



Step Up: A Male Perspective on Friendship and Dating

by Tim Grissom

Hang around Christian singles long enough and you're sure to encounter a certain emotion. If you're guessing loneliness, guess again. The prevailing emotion is frustration.

Men are frustrated because they don't understand what women want from them; and if they do have a clue, men feel the expectations are too high. Women, on the other hand, are frustrated because they want men to take initiative, to lead. That's right, lead. Don't believe everything you hear; Christ-centered women still believe that God assigned respective roles to the sexes. They want to be led by Christ-centered men.

So what's to be done about the stalemate? How should Christian men and women move toward deeper friendship, possibly even engagement and marriage?

Stepping Up

I'll say more about this later, but for now I'll just blurt it out—it takes a man to be an initiator. Relationship building with the opposite sex is risky, but in the created order of God's universe two become one (Ephesians 5:31). However, this will never happen for you personally until you, as a man, accept your God-given role. I believe:

- 1) Men should initiate the relationship.
- 2) Preparing yourself for a relationship is part of becoming a man.

This may sound old-fashioned, but I believe it not for the sake of tradition, which of necessity comes and goes, but because it is biblical. Marriage is meant to be, among other things, an illustration of the relationship between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5); the husband typifies Christ and the wife typifies the church. Clearly it is Christ who initiates the relationship—"We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Furthermore, the Ephesians 5 passage describes the husband as "the head of the wife." Men are called to be—created to be—leaders. This is not an empowerment that mystically comes upon a man at his wedding, but part of his inherent nature. If a man shirks relational leadership prior to marriage, chances are slim that he will properly assume it after.

Several months after my wife died, I was talking with a friend who is also a wise and loving pastor. He wanted to help protect me from too quickly getting involved in another

relationship—a common problem for men who are divorced or widowed. (My advice: Lock them in a secure room for the first six months.) My friend's counsel was simple, and should be heeded by all Christian single men regardless of age: Concentrate first on being the right person, then on finding the right person.

A man who wants to be godly and who means to prepare himself for a wholesome, meaningful relationship has his work cut out for him. And it doesn't begin by random dating.

Be Prepared

The Jewish young men of the Old Testament intentionally prepared themselves for marriage. In addition to becoming skilled in a trade that would support a family, these men saved their resources in order to pay a dowry to their future in-laws, and generally built their own dwellings. The latter was often done in the time between engagement and marriage. Taking a wife was a serious commitment, one that demanded earnest preparation.

I'm not suggesting a return to these practices, although we'd probably be wise to realign romance with realism. I merely wish to point out that healthy marriages are seasoned with preparation. If a man wants to find the right person he needs to be the right person, and that takes concentrated effort that is best begun before there is a potential mate on the scene.

If a man is serious about walking with Christ, and serious about wanting to be the right kind of husband and father someday, how should he prepare himself?

A man should prepare himself morally

Our culture, even our Christian subculture, has become enamored with sex. It's everywhere in entertainment and conversation. One would think that sex is all there is to happiness and fulfillment. But this just isn't real. The man who enters marriage thinking that his wife is cut out of the same fabric as are the seductresses, excuse me, actresses he's seen on the television and movie screen—eager to jump in bed at any moment and ready to resolve every conflict with sex—is in for a terrible shock. A mutually pleasing sex life thrives on a good relationship, it doesn't drive one.

Men who are unguarded in their intake of viewing and reading material set themselves up to be disappointed and to be a disappointment. Moral behavior requires a moral mindset—the discipline to shut off the supply of impurity. Why not take a 40-day media fast? For the next 40 days, leave the television off, do not attend or rent movies, and use the Internet only as your job may require. If a conversation begins moving toward immoral topics, excuse yourself. These 40 days may prove to be some of the best days of your spiritual development. And you'll begin to view women with the wholesome respect God intends.

See immorality for what it is: a weapon of the enemy designed for your destruction. So choose your friends carefully; connect with men who care about your growth and standing as a follower of Christ. Be honest with them about your habits and struggles. Let them know what you are doing to try to grow spiritually so they can pray for you, help hold you accountable, and get in your face when necessary. Forge friendships with your fellow warriors, and cover each others' back.

A man should prepare himself financially

We're told that more marriages break up over finances than any other issue. This needn't worry us, but it should motivate us. Men should aspire to financial stability. This doesn't guarantee a surplus of money or safeguard us from occasional unemployment. I am suggesting, however, that a man who is disciplined in his work ethic and wise with his resources is better prepared for courtship and marriage than one who is impulsive and discontent.

The kind of lady you want will be drawn to your character, not the model year of your car or the square footage of your house. More importantly, God is honored by the wise use of every resource He lends you, whether dollars in your wallet or hours in your workday.

