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**Core Seminar**

**Singleness & Courtship**

**Session 7: Stages of a Relationship**

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**Introduction**

Last week we introduced three principles that should govern our dating relationships.

1. It has marriage as its goal. Endless casual dating is not appropriate for a Christian.
2. It is initiated and led by the man. Since we’re trying to figure out if we should get married, we want to begin to try on the roles we’ll adopt once we’re married.
3. It is a community project. We should be getting advice and accountability from our church family, if not also from our families of origin.

So, what does a relationship look like that embodies these three principles? That’s what we’re going to be looking at today. Today’s class is essentially an anatomy of a relationship, from friendship to marriage: a relationship as a series of stages. Now, I’ll admit, that sounds pretty clinical. Like, I can’t imagine staring into someone’s eyes in a darkened coffee shop and asking in a low voice, “are you ready to progress with me to stage 3B?” But even though these stages will sometimes be fairly fluid and will certainly look different from relationship to relationship, I think that thinking in terms of stages can be really useful because we have different goals for different stages of a relationship. And if we move onto later stages without having adequately done what we need to do in earlier stages, we’re in for some serious miscommunication and heartache.

Remember the word picture we talked about last week: the playground with fences. In the dating process, there is a real danger in all of this in focusing on rules. What am I supposed to do? When do I guard my heart? When am I allowed to be vulnerable? Can we ever be alone? etc., etc. I want to you see the things that I will lay out over the next few weeks as guidelines. They are the fence around the playground. They are meant to keep you on safe territory, to protect you from harmful things on the outside. But once you figure out what those fences are, then go inside the playground and have fun. Dating is supposed to be something you enjoy.

So today are the stages of a relationship. Then, starting next week, we’ll consider different attributes of the relationship as they progress across those stages. Next week is about intimacy and accountability. Then the week after: what you should be looking for in a potential spouse. And so forth. Hopefully that orients you to where we are in the class.

**Stage 1: Friendship**

It’s important to point out that dating relationships should normally start out as friendships. Not the forced friendship with unspoken romantic intentions lurking under the surface, but the kind of friendship we talked about in the first weeks of this class. Friendship where your main goal is to love and serve each other as Christian brothers and sisters—where you learn from each other and enjoy each other’s company. It’s crucial that we protect this idea of opposite-sex friendships in our church. We don’t end up with a church culture where every conversation between a man and a woman is held up and analyzed for romantic intent. Guys: be careful to state your intentions when you have them. Women: if he hasn’t stated his romantic intentions, that means he doesn’t have any.

Now, not all dating relationships start out as friendships. What about blind dates? What about online dating? What about getting set up by mutual friends? There’s nothing necessarily wrong with any of that. But we need to recognize what we lose out on by not beginning a relationship as a friendship. Dating—perhaps counterintuitively—can actually cloud your ability to get a good read on who this person is. Emotions make things more complicated. We’re on our best behavior ‘cause we’re dating. And so forth. When you date a friend—and better yet, when you date a friend who’s in the same church—you start the relationship with all sorts of important knowledge about each other that’s really hard to get in a dating relationship.

As one author put it,

Perhaps, after all, romance did not come into one’s life with pomp and blare, like a gay knight riding down; Perhaps it crept to one’s side like an old friend through quiet ways…Perhaps…Perhaps love unfolded naturally out of a beautiful friendship...[[1]](#footnote-1)

Now I know that romantic flare-ups can be the death of good friendships. But that doesn’t need to be the case. If we’re careful with our intentions, real friendships between brothers and sisters in Christ can survive the coming and going of a courtship that doesn’t end in marriage. Though other options can certainly work out, it’s best for courtship to begin with friendship. I love how pastor Tommy Nelson puts it: “Run as hard and as fast as you can toward Jesus. Look to your left. Look to your right. Marry someone who’s running beside you.”

In the process of running toward Jesus, you’re going to take notice of someone of the opposite sex and begin to think, “should this be something more than a friendship?” And that’s when we have great opportunity and great peril. We need to remember the truth of Proverbs 31:30, “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.” One of the best things you can do for your marriage in the years before you’re married is to train your affections to value those things that God values. Fall in love with character and you’ll fall in love with someone who will only get more beautiful with time.

So what happens then?

Well, at first, nothing obvious. You might put yourself in group settings where you know you’ll run into that person. If you’re the guy and you’re thinking about initiating a relationship, you may start talking to people who know each of you well to see what they think. But in all this, you’re working hard not to set up expectations you don’t intend to fulfill. But after not too long if you’re the guy—you have some intentions for this relationship that you need to vocalize. And we’re talking weeks or a few months here, not longer. What happens then?

