

A Better Way

A Biblical Approach to Dating

Article 2

The Single Years

(Contains Seven Daily devotionals)

1 Corinthians 7:32 An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs-how he can please the Lord. NIV

My dad taught us to love the outdoors . We were campers, hunters, fishermen, and backpackers, - well seasoned in nearly anything that came along having to do with the "Great Outdoors". I have spent many nights in tents, tent trailers, camp trailers and just out under the stars. I have had skunks walk under my army cot, raccoons steal food out of my ice chest, and bears knock over my trash can in pursuit of a few scraps. I have slept, or at least tried to sleep, in places that were mosquito infested, and with every bug from a scorpion to a black widow spider. I have slept on the ground in places in Texas that were known for their rattlesnakes, and I have slept in the backwoods of Colorado with the cougar and the bear. But this night was truly one to remember. I had never slept with one of these varmints before.

I laid down to sleep, exhausted. It was a meager accommodation; but, it seemed more than adequate to me. It was certainly a step up from my previous sleeping accommodations or at least I thought so. I had been sleeping in an old store front right off main street in the small Texas town of Roby. I had accepted a position to serve First Baptist Church as their Youth Director, and it was my first full-time, church job. The small church was not able to pay much, but they did give me a place to stay (compliments of one of the old deacons in the church).

During the time I served there, I grew to truly love that old man. As a naive young man, I could never quite get the edge on him. I remember the time we were sitting at the hardware store just a'slurpin' down our root beers, when he made me a little wager. Glancing at an old wheelbarrow leaning against the building, he said, "You think you are stouter than this old man?"

I had too much respect for him to answer yes, so I just said something like, "No, but I can hold my own," and took another drink of root beer.

He said, "I tell you what young'un, I bet I can push a load in that wheelbarrow that you can't. I will draw a couple of lines back there in the dirt, and I will push a load from one line over to the other line. If you can push the same load back, I will concede defeat and give you ten bucks. If you can't do it, you give me ten bucks."

My daddy had always told me not to gamble and that is a rule that I have pretty much lived by. However, this was a slam dunk! Granted, it didn't seem real fittin' for this old Deacon to be a betting with the Youth Director while't the Senior Pastor was a sitting there watching the whole thing without one word of rebuke. However, this was small town Texas, and heck, if he was willing to give me ten bucks, I was gonna take it. Maybe he was figuring it was a part of his tithe. Well, whatever he put in the offering plate next Sunday would be on his conscience. I was planning to take his ten spot.

I scanned the back of the hardware store and there were all sorts of heavy items to put in the wheel barrow. There were bricks, bags of concrete, bags of manure, and a host of other stuff.

So, I asked, "What is the load?"

He said, "If you don't think you can do it don't take the wager," and he went back to slurpin' his root beer.

"Okay," I said, "You're on."

He pushed his chair back, walked over, and drew two lines in the dirt with his foot - not even that particularly far apart. I thought to myself, this is a sure win. Then he went over and took the wheel barrow off the wall and nosed it up to the line. Next, he reached over and got his root beer as if he wasn't planning on pushing that wheelbarrow at all and said, "Okay son, get in the wheelbarrow."

I never did get in, even though the short ten-dollar ride might have been fun. Instead, I just handed him the money and walked out humiliated as everyone around got a good laugh at my expense. He probably bought them all a Root Beer on my ten dollars. And no, I didn't short change the offering plate the next Sunday. But let me get back to my story.

