship.

Now, one might think that in order for a relationship to progress, you need to see what intimacy looks like, and figure out whether you can sustain a long-term intimate relationship with the person you’re dating. You know, to figure out if you can handle marriage together. But in Scripture, intimacy is the reward, the fruit of commitment—not the means of achieving it. Intimacy thrives inside commitment—and it is destructive without it.

So let me just jump right ahead to the conclusion of this part of the class. **Any sexual relationship outside of marriage is sinful and destructive.** Yes, it’s really as un-nuanced as that. But biblically, how do we get there? Let’s start by considering what the Bible’s standard is for physical intimacy outside of marriage.

**II. The Bible’s Standard**

Let’s look at three verses in the New Testament. First, Romans 13:13-14 where Paul’s been talking about how to live in light of the end, the coming night.

13  Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14  But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, *and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires*.

Paul tells us that there’s no “balancing act” between purity and indulging our desires. He simply says to “make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” Physical involvement before marriage is by definition making provision for the flesh and gratifying *my* desires. It is selfishness. My desires. My desire to feel excited. Or my desire to make you feel excited and more attracted to me. But either way, it is selfishness no matter what language you wrap it with.

Next, let’s open to 1 Thessalonians 4 where Paul describes God’s will for our lives.

3  For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; 4  that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, 5  not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; 6  that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. 7  For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. 8  Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

Our goal, verse 4, is to conduct our relationships in holiness and honor. Not giving in to passionate lust but living in a way that will produce no regrets. As you look back over whatever history you may have of dating relationships, do you see a history of holiness and honor? Or is there regret? The great news of the gospel is that there is forgiveness for our sin of the past. And, even more than that, to quote Paul in 2 Cor. 7, “godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret.”

Part of what would lead to regret is what Paul describes in verse 6: “that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter.” The NASB puts it more sharply: “that no man transgress and defraud his brother.” How could sexual immorality defraud your brother? Because the person you’re with could well someday be someone else’s spouse! When you take from marriage and try to enjoy it now, you’re stealing. Stealing, possibly, from someone else’s marriage.

So we see that we should make no provision for the flesh. That we should not steal from marriage. Finally, let’s look at 1 Timothy 5:1-2.

1  Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, 2  older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity.

How should men relate to women? As sisters, in all purity. Remember that person you’re looking at is first and foremost your brother or sister in Christ. Treat her that way. How? “In all purity.” Or as the NIV translates it, “In absolute purity.” This is the standard. Paul knows our hearts and how quickly we rationalize our sinful tendencies. He’s not speaking of relative purity—as if it’s OK so long as it’s better than what the world does. No. Absolute purity. Because our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ are part of how the gospel becomes visible. They will know you are Christians by how you love one another—and that extends to brothers and sisters in the Lord who are pursuing marriage. Remember, the gospel is at stake in how we treat each other.

Now at this point, some of you might be feeling like I’ve overplayed my hand. For some of you, it feels like I’m beating a dead horse. “I get it, I get it. Why keep reading passage after passage that tell us the same thing? Sex outside of marriage is wrong.” Well, if you feel that way there’s two things you need to hear. The first is absolute purity is the Bible’s standard. Make no provision. Do not defraud. Treat each other as brothers and sisters in all purity. It’s not just “no sexual intercourse before marriage”—but holiness and honor. Second, it’s important to feel the weight of passage upon passage because even as those who know this truth, we still disobey it. We need to listen to the force of Scripture to battle against the voices inside of us that beg to differ.

But there’s another group of Christians who are thinking something different. To you, this sounds entirely unrealistic. “So I’m to relate to my boyfriend or girlfriend the same as I do my brother or sister? Get real! Surely we can go for a looser interpretation.” But what looser interpretation is there? As it’s been said before, we don’t break God’s law so much as we break *ourselves against* God’s law. God tells it like it is. This is what is best for us. We ignore, or hedge, or compromise only to our peril and the dishonor of his name.

**Questions?**

**III. What Are the Consequences?**

So what happens when we *don’t* keep the standard God gives us? What then? Well, in his mercy God’s explained some of that to us. Let’s look at some of those consequences.