At this point, we need to think carefully about gender roles in marriage. Men initiate; women respond. Let’s take each of these in turn.

***Men Initiate***

Among the different roles assigned to men and women in the Bible, men are assigned the role of leadership both at home and in the church. This is not a sign that men are more valuable or more important than women; it is the design and assignment of roles ordained by God. Men initiate, women respond. This concept holds true in the area of beginning a relationship as well as in marriage (Ephesians 5:22-32).

What does this look as two people begin a relationship?

First, the man must initiate asking the woman out on a date. And remember from last week, if you’re not ready to marry, you’re not ready to date.

[As a quick aside, if you are a single man here today, and you would not describe yourself as ready to be married, ask yourself why. When Paul extols singleness, it is singleness for the purpose of *enhanced* *ministry*, not enhanced selfishness. If you’re staying single because you like not being committed or because you’re afraid of rejection, consider—are you really approaching life biblically? Maybe God’s normal plan of marriage is a better one than what you’ve got right now.]

So, does this initiation mean flirting with her, getting her to show as many of her cards as possible before you show yours to prevent the embarrassment of getting shot down? No. Initiation means initiation. It means that as the man you take the first step, put your cards on the table, risk and all. Welcome to leadership. Your intentions and your feelings, to the extent that you can discern them and it is appropriate for you to share them, should be clear. Part of your role even at this early stage is to protect the woman from unnecessary risk and vulnerability by providing a safe context in which she can respond to you.

So what does that look like? That’s up to you. Maybe you ask her out for a cup of coffee because you want to get to know her better. Maybe at this point you actually know enough just to jump ahead and ask her to prayerfully consider a courtship relationship. But the key thing is, you need to respond. If your words or behavior are beginning to create in her heart an expectation of interest, you’ve probably waited too long. State your intentions clearly, as soon as you have intentions.

Keep in mind general biblical principles as you initiate. (1) Am I treating her as a sister, in absolute purity? (2) Am I consistently seeking the counsel of others? (3) Am I considering her as more important than myself, and putting her needs first?

***Women Respond***

So how does all this look from the women’s perspective?

As it’s the man’s God-given role to initiate, so it’s the woman’s God-given role to respond. As men need to be learning how to lead (whether they like it or not), women need to be learning what it means to let a man assume spiritual leadership in the relationship.

So what does response look like? It means giving him a yes or a no.

* Take time if you need to think, pray, and get counsel—but don’t let that drag on for more than a few days. Remember: he asked you to coffee, not to marry him.
* Let your yes be yes and your no be no. A “maybe” only fits if you are thinking about it and want time to pray and seek counsel. Otherwise, a “maybe” is essentially, “I really want to say no but I don’t have the courage to do that.”
* I’d encourage you to generally give a guy at least a date or two if he asks—especially if he’s a member of your church. Turning him down on the spot assumes a lot of knowledge that—most probably—you just don’t have about him.

OK. Let me address the very vulnerable place this puts a woman. “Does this mean that *generally* I just sit back and watch and pray and maybe the guy I like won’t ever notice me?” **Yes.** You’ve really got to believe in God’s sovereignty. If God thinks it’s best for this to work out, it will. We need to trust him.

Why did I use that word “generally” a moment ago? As in a woman “generally” sits back and waits for the guy to respond? Because in the complexity of relationships, there are ways you can express interest without becoming flirtatious. You can accept his invitations to group events even when they’re not convenient. You can initiate conversation with him. You can make it clear that you enjoy the time you have talking. Sometimes out of fear of becoming a flirt, a woman can be so closed as to convince the guy he’s wasting his time with her. There’s no need to do that.

One last thought on this idea of response. Keep in mind that you may need to be gracious in responding to klutzy initiation by the guy. He could be klutzy by not initiating when he clearly has some intentions for the relationship. In that case, it’s fine for you to ask him about his intentions. Most guys haven’t thought through things the way we are in this class. Resist the urge to lead *for* him—just make it clear that he needs to lead. Or he could be klutzy *as* he initiates. That’s not necessarily a bad thing. If a guy has adhered to the principles we’ve been talking about, he may not have dated many women until he met you. And if he hasn’t dated much, he’s probably going to make a bunch of rookie mistakes, especially at first. Sometimes it’s better to choose relational stupidity over a guy who’s a serial dater.