This old Deacon owned a hardware store which was connected to a small storefront shop that had been out of business for years. This became my summer chalet, free of charge. There was a crack in the wall beneath one of the big picture windows that any size rodent could have entered. I stuffed it full of newspaper in hopes that it would slow the draft that blew through. At one point, I taped some newspaper to the bottom of the windows to sort of serve as a curtain; but, finally just gave up on the whole curtain idea all together and took down the paper. I just made sure I didn't walk around in my undies. There was no shower, just a small sink and toilet, for which I was thankful. Only furniture was the bed in the middle of the single room, and a chair with a small kitchen-type table. I can remember the roaches being really bad. I would often remove them from the bed before laying down to sleep. I can even remember throwing back the sheets and having to brush a few out of the bed a time or two. This of course became a motivating factor that encouraged me to make the bed properly each morning before leaving. For when I failed to take the time to make the bed properly, it was as if I had put the welcome mat out for those roaches. I sprayed some Roach Killer around a couple of times and it seemed to help for a while, but this was Texas. These accommodations really didn't bother me in the slightest. The price was right, they were free. They allowed me to stay in the area where I was serving that small west Texas church and that was important to me. I don't remember ever once complaining. However, the people I served were concerned about that living arrangement much more than my Deacon mentor or I were. So, they had found another place for me to stay. It just wasn't finished yet, so I couldn't move in.

Fact is, it seems that everyone was more concerned about that living arrangement than me. I remember the time my fiancé grandparents came down to visit me, all the way from Washington state! They wanted to get to know their future Grandson-in-Law. Believe it or not, they stayed in a motel! I wasn't offended none. Would have been real tight all three of us in that double bed. I often wondered what kind of report they sent back to my fiancé's parents? I just knew they were thinking that their granddaughter (who **did** grow up with a silver spoon in her mouth) was gonna die after the wedding, if she had to move into this place. But that was never to be. Why? Because my new living arrangements were ready.

This was my first night in my new living arrangements and they were plush. My new abode was in the back of a local flower shop, upstairs, downtown. It was more of a half attic, and it was really neat. The little half wall where the room stopped made a balcony, so I could look out over the whole store. The BIG picture windows in the front of the store were not visible from the back portion of my loft. So as long as I stayed away from the half wall, I could run around buck. This was a new freedom that I didn't have at the old place. I never did, but just knowing I could was a new measure of privacy not hithertofore enjoyed. It was really nice. I could squeeze up next to the loft wall for breakfast coffee and devotional with an incredible view of downtown Roby and take three steps and enter into stealth mode in the rear of my lair. What could be more perfect for this young college guy. Hey, now I even had my own shower! With Hot Water!

As I kicked back in my new paradise and prepared to rest, I was anticipating a quiet night. I turned out the light; but, before I could get off to sleep I heard this strange "swoosh" noise above my head. I told you already that my family hunted. I recognized the sound immediately. It sounded like a bird had just done a fly-by and buzzed my head. I laid still and quiet, and sure enough it made a second pass. There was definitely a bird in the building. I shuffled over to the light and flipped the switch. I figured I would just let the little feller out and go back to bed. However, when I turned on the light, there was not a bird to be found. I looked high and low in that store. I hung over the balcony for what seemed like an hour, (probably was no more than ten minutes) no bird. So defeated, I went back to bed. I had barely arrived back under the sheets when it happened again. SWOOSH! OK, now I was getting upset. I went to the light switch to repeat the same process. No Bird. So this time when I turned the light out, I didn't even go to bed. I just waited by the light and listened for the "swoosh". I figured I was gonna catch this invisible bird one way or the other.

Now I know, some of you are thinking it's not a bird at all; it is a demon and needs to be cast out, that is why it runs from the light. Well, demon or not, I was determined to capture this critter and throw it out. So I was just gonna listen and click. I had already figured out that whatever it was, it didn't like the light. I waited patiently, "Swoosh" and then click! Well, I was sure surprised to find it wasn't a bird. It made a bee line straight for the front of the building, slipped through a hole in the ceiling tile and disappeared out of sight into the darkness of the attic space above. Nope, it wasn't a demon neither. Yep, I had bats in the belfry.

Throughout the summer I was often visited by these nocturnal friends. The first few nights were a challenge; but, I discovered that they really didn't like light. So, I would just sleep with a fair-sized night light on, and they would pretty much stay at the other end of the building. I came to rather enjoy the bats and for the most part lost very little sleep over their presence. They were often quite entertaining. All this was about to change, however. I was getting married at the end of summer.

