

Men & Women as Friends

In 2017, the evangelist **Billy Graham was all over the news**, but not for any of the reasons you might think. In fact, the reason he was in the news had very little to *do* with him. It had everything to do with a “rule” bearing his name—the now infamous “Billy Graham rule.” In 2017, it had been discovered that at least a few conservative male *politicians were operating* by this rule. The rule, at least according to them, dictated that they not dine alone with women they weren’t married to—some of them refusing to even attend events where alcohol is served without their wives present with them.

In addition to politicians, several Christian *celebrities* are said to live by this rule—not to mention countless pastors and ministry leaders across the country. I personally know quite a few men who have put into place policies for their own interactions with women at least *loosely* based on the Billy Graham rule. Some of them have taken it a step *further*, saying that they don’t ride in a car with a woman, take a one-on-one meeting with a woman in their office, or *text* a woman without including their own wife or the *woman’s husband* on the text thread. And generally, the reason *given* for these “rules” is to help guard against sexual sin and infidelity—which we should note, is a noble goal.

But as you might guess, the Billy Graham rule **has some critics**. A lot of people say it paints women as something like immoral seductresses; it objectifies and sexualizes friendships in unhelpful ways. In *workplace* settings, it *can* also have the effect of excluding *women* from conversations where their voices may be needed or helpful. It can also *prevent* women from receiving needed counsel or counseling from their pastors if practiced too strictly. And I think all of those can be *warranted* critiques, depending on how the rule is practiced.

I do think it’s worth pointing out, though, that **Billy Graham never set forward this “rule”** as something all men should follow. It was *his* way, personally, of abiding by the biblical teaching for public Christian leaders to be “above reproach.”¹ Especially when he and others with him were spending extended amounts of time away from their families on the road.² I’ve got to think he would be a little confused at how some have taken his very specific principle for traveling evangelists and applied it far more *broadly* and *aggressively* than he did.

In fact, **some people** take it so far that they don’t even seem like they’re *following* the “Billy Graham rule” at all. It’s turned into something altogether different. Some of them

¹ See 1 Timothy 3:2

² You can read more about the details of the “rule” [here](#).

are following what we *could* call the “Billy Crystal rule.”³ In the famous film *When Harry Met Sally*, Billy Crystal’s character says to Meg Ryan’s character, “men and women can’t be friends because the sex part always gets in the way.” He goes on to tell her, essentially, that every man she *thinks* she’s friends with secretly just wants to sleep with her. It’s quite a depressing conversation.

But I would argue **that view** of relationships—the one held by “Harry” in the movie—is **actually what’s behind** a lot of people’s thinking on friendships between men and women—whether they get it from the movie or not. And particularly, the belief held by some that men and women *can’t* really be friends with each other at all, without it turning into something else. But I do want you to see that **that belief *doesn’t* come from some prudish, antiquated belief that all women are temptresses. In fact, it doesn’t come from the bible at all. It comes from a secular, hypersexualized, Freudian view of humanity.** In this view, if a man and a woman develop any type of friendship with each other, however innocent it may seem, it’s only a matter of time before they end up in bed. Or bare minimum, until *somebody* catches feelings.

So **today I want us to ask:** *is that view of friendships between men and women accurate?* And more practically, is that *approach—avoiding* friendships with the opposite sex—*biblical* for followers of Jesus? Is it really true that men and women have to largely *avoid* platonic relationships with each other, just to guard themselves against temptation? Or is there a better approach out there?