***Stage 2: Early Dating***

OK. So you have your first date. Or maybe a few dates. Where do you go from here? Well, at this point you need to have a conversation about where this relationship is going. So far there’s no expectations of a boyfriend-girlfriend kind of relationship with any exclusivity. So far you’ve just been two friends getting to know each other better. But now the guy puts the question on the table: would you prayerfully consider starting a relationship where we can figure out if we should get married? And after she’s sought counsel and prayed about it, she says yes. Now we’re dating. Or courting, depending on your parlance.

The goal of this stage is to figure out who this person is. What are they like? What’s it like spending time together? Do you enjoy each other’s company? Let me make a few observations about life in this early stage in the relationship.

* Time together: at this stage, you don’t need a lot of time just the two of you. In fact, you may learn more if most of your time together includes others as well. Have fun together. You don’t know where the relationship is headed, but try not to obsess about that. Enjoy each other’s company in such a way that if this eventually turns back into a friendship, you’ll have few regrets and lots of good memories together.
* Accountability: at this point in the relationship, you need to bring in others who know your relationship and can help you guard your hearts. Proverbs 4:23, “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.” Ideally, the girl has the kind of relationship with her father where he’s already been brought in. She’d never think of dating a guy without her father’s blessing—and she told him so during one of their first conversations about where the relationship was headed. He’s starting to get to know her dad, and her dad is on board with what’s happening. Ladies—remember that the guy who’s interested in you doesn’t know what your expectations are for that aspect of your relationship. If there’s a man—such as your dad—who you want to have authority over the relationship, make that clear early on. Yes, this is best—but it’s not always possible.

***Stage 3: Intermediate Dating***

After a time—it could be weeks or a few months—it’s becoming clear that your relationship has the real possibility of marriage as its end. Which means the guy needs to lead into another stage of the relationship, where you’re thinking more specifically about marriage. The goal now is to figure out the question you need to answer before you can get engaged.

For the guy, you want the decision to enter this new stage of your relationship to be clear, honest, and deliberate. Don’t assume she knows the answer right away; she may need time to think about it, pray about it, and talk to those she trusts. And ladies, this is your chance to be honest with him. Maybe you enjoy his company but have realized that you can’t ever marry him. Well, if he’s faithfully put himself on the line in the way I’ve just described, this is the time to either say, “no thank you,” or “yes, I’m right here with you as far as I know.”

The world might refer to this as “getting serious”—by which it means a much higher degree of physical involvement, spending lots of time together, maybe even moving in together. They try to share everything physically, emotionally, and so forth.

But remember, our goal in dating is not immediate intimacy, but future intimacy. Right now you’re just trying to get to know the person better so you can make a decision about marriage. Keep in mind that passage from 1 Thes. 4 that we looked at last week about defrauding each other. Certainly Paul has physical intimacy primarily in mind—but in a courtship relationship we need to avoid acting as if we’re married in *all* aspects of the relationship. As always, our job is to love them and consider what is best for them.

We’ll talk more in a few weeks about what you might want to be talking about at various stages of your relationship. But in short, you want to start having some serious, one-on-one conversations. What are your goals in life? Do they seem to have a lot in common? How do you see gender roles working out in your marriage some day? This is also a time to talk about past sin that might affect the future of your relationship. If you two are members of different churches, this is a time when you should probably join the same church. After all, part of getting married is knowing that you can both thrive in the *same* church. If you’ve had a long-distance relationship so far, you’re probably getting close to deciding to move to the same city so you can share the same church and the same friendships and the same mentors.

And this may be a time in your relationship when you experience some conflict. That’s no bad thing: you really want to see how you deal with disagreement and disappointment in each other before you make a decision to get married. In fact, if you’re at this stage after just a month or two and you *haven’t* had any real conflict, I’d encourage you to slow things down and see how you weather that storm before you move forward.

This stage lasts until you have a pretty clear idea of what the “deal-breakers” might be in deciding to get married. Once you’ve figured that it, you’re at:

***Stage 4, Making the Decision***

So, things are going great! And now it’s game time: is there a ring in your future? The key goal now is: “what questions do I need to answer before we can get engaged?” We’ve encouraged guys and girls to build a relationship with each other’s families from early on, but if that hasn’t happened yet, this is probably a time when you visit your family to introduce them to your potential fiancé(e).