I already told you I had entertained a couple of visitors earlier that summer; they were my fiancé's grandparents. In just a few months, I was gonna be married. It was this new addendum to my life that was about to change everything. It was to be the end of my rent-free living. No one told me to do so. I just felt the need to upgrade. I wasn't sure how she would respond to living with bats. And if she decided to make a dash from the shower to the bed in her birthday suit, I wanted her to have the privacy of the whole room, not just the back half. Yes sir folks, my years of serving the Lord as a single adult were coming to an end. Things were about to change.

Consider this verse with me for a moment: *1 Corinthians 7:32 An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs-how he can please the Lord. 33 But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world-how he can please his wife- 34 and his interests are divided. NIV*

I believe Paul is speaking here about a freedom in singleness that does not exist in marriage; a freedom to be devoted fully to the Lord. The things I felt free to do, the sacrifices I was comfortable in making before marriage, had now changed. I now was considering how to take care of and please my wife. My responsibilities were no longer to just the people I served, but to the wife of my youth. She required love, affection, spiritual leadership, time, money, and those were just the things I knew about. Truly my life was divided. This was not a bad thing. In fact, it could be argued that in the years to come my service was multiplied because of her love and devotion to the Lord as well. But my freedom in ministry, due to the level of sacrifice I was willing to subject her to, had changed my outlook on life forever.

So here is my point, the single years are a wonderful unique season of life where one's complete and total responsibility and focus should be about the Lord's affairs. It is a time to treasure as one can please, grow and serve the Lord, completely undistracted by the responsibilities that come from a marriage relationship. The Challenge, of course, is to use your single years for the Lord. Devote yourself to Him. Make it your goal to please Him. Master the spiritual disciplines. Serve Him sacrificially. Grow in spiritual maturity and do it all without the distraction of a divided mind. It is a challenge that most are not up for. You will have your whole married life to focus on the needs of your spouse. These years are precious for 'service to' and 'growth in' the Lord. They are crucial to spiritual development and your future relationship with the Lord and your spouse.

I exhort you to make the Lord the focus of your single years! Don't waste your single years trying to woo and pursue the interest of members of the opposite sex. Look, here is a hard truth - **If you divide your interest, trying to please persons of the opposite sex before marriage, you are out of line with God's word and plan for your life.** So here is a thought, choosing a spouse and getting married, probably the most important decision you could possibly make concerning your future (other than becoming a Christian) you are now making from the position of being out of the will of God. Now how do you expect to make a wise decision from this position? In your own wisdom it may look right to pursue a mate instead of God. But that is exactly what the Devil wants you to believe. Five years into marriage you may well be looking back thinking, *I wish I had been Paying Attention to God when I selected my marriage partner. Here I am sitting in a wheel barrow that I can't possibly push.* Oh, that I had done things differently, and chosen my spouse from a position centered in God's will! I have no confidence that the person I married five years earlier was or now is God's perfect and best will for my

life! It gets really tough when you look back and think your marriage was a mistake. Far better to Look back and Say, "I am absolutely sure that you, my spouse, were and are still God's best for me." Many are the people I have talked to through the years that were grieved because they felt they had married the wrong person. I only know of three guidelines in scripture that one needs to follow in order to know they are marrying the right person, but truly some folks can't even get those right. So I get it! That is a bad place to find yourself.

I believe that the traditional American dating paradigm reverses this order of single year priorities, so that, this kind of surety rarely happens. In fact, I believe that finding that picture-perfect spouse through the traditional American dating paradigm, though possible, is a very bad gamble that could cost you far more than ten dollars. It could cost you a marriage relationship with the person God intended and knew would be most perfect for you. If you are not careful, the traditional American dating paradigm could put you so far out of God's will for your life that you end up with a spouse that is not only not God's best for your life, but rather the devils first choice for your life. Now there is a sobering thought. How can I say that? Because it reverses God's order and makes the focus of the single years finding a spouse and pleasing someone of the opposite sex who is not your spouse. Your attention shifts to the world and how to make yourself appealing to the opposite sex. And heaven forbid, even to the point that you find and build your self-esteem and self-image on how you are able to relate to the opposite sex instead of how you relate to Jesus. Your self-esteem and self-image should be built on who you are in Christ and your love relationship with Him. In worse case scenarios this neglect of relationship with Christ turns to all out rebellion and inevitably an acceptance of the devils first choice for your mate in marriage.