* Judgment. The last verse of Ecclesiastes makes it clear: “God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.” We will all answer to God someday for how we’ve lived—even as those who are in Christ. And our accounting will matter.
* Further sin. The Song of Songs is a beautiful, poetic description of love and intimacy in marriage. And one of the refrains that runs through the song is one of warning. “Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires” (2:7). Because, as the Song ends, “love is as strong as death.” The lover and his beloved unwrap the glories of sexual love in the Song to their great delight. But even in doing that, they remind others that beginning to unwrap these things outside of marriage is like opening Pandora’s box. You think that by touching here, or kissing there, you’ll satisfy your desires—but it’s just not true. All sexual activity is sex, and builds toward more sexual activity. That’s how we’re made. Someone might rationalize that passionate kissing is not sex. Or touching is not sex. Or everything short of penetration is not sex. But they would be wrong. It’s called foreplay, and it has a purpose. These kinds of physical involvement are kind of like the onramp to the highway of sexual intercourse. The onramp isn’t designed to be a nice resting place; it takes you onto the highway. And once you’re on the highway, the traffic by design moves in only one direction. So don’t deceive yourself into thinking that you can stay on the onramp. That’s like the bank robber who feels bad about robbing banks so he decides to take from the ATM instead. Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires. You will waken that sleeping giant to your peril, for love is as strong as death.
* Damaging future intimacy. We’ve said before in this class that courtship is designed to maximize future intimacy in marriage, not present intimacy. What we haven’t talked about so much is the interplay between intimacy now and intimacy later, in marriage. Intimacy comes from trust. Sex, for example, is so wonderful in part because it’s so vulnerable—and being vulnerable to someone you can trust is delightful. In fact, marriage is all about trust. You destroy the trust, you destroy the marriage. So when you push physical boundaries in your dating relationship, what are you doing to trust? You’re spending it, aren’t you? You’re saying that your pleasure, or the security that comes from sexual attraction, are worth more to you than that person’s holiness or relationship with Jesus. So even if you two get married, you are robbing that marriage of trust. Guys: this is one way you can practice giving yourself up for her, just as Christ game himself for the church. Lead selflessly, with her good in mind—and you’ll help her learn to trust you.s
* Damaging the present relationship. How many relationships have been destroyed because of sexual immorality? Sex—be it intercourse or foreplay—is symbiotic with commitment. But without the commitment of marriage, your relationship isn’t built to withstand the weight of sex. Soon the relationship is characterized more by shame and regret than hope and love. And the passion that could have directed it toward marriage is breaking it apart instead.

**IV. What should we do about this?**

Truly loving someone in a dating context means *not* expressing that affection sexually. I challenge you to find any married couple in this church who wishes they were more physically engaged before marriage.

So what should we do to not fall into sexual temptation during dating? Let me give you three ideas that we see in Scripture.

1. Flee. Listen to Paul in 2 Timothy 2:22 (easy reference to remember, right?) “So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.” Or Proverbs 6:27-28 where Solomon warns against getting even close to sexual temptation. “Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched?” Or Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:

“Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” (v. 18-20)

What does it look like to flee sexual temptation in a dating or courtship relationship?

* Do not do anything that is sexually arousing. Plain and simple. That means being clear and honest with each other. Get used to being honest now about what may seem embarrassing; there’s need for a lot more of that in marriage.
* Set clear guidelines. Talk about what’s appropriate and why. You don’t need to do this often, but you do need to do this periodically. Run your guidelines past a married couple you know. If you never talk about this, it’s going to be really hard to not slip further and further toward what feels right.
* Don’t be alone together in private, especially late at night. Now, I know you’re thinking, “Come on. We don’t need to be that extreme.” But why not? What does “flee from sexual immorality” mean except to be at least somewhat extreme?
* Dress modestly. That’s what 1 Timothy 2:9 tells us. Adorn yourself by who you are, not by dressing in a way that’s provocative.
* Guard your thoughts. Not only can my thought life by sinful itself, but sin in my thoughts quickly leads to sin elsewhere. Guard your thoughts.

So that’s one thing we should do: flee temptation. But there are two more:

1. Accountability. We’ll talk about this more in a few minutes. But in brief, tell a good friend what your boundaries are and ask them to ask you questions about them on a regular basis. I’d encourage you to make that person someone of the same gender (obviously) and someone who’s married. In my experience, married people tend to be far less sympathetic to boundary-crossing.

Now, by itself accountability merely restrains sin—which is a good thing—but does little to get to the heart issues behind the sin. So with your accountability partner, don’t just talk about *what* happened when you sin—but *why*. Perhaps they can give you better insight into your heart than you can by yourself.

1. Faith. Speaking of heart issues, we need to remember that a struggle against sexual immorality isn’t finally a struggle of self-discipline; it’s a struggle of faith. I feel like pushing that boundary would be good, and wouldn’t hurt anyone. But God’s Word tells me otherwise. Will I believe myself or my God? That’s why this discussion is not one of legalistic righteousness – as if we earn merit with God by obeying him in this regard. Instead, this discussion is about the gospel. It’s about believing that what he says is true and good for us, despite how things may seem at the moment. And then acting on that faith.

Remember that God is pleased by your faith (Hebrews 11:6). This area of purity will most certainly be a struggle for you. But as you trust God and obey him, you’re showing yourself, and your potential spouse, and the world around you, that what God has for you in Christ is better than indulging your desires. And that choice—for God, against your flesh—is hugely honoring to God because it shows off how good and satisfying he is for us. Remember in this struggle that what’s at stake isn’t simply your dating relationship, or your future marriage, or your clarity of conscience. What’s at stake is God’s glory and reputation. That’s what you want to build this relationship around.