Some who read this may be in debt or out of work, and the current financial picture is bleak. Are you a hopeless cause? No. But you need to focus on what you can do to improve your situation. What steps can you take, under the leadership of the Lord, to move toward financial freedom and gainful employment? Get yourself situated and moving forward.

A man should prepare himself spiritually

Finding myself single again after being married for over eighteen years, I've confronted a question that we must all wrestle with in the face of any loss: Is God enough for me? Until we can answer in the affirmative, we would be wise to suspend seeking another relationship.

Loneliness is difficult, but it is not sufficient reason to pursue a partner. Loneliness in its rawest form can make us very self-centered. Therefore any relationship we enjoin out of sheer loneliness holds only ourselves, or mostly ourselves, at the center. Whether consciously or subconsciously, we seek to medicate our wound through the presence of another person. This is neither fair to them nor healthy for us. Remember men, we are to be Christ-like. That means we are not seeking to be loved but to love. Love that is self-centered is really not love at all. Better to come to grips with this now and have God form genuine love in our hearts than to enter into a relationship that hurts both individuals and misrepresents Christ.

So how does a man prepare himself spiritually? By seeking God with all his heart. To do this, he must embrace his loneliness, grief, disappointment, hurt -- any and all circumstances that have brought him to this place of aloneness. Embracing the hurt ushers in the comfort, and comfort is delivered by God Himself. Spend more time in prayer. Spend more time studying the Bible. Read Christian literature that instructs and edifies. Attend Bible study or discussion groups. Involve yourself in service. Step out of the world of self-pity and into a life that is marked by Kingdom purposes and activities. Give more than you take. Understand that real men are leaders and real leaders are servants.

Spiritual development also involves the building of a prayer life. Speaking of which, it is surprising how few men actually ask God for a wife. Of all things, why would we leave this matter off our prayer list? Perhaps some would argue that it is unspiritual to pray about such a thing, that if God intends us to be married we should disengage from the process and allow Him to override our neutrality. Being neutral is fine if it means surrender and waiting by faith on God's answer (which, by the way, first demands that a request be made), but it is not fine if it implies apathy or cowardice.

A man should prepare himself relationally

Beware of two relationship killers: over-aggression and passivity. In the past the former was the likelier culprit; these days however, the latter seems more common. When it comes to male-female friendships, which is where any meaningful relationship begins, men are increasingly stolid.

What is making men so passive?

Some of this is no doubt due to personal hang-ups or bad experiences. But much of it is, in my opinion, the result of two widespread phenomena. First, the past few generations have provided fewer and fewer positive examples of what a Christian marriage can be. Second, manhood has been under siege. Women have been encouraged to be stronger, to stand up for themselves and revolt against male domination. In some instances this may have been both appropriate and necessary. However, as a cultural wave it has created a harmful undertow: the erosion of manhood.

Regardless the reason's, it is time for men to become manly again. It's fine to be deliberate, but not passive. It's good to be cautious, but not cowardly. Dating is risky business, and I'm not advocating a reckless abandonment to our feelings. I am saying, however, that Christian men need to be motivated toward building proper relationships with Christian women. This is the design and intent of God. Clearly marriage is part of His will for most men and women. Do not rush into it, but do not hide from it either.

There is a time to involve trusted members of the body of Christ in your personal business, and your dating life should be one of those occasions. Connect with some married couples whom you respect, and ask them to pray with you about this matter. If you are interested in a certain lady, ask them to pray about whether you should initiate contact with her. Get their counsel on how to proceed, and be open to their cautions.

Though I've listed only four, you may discover other areas of your life that need attention. Perhaps you need to work on your physical condition (for the sake of health, not vanity). Perhaps you've made ministry commitments that you've not kept (now would be the time to take that mission trip). Perhaps there are interpersonal rifts that you need to mend or personal disciplines you need to establish. Anything that stands in the way of your wholehearted devotion to Christ also obstructs your candidacy for relational intimacy. Wisdom says: Deal with these matters sooner rather than later.

The right man on the right journey

There is a common misunderstanding about the man of Proverbs 18:22—He who finds a wife finds a good thing—and the confusion hinges on the meaning of “finds.” The biblical language here describes a discovery, not the direct result of a search. This man was not on a hunting expedition, intent on finding a wife, trapping her, and dragging her home. Rather, while on a journey he encountered her, recognized that she was a God-send, and won her heart.

As we men journey through life, seeking God and going about the tasks He has given us with diligence and faithfulness, it is within reason to believe that God will bring the right woman

across our path. Let us make sure, then, that we are on the right journey. And let us not be afraid when we discover the “good thing” God sends our way.