There are some times in your life when it is crucial to know, absolutely, who you are, where you are going, and that you are right smack dab in the center of God's will. The marriage altar is one of those places. It is one place you will want to look back on and have no regrets. I believe that the biblical principles you are learning in "A Better Way" can help make that happen for you. Here is a faith statement that I have which a lot of young people have a hard time embracing.

I Believe that God is Big enough to bring into my life at the proper time, the perfect life partner for me, in such a manner that I will not miss or be confused about who that person is to be, as I give my complete and undivided attention and devotion to my Love Relationship with the Lord and His Kingdom and His Service.

What this statement says is that you trust God enough to leave the matter of finding a future mate in His hands. You Trust Him enough to believe He will make it apparent to you who this person is to be, without you making that the dominant pursuit or focus of your life. Scripture says: *...seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matt 6:33-34 NIV)* The "all these things" in this passage is speaking of our most basic physical needs of food and clothing. The worlds paradigm is the exact opposite of this. These and other material things we are told to pursue first and put a little God in there if it works out. What if our paradigm was shifted from this worldly approach so that in all things, not just food and clothing, "seeking God first" became our paradigm for finding our way through life? Is there not a lesson here with application beyond just food and clothing? I think so. If we fail to learn this lesson, we may well spend **Far too much energy and worry in our premarital years seeking not God but a mate.** Choosing a life partner isn't meant to be a losing gamble. It shouldn't be a self-seeking, self-propelled, fruitless effort, like pushing a wheelbarrow from the inside. It's a walk of faith, seeking the Lord and trusting Jesus with our every need, even our need for a spouse.

"Just Looking"

Week 2 Day 1

*1 Cor 7:25 Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. 26 **Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. 27 Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. 28 But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this. NIV***

Paul seemed to feel such an urgency about the things of the kingdom of God that he viewed marriage as something that would distract and slow him down. In times of persecution, it certainly makes one more vulnerable, and for a traveling missionary such as Paul, family life would have been a stretch. So, it is easy to see where Paul is coming from. However, it is as he says; men are gifted in different ways, and the single life is not for everyone. (1 Cor. 7:7) I know very few who would chose celibacy or feel so gifted as Paul. However, there is no denying what Paul said to be true, *those who marry will face many troubles in this life*. Marriage, and an interest in the opposite sex in general, certainly creates its own unique set of challenges - challenges that can cause one to lose sight of the urgency of the things of the kingdom of God.

In my early single years, I can remember my focus being so much on evangelism that it consumed me at times. I would dream at night about leading people to a saving knowledge of my Lord Jesus Christ. I prayed for the lost constantly. There was absolutely nothing in my life more important than evangelizing my world. I carried ammunition in the way of tracts and a readiness to share the gospel continually. It literally consumed my thoughts - that is, until the "love bug" began to bite. Suddenly, I discovered that my thoughts were divided. Church became as much about being around girls as it was pursuing the things of the kingdom of God. It became my primary social outlet with very little focus on ministry or service. Looking back, this mindset consumed many of my single years as I spent massive amounts of time and money trying to "woo yon fair maiden." Could I have done it better or differently? Sure, if I had paid attention to what the apostle Paul had to say and exercised a little more faith. However, it is extremely difficult in our society to keep one's primary focus on the Lord and trust Him to bring you the perfect mate in due season without allowing a pursuit of the opposite sex to halt every reasonable and responsible thought pattern. Ponder again this faith statement: **I believe that God is big enough to bring into my life at the proper time the perfect life partner, in such a manner that I will not miss them or be confused about who that person is to be, as I give my complete and undivided attention and devotion to my love relationship with the Lord, His kingdom, and His service.**

Prayer: Lord, grant me the most productive use of my single years possible and help me to find the place of trust in you for the provision of my future spouse.

Extra Mile: Can you own the above Faith Statement theologically and practically as you approach marriage? Analyze each part of the statement again highlighting the pieces that seem difficult or unreasonable to you.