This can be a hard stage of the relationship—because it’s so clear that your each evaluating the other. You’re sharing some pretty deep and personal stuff with each other, and it’s virtually inevitable that breaking things off at this point will be really difficult for both of you. So let me give you some advice for this stage:

* Keep in mind that you are there to serve, not to sit in judgment over your potential spouse. Your relationship should be tempered by brotherly love and care—not cold hard evaluation.
* Make a decision as soon as is appropriate. It is not “OK” to have an indefinite “deciding” phase—and eventually, an “I just don’t know” should become a “no.” Guys, this is where you need to lead well and seek the counsel of others.
* God doesn’t normally tell us directly what we should do. Instead, we glorify him by using the judgment he’s given us, informed through his Word and the counsel of others. Waiting for some mystical “sign” is expecting something from God he hasn’t promised.
* If you think that marriage is best for the two of you, then get married. Logistics will never be perfect. Adjust things like school and jobs and money and distance to accommodate getting married—not the other way around. If you’re saying something like, “well, we can’t get married for two years and we don’t want to be engaged for more than a year so we’re going to hold the relationship here right now”—I really want you to examine your priorities with others you trust. Marriage is going to shape your life for the rest of your life. Why not start now?

***Stage 5, Engagement***

Congratulations, you’re engaged! What do you do now? Well, there is just one concept to keep in mind during engagement, and it’s really easy. It should guide every decision, thought, and at until you’re standing before God, the people, and the pastor on the big day. Ready? Pens primed? Here it is. **You’re not married yet.** Now, depending on logistical or other circumstances, cultural backgrounds, length or relationship, and other factors, there’s another way to put this. Ready? **You’re not married yet.** What does this mean for your relationship?

* Goal: **you’re not married yet**. Your goal is to get married. Plan a wedding, prepare for marriage. Make sure you get premarital counseling from a Christian you trust. If you’re getting married at CHBC, that should be one of the elders here. If you’ll be moving and setting up your new life in a different church, try to do your premarital counseling there, not here. The relationship you’ll build with that pastor will be hugely helpful if you run into problems early in marriage, so try to build that with your future pastor, not one from your past. Along with your counseling, get some good books on marriage and read them together. If you do premarital counseling here, we’ll give you plenty to read.
* Time spent together. Remember, **you’re not married yet**. That means that basically you’ll keep the same boundaries on time together as you had before you got engaged. It may be easy to say, “we’re committed, so what we do doesn’t matter as much any more.” But you’re not married yet. Keep those constraints in place.
* Topics discussed. Now that you’re engaged, you will be regularly discussing how in fact **you are not married yet**. The one guideline I’d give you here is to be careful how you discuss your future sex life together. Don’t buy into the secular myth that you are somehow inferior or failing your new spouse if you don’t show up as a sexual expert on your wedding night. God’s plan is for both of you to enjoy a wonderful, innocent exploration as you awkwardly figure things out. You don’t need to talk about sex much during engagement.
* Accountability. Remember, **you are not married yet**. Accountability is just as important now as always. Satan will tell you that it doesn’t matter since you’re going to get married. Remember, you may not get married. But if you do, sexual sin now will wreak havoc on your marriage. In marriage, trust is your most precious commodity. So when you make clear by your actions that you value your physical pleasure above your fiancé(e)’s purity, what will that do to his or her trust in you?

And of course, in addition to preparing for marriage, you’ll prepare for a wedding. That shouldn’t be the focal point of your engagement—but it’s a really useful exercise. The stress, and managing difficult family relationships, and conflict of expectations and preferences that all come about when you plan a wedding will be wonderful fodder for building your relationship through engagement.

Keep in mind that a wedding is not primarily about the two people getting married. It is not primarily the bride’s special day (though it will unquestionably be that), and it is not primarily the groom’s rite of passage into Christian manhood. Like every other day in the Christian life, your wedding day is about God. It is a *worship service* where two people happen to get married. So as you plan the music, preaching, and other aspects of your wedding service, keep in mind that it is ultimately an event of worship before God. Keep it simple (even humble), and keep it worshipful. Too many couples put tremendous energy and stress (even tears) into what the programs will look like while neglecting their marriage before they even start it. Almost every couple *says* they want a simple wedding, until they get into the process and realize just how complex their idea of simple is. And almost every couple wishes on their honeymoon that the wedding had been more simple. A simple wedding will allow you to have a short engagement which is almost always a good idea.

**Conclusion**

So, there’s a relationship from end-to-end. Yours may well look different, and that may well be just fine. But I hope that having a model out there will be useful for life in the real world. Next week, we’ll think about a Biblical approach to intimacy and accountability across all five of these stages.

1. From *Anne of Avonlea* as quoted in *Boy Meets Girl* by Josh Harris, page 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)