*Singleness* seminar

Week 3

**Singleness & Relationships**

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

Today, we want to think about what relationships look like in a single person’s life. How do we relate to other Christians, to single adults, to married folks, to families, to children, to seniors, to people who aren’t like me and those who are? 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, 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, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for *you are all one in Christ Jesus*.*”* (Galatians 3:28).
* Jesus prays “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, *that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you*” (John 17:20-21).

As Christians who are united in Christ, we are, by definition, 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***

Many singles struggle with loneliness—a topic we’ll address more next week—so it’s a wonderful when we can laugh and have fun in our relationships (Prov 12:25). But 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 to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24-25).
* “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12-13).
* “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature 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. Some of those references are include on the handout.

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

In thinking about the basic nature of our relationships in the church, we can describe them as family-type relations. Paul writes in 1 Tim 5: “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity” (1 Timothy 5:1-2).

In the church, we are to treat each other as family members, as brothers and sisters in Christ. 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 levels.

How would a man treat his sister or his mother? How does a woman treat her brother or her father? Here are six things that should characterize the way we treat one another:

*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, 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 one of our greatest priorities is to see each other grow to be more like Christ. We want the 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 “all 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 treat your biological brother or sister.

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

Our Christian relationships have a natural context. While it’s perfectly fine to get to know Christians at work or school, the healthiest and most helpful context for these 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’s a self-conscious commitment 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. In the same way, my Christian relationships should be essentially corporate and other-directed.

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. These relationships are beautiful gifts from God provided to us through faith in his Son and fellowship in his Church. So single men and women of this church SHOULD NOT ignore one another, CHBC families, and any other members. More than that, you are positively called to serve and interact with the entire church as brothers and sisters in Christ. Ideally, it’s out of these sorts of relationships that dating will arise. We’ll get to that in the second half of the class. Note my primary purpose here is not for you to find a girlfriend or a boyfriend. Primarily, I want 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**

Now we want to shift gears and focus the remainder of our time thinking about three categories of relationships within a church community. Specifically, we’ll look at 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, like identity questions, work development and struggles, sexual temptation, etc.
* It’s great to have others to just have fun with – to enjoy fellowship, share common interests, support and encourage one another, etc.
* It’s great to have others who have more freedom and time than families typically do.

A downfall of relating to other single adults:

* Unless you’re talking to a single adult who is a decade or two ahead of you, your single friends just haven’t experienced certain struggles, accomplishments, and life stages yet. Thus, they generally can’t offer you the wisdom that older saints can. Why do I bring this up? With a lot of single adults (especially 20-somethings), there’s a tendency to rely too heavily on their other single friends for advice, guidance, and support. For instance, a single woman or man decides whether to continue dating someone and they only talk to their single friends.
* There are particular temptations that can be more common in certain seasons of life. Only relating to those who are struggling with the same things may make things worse, not better. As an example, single men commonly struggle with internet pornography. So it’s not unusual for a single male struggling with this to relate to another single male who is struggling with the same thing. On the one hand, it makes sense; it feels safer to confide in someone who’s 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 different—and perhaps more balanced—perspective than a friend with no more life experience than you. And it’s much better to have those conversations with an older Christian who really knows you than simply asking a pastor for an appointment.

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

When this class was originally taught, we moved quickly to the dating piece. We thought that friendship among single men and women in the congregation wasn’t a topic that needed any further teaching. However, as we taught on marriage and dating and were silent on friendship, we noticed an unhelpful trend. Our 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 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. Your 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 spouse? Or do you think of 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 that you are so scared of rejection (either because you’ve been rejected often or just because your fearful) that you don’t engage. Or perhaps you hear so much language about protecting the other person’s heart that you fail to engage apart from casually at church or group settings. Or maybe 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 that you put every person who you find attractive in the “interested” category. Then you do everything you can to flirt with them, whether in-person, on Facebook, or over email and text. Or you might 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 person of the opposite sex as a brother or sister in Christ. This could include good things like protecting their heart, but guarding their heart emotionally and spiritually doesn’t mean the only other option is to disengage. You can relate to them as a friend in a pure, prayerful, holy, self-sacrificial, and Christ-honoring way.

It’s important to get a mental picture of 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. Some brothers try to lead spiritually focused conversations at MAC or lunch after church or in any other group settings both formal and informal. Other men walk women home when it’s not safe to be alone. Both men and women ask each other how to pray for one another. Some brothers and sisters have more-than-surface-level conversations, covering a wide variety of topics while being careful to avoid things that should only be talked about in same-sex settings. Men and women demonstrate hospitality and facilitate group events that encourage fellowship among single men and women and couples or families. There are some singles that deliberately cross 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. Both single men or women write thank you notes. I could go on. As a pastor, one of my favorite stories about the singles in this church is how single brothers serve at the annual Christmas tea. Non-Christian are 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. The husbands and wives, and fathers and mothers in this church feel a Titus 2 obligation. That is, they understand from Scripture that 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 often spend time with other singles, while the married couples spends time with other married couples, making it rare for these groups to intermix. Singles who want a discipler who is married or has kids often asks me: 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 a family if you don’t already know one. The single lady most invested in our family (Rejus) is not someone we sought out; she initiated the relationship with us. And we consider her an adopted daughter.

Two tips on this. First, don’t expect families to have the same freedom you do to meet up outside of their home. 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 sister 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 the family’s less flexible calendar. Second, you’re more likely to connect with a family if you’re willing to step into their world rather than expecting them to step into yours. And if you are willing to step into their world, you get the blessing to see Christian families “live and in action.” You’ll have a front row seat to observe a thousand mundane moments as husbands and wives/parents and children move through the day to day things of life. Think about it this way, if you’re 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 do you 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 Christian family, seeing other families “do life” helps you see how similar biblical principles can be worked out differently in different families. If you don’t come from a Christian home, then it’s even more important for you to do this. If not, when it’s 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 are sacred to even try, call me or another 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 considered folding singles into your family life, then I’d challenge you to consider this an important part of your Christian discipleship. It’s a clear and concrete way to demonstrate the love of God to fellow believers.

Relating to Seniors: The mature members who have a lot more time on their hands than young families are the seniors in our church. Sadly, we don’t have many left. Have you considered what a blessing it might be to care for a senior by visiting them, reading Scripture and praying with them, giving them practical help or rides to church? I think you would be surprised how much blessing you’ll reap by taking the time to do this. Talk to our deacons of member care if you’re 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 for childcare more often than men ever do. I’ve known single men get involved in children’s ministry 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 teach, and how they “got it” after they engaged with 4-5s.*

If you’re a single adult who has no interest in engaging these three groups, preferring instead to hang out exclusively with other singles, I’d question your understanding of Christianity. If you only want to hang out with folks who are like you, then I’m not sure you’re living in light of the gospel. Feel free to ask me more about this in just a minute as I answer questions.

**[PAUSE FOR QUESTIONS]**