Squashing The "Love Bug"

Week 2 Day 2

Eccl 3:1-8 There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: ... a time to laugh, ...a time to dance,... a time to embrace and a time to refrain, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, ... a time to love and a time to hate,... NIV

I like having a good time! As a matter of fact, I can have a good time at just about everything I do. However, I have discovered that a good time at the wrong time ends up being a bad time. My love for fishing and hunting has led me to pursue some good times at the wrong time and end up with some really bad times. I can remember a time I went crabbing down at the mouth of the Columbia River. The weather report said, "Fools Only Crab Today!" The 26-foot boat I was on was tossed around so much and the visibility so poor, I was thankful that I had brought a couple extra pairs of underwear. My Skipper that day was a one-legged retired cop; fear was not a part of his vocabulary. I kept pointing out that we were the only ones on the water besides the Coast Guard. Suffice it to say, "It was not a good experience."

Then there was the time I couldn't cast far enough to get past the ice on the lake, so I broke through the ice with a large rock. Every time I reeled in my line the eyes on my pole froze up. I ruined my line and almost ruined my favorite fishing pole as I repeatedly attempted to defrost the frozen portions of my gear with everything from a match to a hammer. Notice I did not say "rear," I said "gear," but there is no doubt that my derriere needed some defrosting as well before the day was over. Trust me people, wind chill is a factor! Good Time, Wrong Time, ends up Bad Time, Every Time!

And so it is with the "love bug"! Every time the "love bug" shows up, the "time for everything" and the "season for every activity" becomes a time for only one thing, and that is the love thing. If you pursue a good time in a love relationship at the wrong time, the relationship will have no place constructive to go and will most likely end up in activities which will be a bad time for everyone involved. Pursued at the right time; the end results can be quite rewarding as one enters into marriage. So when you are looking for a good time in your single years, squash the "love bug" until the right time for a good time includes a time for marriage. In the mean time, try - searching for, laughing with, dancing with, embracing, and loving all the beautiful people God puts in your world. Some call it ministry. I just think of it as enjoying those precious single years with some of the best times you could possibly have. What could be better than service to others as you are led and directed by the Lord.

Prayer: Lord help me to squash the "love bug" if he bites before the time is right. Help me to keep enough distance between myself and members of the opposite sex to be able to walk away with minimal damage to myself or others anytime you lead me to do so.

Extra mile: Think about timing for a moment. How will you know when the right time for the "Love Bug" comes around? How would looking at the "love bug" as the precursor to marriage affect timing? Is there an age, a mindset, a maturity, a provision at which one is mature enough to handle love and marriage? If so when is it? How will you know when you can look up and say realistically, I have entered a season where marriage for me is a very real possibility?

Find a Ministry

Week 2 Day 3

Gal 5:13 You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. NIV

I was nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof. That pulpit looked ominous to an eleven-year-old. I made my way over to it and stepped up on the three empty wooden Coca-Cola crates that had been placed there for my benefit. I am sure there wasn't a hundred folks present at best; but it sure enough seemed like thousands to me. That is the only way I could possibly explain all the nervousness I was feeling inside. My dad had told me not to sweat it. He said, "Son, it is not like they are going to throw tomatoes at you. Just give them what the Lord has given you." That seemed like good advice, and I reckon that is what I have tried to do ever since. In spite of all of my Christian upbringing and weeks and hours of study, the Lord didn't seem to give much that day. For sure as shootin', what I thought was gonna be a thirty-minute sermon was no more than a flash in the pan. I can still recall seeing the tape reel that my mom had used to record the message. There was plenty of blank space left. Fact is, it looked almost unused. So what in the world was an eleven-year-old doing in a Sunday pulpit trying to preach anyhow? Well, I was eleven years of age when I reckoned the good Lord was calling me to preach. It was a call I will say that I resisted a mite in the beginning. However, once I had made it known publicly, that small town preacher decided to give me the pulpit. He said, "If God has called you to preach then get at it boy, you don't have to wait till you are forty." So I did, and the rest is history.