**Questions?**

**V. Emotional Intimacy**

We’ve spent a lot of time talking about physical intimacy in a relationship; let’s take a few minutes to think about its emotional cousin. What do I mean by emotional intimacy? I’m referring to the depth of issues that you talk about in the relationship and the level of emotional dependence there is between you. Talking about last month’s vacation doesn’t imply a high degree of emotional intimacy; talking about the abuse I suffered as a child does. Talking a few times a week doesn’t imply a high degree of emotional intimacy; feeling like my day isn’t complete until my significant other hears everything that happened—that does.

They key verse to remember here is Proverbs 4:23, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.” Or, to use an older translation, “Above all else, guard your heart.”

Emotional intimacy will grow with the relationship. That’s inevitable and good. But Proverbs 4 warns against jumping in too deep too quickly. As we’ve mentioned before in this class, commitment should precede intimacy. At the beginning of the relationship where there’s not a lot of commitment, be careful not to become too emotionally dependent on each other, or to share things that are deeply personal. At the beginning, your boyfriend or girlfriend should *not* be your primary confidant and they should *not* be your primary advisor. It’s OK to have deep, dark secrets that you haven’t shared with each other. As you move toward engagement, this is going to change, of course. By the time you’re engaged you should have shared with each other anything in your past that could influence whether or not you get married. And as an engaged couple, you *do* want your fiancé(e) to be your primary advisor and increasingly, your primary confidant. For many couples, prayer together is something that builds emotional intimacy. So save long times of prayer together for later in your relationship, not something you do at first.

This is a tricky area because Scripture doesn’t provide any clear guidelines on “how close is too close” from an emotional standpoint. So it’s a good thing to talk about periodically in your relationship and to talk about with those who know your relationship well. Are you being vigilant in guarding each other’s hearts? And guys, as the leader in the relationship, this is something that falls especially to you.

**VI. Your relationship in community**

OK. One last topic to cover. I’ve already mentioned the role that others should play in your relationship; let’s finish our time by thinking through that more fully. I think there are three main ways that other Christians—especially older, wiser, married Christians—should play in your relationship.

1. Authority

In the Old Testament, a woman’s father was in a position of authority over the relationship she had with a potential husband as a way of protecting her (Exodus 22:17). We don’t see anything that explicit in the New Testament, but certainly the father is still the head of the family (Eph. 5:23) and primarily responsible for raising his children in the Lord (Eph. 6:4). Ideally in a courtship relationship, the man would seek his blessing not simply before proposing marriage but before beginning a serious relationship at all. Whether or not a woman’s father can assume this authority over the relationship depends on whether he’s a believer, how far she is from living in his home, whether he’s in a position to know the man, and so forth.

What if her dad isn’t the person to do that for whatever reason? In that case, it’s good for her to have another man she trusts to step into that role. In other words, she might tell a guy, “if you’re interested in *me* you’ll need to talk with *him*.” He can help her screen guys who might come along, and play a guiding role as a relationship develops.

2. Advice

Generally, the role played by wise Christians in a budding relationship isn’t so much one of authority as one of advice. As Proverbs 11:14 says, “Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.” Seek good counselors for your relationship. Ideally, those who are married, wise, and who know you both well. Let me give you a few pointers here.

* Get to know wise, married couples in our church *before* you start dating. Often, I’ve been in the situation where an earnest couple who’s started dating want my wife and I to spend time with them and give them advice in their relationship. But with the press of other things going on, there’s only so much time we can spend with that couple and only so well we can get to know them. Start building these kinds of relationships *now*. They will be good for you and good for that couple regardless of your dating future.
* Try to find a couple who know *both* of you. Or, if that’s just not possible (say, for a long-distance relationship), find a couple who already knows one of you and who can make a good effort to know the other. When your “mentors” only know what you tell them about the relationship—even if you’re entirely honest—they can only advise you so well. Instead, you want them to learn about the relationship from both of you and ideally, also from observing you together. That gives them a much more complete picture of what’s going on.

3. Accountability

The last role that others can play in your relationship is to hold you accountable. As we’ve discussed, much of this will be accountability for physical boundaries in the relationship. I mentioned before that it’s a good idea to tell this person what boundaries you’ve set for your relationship—and invite their feedback. For reference, I’ve printed on your handout the boundaries that Josh Harris lists in his book, *Boy Meets Girl[[1]](#footnote-1)*. I think they’re a good starting point.

And then you’ll want that person to ask you questions about your physical relationship on a regular basis. Here’s an example:

1. In the last week, did you cross any of the physical boundaries you’ve set up? Which ones? Why?
2. Did you do anything with her/him that was sexually arousing? If so, what? Why?
3. Did you just lie to me?

It’s easy to see accountability as a hurdle to get over. As in, “please don’t let me do anything that would lead to embarrassment with my accountability partner.” But that can tend to a very legalistic view of that person’s role in your life—as if answering “no” to their questions somehow qualifies you as a good person. Instead, you should see accountability as a window into your heart. Someone who loves you asks you questions and helps you to see where you have bought into Satan’s lies instead of God’s words. So don’t forget to ask “why” if you’re holding someone accountable.

**Any last questions before we close in prayer?**

1. Page 157 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)