*Singleness* Core Seminar

Week 1

**Singleness & Identity**

**Introduction**

Welcome to the *singleness and dating* core seminar. In weeks 1-5, we’ll cover a basic theology of singleness, while weeks 6-13 will deal with dating. Our church is blessed with a significant number of single adults, so studying what the Bible says about singleness is uniquely helpful for us. [GO BREIFLY OVER OUTLINE IN HANDOUT.] For those of you who have been through the dating class before (weeks 6 – 13), you might think, “Been there, done that.” But we hope you’ll stick around for some of the new material, covering topics like: dating those outside the congregation, how to break up well, and a class addressing things that go wrong in our dating culture. 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! Our email addresses are at the bottom of each week’s handout so you can feel free to contact us as questions arise. 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’ll 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 would leave their family of origin primarily to get married and establish their own family unit (cf. Gen 2:24). Studies show that in the 19th and early 20th century, singles made up 5% of the adult US population (3% never married; 1% divorced; 1% widowed), while the rest (95%) were married. The studies I looked at puts the single population today somewhere around 45 to 46% of the adult US population.[[1]](#endnote-1) 5% to 45%-- singleness has grown astronomically in the last half century! Why the change? A lot of factors contribute to this:

* The average age of first marriages (early 20’s in the 1950s to late 20’s in the 1990s)
* The rise of divorce and cohabitation
* There are more never marrieds than ever before
* There is much greater mobility of adult children (e.g., 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’s a temptation to define singleness as *someone who is not married* and(consequently) someone who is a second-class Christian. It seems like there are weddings almost every weekend at our church, and have you seen how long the engagement and pregnancy list is in the CHBC newsletter? In week 4, we’ll deal with the real danger of idolizing marriage. But for now, I want to establish the fact that your identity as a single adult doesn’t have to revolve around the fact that you aren’t 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 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, perhaps 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 considered 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 of time in 1 Corinthians 7 next week, but in that text, Paul gives us a richer definition of singleness – 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 over 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.” Since you spend much 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’re 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: “Let the theif no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need” (Eph 4:28). And from Proverbs, there a whole host of verses on work: “In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty” (14:23). “The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labor” (21:25). “Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men” (22:29). “Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits will have plenty 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 family, and maybe even your aging and feeble parents.

Just a few things pastorally I want to say to singles about your work. First, 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 those things done. So 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. Proverbs 24:27 says, “Prepare your work outside; get everything ready for yourself in the field and after that build your house.” The author of Proverbs encourages sensible preparations before building your house. In the same way, we should use the freedom that singleness affords to prepare for future seasons of life.

Second, don’t set so ridiculous a pace at work 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 teaches us that there’s a cost to following Jesus, so no one should become a Christian without *first* considering what it requires of you to follow Christ. Similarly, you shouldn’t let your work or school so dominate your life that the normal responsibilities of following Jesus are impossible (or at least really hard to pursue). [#1 and #2 are meant to balance one another out.]

Third, 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 (i.e. – grad school), and have no consideration of which church you’ll join. Don’t choose a new job or a new degree in another city if there is a good church in that same city. To do that is to make your spiritual life secondary to your career and educational choices and that is just flat out dangerous.

Fourth, here’s where you can run into a quandary as a single woman. One sister asked 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 (ex. as a single women, don’t take on a ridiculous amount of graduate school debt; that can over-burden a marriage). Make decisions in light of the fact that 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. Maybe you have some phone calls, make some visits, but essentially you live a very independent life.

A few pastoral thoughts. First, 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? You should listen to what they say and build as much of a relationship as the Lord would allow. But you don’t have a 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, finances, 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.

Second, 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 have to choose your own values, priorities, and life path, which will often come into conflict with the hopes and desires of non-Christian parents. It’s okay to disagree with your parents (especially if they aren’t Christians), and the more that disagreement is rooted in Scripture, the more certainty you can have in your position. Example: if you get a really good job offer and you turn it down to stay in a good church, your non-Christian parents may think you’re 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.

Third, an interesting question to ask is, “When I need direction, encouragement, guidance, and support, from someone who is older and wiser, 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 some may 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 biblical answer 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’s 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’re single woman who doesn’t have a close relationship with your father (or both parents), I want you to hear me loud and clear: Our church (and especially our elders) want 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’s lots of pressure from our culture to be sexual. People will think it very strange if you, as a single adult, are not trying to have sex regularly, 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. *First,* *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’re tempted to suppress your sexual desires rather than be honest about it with others because the Bible tells you can’t have sex before marriage. My advice is to 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 who support you in this area of life.

Second, 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. For example, single women may be strongly tempted to entertain overtures for intimacy and emotional connection from non-Christian men because they don’t get similar attention from brothers at church.

Third, 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 with whom you can be totally transparent. We can see the temptation toward isolation throughout the Bible. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve hid from God after eating the forbidden fruit. From the very beginning hiding has been a consequence of sin. Proverbs 18:1 warns of the danger of isolation: “Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment.” Ephesians 5 shows us that the general trajectory of Scripture is movement from darkness to light.

Fourth, for those of you who have active sexual pasts – whether that’s fornication or struggles with pornography and masturbation – remember that the blood of Christ covers your sin. Revelation 1:5 describes Jesus as the one, “who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.” I’m here as your pastor to say God has forgiven you in Christ. You don’t have to walk around like a white sheep with black spots all over your coat. The blood of Christ makes that coat whiter than snow.

Fifth, if you’re struggling with some type of sexual sin, don’t fight this battle alone. We, the church generally and the elders particularly, want to help.

***Christian***

We’ve been pursuing the idea of identity, answering the question, “Who am I?” 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. We often get in trouble when we let the things of this world—experiences, abuse, ethnicity, family, education, work, psychological labels—become more important and 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. Consequently, what we know to be true—God’s Word—functionally ceases to matter to us. My childhood, my training, my career, my feelings (no matter how irrational), 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—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.

There’s 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. Many singles hear from their married friends about the unique ways that marriage help you to grow. 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’s 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)