I have always been thankful for those small town church roots. Many churches today have become so professional and "adult" that young people are not given much of a chance to serve. Too often it is all about the church serving our young people instead of those young folks latching onto a ministry and owning it. I believe that we all are to have a ministry in the church to the family of God and a ministry to the world outside the church as well. The single years are some of the best years you will ever have for this kind of service to the Lord. It is also one of the best ways to learn. There is nothing like experience to teach one the real lessons of life.

As I look back on my single years, some of the best memories I have are those of serving in and through a local church. The best and richest friendships I developed with members of the opposite gender came out of those shared ministry experiences. In these settings the object of the adventure is a much higher calling than the pursuing of the opposite sex, but keeping it at that level can be difficult. Shared Ministry however, at least gives one an opportunity to develop multiple healthy friendship relationships with some very special young ladies, one of whom might eventually become your wife. Believe it or not, it is a surprisingly short jump from friendship to wife.

Prayer: Lord teach me to develop healthy friendships with members of the opposite sex as I focus on ministry and service to You.

Extra Mile: List the ministries you are involved in that build up the family of God. What ministries are you involved in that reach out to the world? Consider how expanding your ministry could be an effective way of expanding and building your friendships with others as well.

Ask Why Often!

Week 2 Day 4

1 John 3:1 How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! NIV

Have you ever been around a small child who had just mastered the word "why?" It doesn't matter what you say, they always respond, "Why?" This can be pretty annoying if you actually try to give them an answer.

"I am going to the grocery store." "Why?"

"Dinner's ready!" "Why?"

"Let the Dog out!" "Why?"

It can get really annoying fast. I remember as each of my children would pass through this stage and we would visit my dad. It took only one or two "whys," and he was on to them. So every time one of my young'uns would ask, "why?" he would reply, "Turkey squat and messed on himself." I am still not sure where that came from, maybe his dad. That is the only explanation I can give when in some board meeting someone asks "Why?" and I blurt out, "Turkey squat and messed on himself." On a positive note, many of the laborious questions that ask "why?" on a political, philosophical, or theological level, my children give quick answer to by simply shaking their head and saying, "That Dang Turkey!" You would actually be surprised how often it seems like a reasonable and apt response.

It is my opinion that the "why" stage is wasted on two-year-olds. I believe this stage would be much more productive in the teenage and young adult years. It was during this young adult stage that many of the authorities in my kids' lives taught them to question authority, except, of course, their authority. "Why?" seems like a reasonable question to be asking when that happens.

"I think you need another tattoo." "Why?"

"Two more piercings, please." "Why?"

"Think I will dye my hair orange today." "Why?"

"Plumbers crack looks great on me." "Why?"

"I need a smoke." "Why?"

"I think I will buy that raunchy CD." "Why?"

"Marijuana is legal you know in Washington state." "Why?"

The single years would be good years to actually ask yourself the question "why". Maybe if you do it often enough, and answer honestly enough, you might just figure out who you are. I think a lot of what gets tagged as rebellion today is really not rebellion at all; it is just a bunch of young people who don't have a clue who they are. Me? I am a Christian, you know, a child of God, joint heir with Christ. I am forgiven, born again, part of the body of Christ, a citizen of Heaven. I could go on, but you get the picture. Not only do I know it, I believe it. So I do my best to live accordingly. I know why I wear the pants I do. I know why my hair is the way it is. I know why I listen to the music I listen to, cause I know who I am. The experience of the single years should include establishing an understanding of who we are. That, by definition, will always be in relationship to something outside of ourselves whether it be God, a peer group, a family, a friend, a vocation, etc... You might want to choose that carefully. Bringing a solid understanding of who you are to the marriage altar might be a good thing to put in your bag, a good thing to work out in the single years, and significant to know about a person before you consider marriage with them.

Prayer: Lord I am grateful that this world does not define me. I am grateful that your love, redemption and your truth continually define who I am.

Extra Mile: Consider your dress, recreation, hobbies, and music, ask yourself why. What does your answer say about who you are?

Healthy Friendships

Week 2 Day 5

1 Cor 15:33 Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character." NIV

Healthy friendships are those which are mutually edifying. That is, both people are built up by the relationship. There are many kinds of friendship. There is a friendship that comes out of a foxhole when brothers stand side-by-side in order to survive. There is a team friendship that can be shared as one makes their way to the state playoffs. I even consider myself friends with the lady who sells me gasoline and the waitress who serves my coffee every Thursday morning. The local sporting goods store houses some of my favorite friends who love to take my money. Friends? Really? Yeah, I think so. However, they don't share the same level of friendship with me that my brothers and sisters in Christ do. There is a fellowship that develops around the study of God's Word and prayer that produces my richest friendships. When I serve with the men of my church re-roofing some senior adult's house, a friendship around Christian service forms. When I travel as a sponsor on that mission adventure with my kids and the youth, a friendship forms that is richer and more meaningful than anything I ever shared with my fraternity brothers in college years. I have lots of friends, but the richest and most meaningful friendships I have are not with people who think exactly like I do, but with folks who share my faith and a burning desire to grow and mature in the things of the Lord.

This was not always the case with me. There have been periods of my life where I enjoyed the company of those without Christ more than I did God's people. You might say I ran with the wrong crowd. Fact is, I was really running from the good Lord. Not at first, but slowly as I progressively became desensitized to evil and let my guard down, I would find myself piling up all kinds of transgression for the day of judgment. Thus through the years, although I consider myself to have many friends in all walks of life, I am very careful about keeping a healthy distance between myself and those friends that I would consider, "Bad Company". Why? Because "bad company corrupts good character." That is what God's Word says, and I have never experienced an exception to that rule. Keeping friendships healthy can be a challenge. Distance and time are an important part of the equation in making that happen. In a world of cell phones and internet, time and distance can be a hard juggling act. If the company you keep is pushing you in any way to violate God's Word, your conscience, or your God-given authorities, then check your GPS and alter your course. Put a little time and distance between you and trouble.

Using your single years to build healthy friendships is never a waste of time. Some of the best friendships I have to this day were formed in my single years. Ask yourself, do I offer the kind of friendship that someone would benefit from for the rest of their life? Learning to be that sort of a friend is more valuable premarital preparation than probably three counseling courses.

Prayer: I confess my need to be an edifying friend to others and to surround myself with friends who will be edifying for me as well. Lord teach me to be a good friend and surround me with healthy friendships.

Friendly Advice

Week 2 Day 6

2 Sam 13:3 Now Amnon had a friend named Jonadab..... NIV

This is one of the most informative passages of Scripture on the subject of love verses lust in the whole Bible. If you are not familiar with the story, I encourage you to take the time and read the whole chapter. It starts out with a love struck Amnon, *In the course of time, Amnon son of David fell in love with Tamar...NIV 2 Sam 13:1* In the short frame of fourteen verses, everything changes so drastically that scripture records this about our love struck suitor, *Then Amnon hated her with intense hatred. In fact, he hated her more than he had loved her. Amnon said to her, "Get up and get out!" NIV 2 Sam 13:15* We will return to this passage later and take a good long look at the gross difference between lust and love, but for the moment I want us to notice verse 13 because this is where everything went south, *...Now Amnon had a friend named Jonadab...*

"I double dog dare you!" Ever had a friend like that? I have been told that the famous last words of a redneck are, "Hey fellas, watch this!" Ever wonder where the friend is who would say, "Hey, don't do that!?" It has been my experience that you can find a whole lot of Jonadabs to encourage you into wrongdoing and wrong thinking, but decide to do something right and the crowd cheering you on will be really small. Jonadab could have suggested a legitimate courtship and marriage, but that was above him. But don't think he didn't know the score, for in just a few short verses he is clarifying the news concerning the death of King David's sons saying, " *...only Amnon is dead. ... My lord the king should not be concerned about the report that all the king's sons are dead. Only Amnon is dead.*" *NIV 2 Sam 13:32-33* How did he know that was so? Because he was a friend of the worst sort. I want to caution you about this final class of friends; they are the ones from whom you actually receive counsel. This final class of friends, for me, is very small. They are the people to whom I have given permission to work on my character. They are the people whose counsel I seek out in order to make wise decisions. They are usually older and always wiser than I. They always encourage me in the most noble paths and have no fear of their counsel being weighed in the balance before God. They are few in number, and they pray for me daily, as I for them. They are not in my world by chance; they are there by design. They guide me around the Jonadabs who would report my death with no more concern than one reports the weather. This final class of friends includes the most important friendships you will ever have. Be very careful who you place in this circle, or as Amnon, you could be destroyed.

Consider the friends you currently listen to for advice. Is there someone that you are listening to just now that you call friend who you know is giving you poor advice on your opposite sex relationships? If you were to get married tomorrow, or grow in the things of the Lord, would their advice encourage those relationships? Then what are you waiting on? Move them to your "Don't take Seriously" list today.

Prayer: Lord give me wisdom to steer clear of friends like Jonadab.

Single no More

Week 2 Day 7

James 5:12 ... Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned. NIV

Do you promise to live with him/her in marriage as God demands by loving him/her, comforting him/her, honoring and keeping him/her in sickness and in health; and forsaking all others keep only unto him/her as long as you both shall live?

"I Do."

Powerful couple of words when spoken at the right time, in the right place and with the right witnesses. They have been known to bring the single years to a screeching halt. They change your roles in life and multiply your responsibilities. I always tell those nervous couples, who are afraid that something is going to go wrong in the wedding ceremony and mess everything up, "the only thing that will mess this up and cause you to walk out of here an unmarried person is if you say, I Don't!" Heck, even if I have a heart attack, I usually have an Associate Pastor available that could step in and finish the job. I think I have seen it all. The best man faints and has to be dragged off the stage. The groom forgets the ring, realizes it when it's time to put it on her finger and then races out of the ceremony back to the house to get it while we put the service on hold. Several tried to stop him but he left like a streak of lightning. The dad and groomsmen who all show up drunk and have to be escorted out. Nope, when you get to that "I Do" stage about the only thing that will keep you single are the words, "I Don't".

I do believe that other than the words I spoke when I prayed and asked Jesus to save my soul, no words have changed my life more than those two words, "I Do". Can you say those words and really mean them? If you can't, then use your single years to do a little maturing until you are a man or woman of your word. Marriage is a commitment, and folks today are big on their rights and short on their responsibilities and commitments.

It was Sunday morning and things were not going well. In fact, our relationship had been strained for some time. I was honestly tired of trying. As we left the driveway, my little wife of four years said, "I am not going to divorce you because I am not going to be responsible for ruining your life and ministry. I am just going to wait and let you divorce me, and it is just a matter of time and you will." Well I sure wanted to! But I had said "I Do!!" and divorce was not in my vocabulary. It was apparent that it was a part of my wife's vocabulary, however she seemed to have no intention of exercising that option. That was disappointing at the time, as all I could see was a very long unhappy and painful future. Yet here we are, 40 years later, and I have never loved anyone more.

People think it was always this way for us, but it wasn't. My Aunt Liz once said about a young couple walking through an ugly divorce, "they had a good marriage, they just gave up on it too early." Well we didn't give up. I can testify that it was not our love that sustained our marriage but our commitment. Where commitment stood firm, love finally flourished and grew strong and deep. Much is said about love, but my experience teaches me that a good understanding of commitment is vital as well. When you are able to make a real commitment before God and sign your name to that commitment before witnesses, then you are ready, at least maturity wise, to bring your single years to an end. What was the last commitment you made to God? How did that work out for you? Did you follow through? How many times have you told someone you loved them and even talked about marriage only to walk out on that relationship? Words and faithfulness to them, this is what brings security to our families. Jesus said that He is able to keep me until the day of my salvation. He promises to never leave me or forsake me in His word. I feel really secure in my relationship with Him because He always keeps His word. What do your words create in the life of others, confusion, doubt, frustration or confidence, trust and security? If I asked those closest to you, would they say you are mature enough to say, "I Do?" If not, there is a good project to work on in your single years.

Prayer: Lord make me a person of my word, able to keep a vow. Thank you that you are a God that never lies. Your word can always be trusted.