You know, I **can’t help but think** that some of **Jesus’ own interactions with women** wouldn’t have passed many people’s strict moral standards for those interactions today. One of the *first stories* in the gospel of John is a time when Jesus was alone, in a public place, with a woman he wasn’t married to. And not only does he *not* flee the scene—he *initiates* a lengthy *conversation* with her. A conversation that eventually broaches the topic of her love life. And it’s worth noting that in having this conversation with this woman, Jesus crosses not just strict *gender* barriers in place in that culture at that time, but also *ethnic* barriers in place.⁴

Jesus once allowed a **woman of questionable reputation** to wash his feet at a dinner party—in a way that was *deeply* inappropriate to the religious authorities of his day.⁵ In fact, one of the religious authorities present for it says that if Jesus had *known* who the woman was and what sort of reputation she had, he would’ve never let her *near* him. And yet Jesus allows it to happen just the same. And then he holds her up as the

³ Credit for this connection goes to Aimee Byrd in her book, *Why Can’t We Be Friends?*

⁴ John 4:4-26

⁵ Luke 7:36-50

example of what it looks like to understand the forgiveness and acceptance of God—in stark contrast with the religious authorities present.

Jesus evidently had deep friendships with many of the women disciples—namely Mary and Martha. He went over to their house for dinner.⁶ He consoled them and wept with them when their brother Lazarus died. He endured Martha’s anger at him when he didn’t return in time to prevent Lazarus from dying.⁷ Women followed Jesus as his disciples, many of them financially providing for his ministry out of their own means.⁸ Jesus healed women, interacted with women; he dialogued with women about God and theology and the power of God.⁹ All of these things, by the way, would’ve likely been far more unusual for a man in his time to do than they are in any religious setting today. And yet Jesus does them all.

So how do we pursue opposite sex friendships like Jesus did? How do we create platonic friendships within the Church, among followers of Jesus, that look a little less like the “Billy Crystal rule”...and look a little more like the life of Jesus? That’s what I want us to get into this morning.

Now, briefly here before we turn to our passage: I do want to at least acknowledge something important. And that’s that not everyone in this room is attracted to the opposite sex. Some of you may be attracted to the same sex. But for the purposes of this teaching, I still think almost everything we’re going to say applies to you; it just may apply in slightly different ways. Right? So for the majority of the teaching, I might say “opposite sex friendships,” but I’ll trust you to transpose the ideas set forward in a way that applies to you personally. **What we’re talking about this morning is how to pursue friendships with people where there is at least the potential of romantic or sexual attraction to.** Make sense?

Okay. We’re going to kick things off today in 1 Timothy 5. You can go ahead and turn there with me if you’d like. The book of 1 Timothy—if you’re newer to the bible—is a letter written by a guy named Paul, to a young protege of his named Timothy. Timothy was one of the leaders at a church in the city of Ephesus. And Paul is giving Timothy instruction on a lot of different things. But one of them is how he should interact with other followers of Jesus in that local church. And here’s what he says to Timothy in chapter 5, verses 1-2, which we’ll sort of use as our anchor for this morning:

⁶ Luke 10:38-42

⁷ See John 11:1-44

⁸ See Luke 8:1-3, Mark 15:40-41, Matthew 27:55-56

⁹ See (again) John 4:4-26, as well as Matthew 15:21-28

Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.

That's our passage for this morning. Now, **here's why we're going to spend** the majority of our time today on just *two verses*. Because while this passage is very short and seems relatively straightforward, it is *deceptively* difficult to apply. On one hand, Paul lays out what seems like a relatively *simple* idea: **that men and women in the community of faith should treat one another as family**. We should treat *older* men as fathers, younger men as *brothers*, older *women* as mothers, and *younger* women as sisters. *That's simple enough* to understand, right? **Now, I'll let you debate amongst yourselves as to where the cutoff is between "older" and "younger"—have fun with that.** But still, even with that considered, this seems like a pretty simple idea: treat other followers of Jesus *as family*.

In fact, **if you've been around our church** long at all, you've likely heard us talk about this idea a *lot*. **We say often around here that church is not ultimately a hobby, or an event, or a building—or even an organization that distributes goods and services. The church at its core is a family.** A group of people that we're called to belong to, much like many of us belong to our biological *families*. So Paul, using *that* understanding as a foundation, says to Timothy: you and other people in the church at Ephesus should *treat* one another in precisely that way. *Like* family.

Now, that's likely **where it starts to get complicated for some** of us. Because for a lot of people, the word *family* doesn't bring up fond memories at all. Some of us have been *hurt* by our family, *mistreated* by our family, maybe even *abused* by members of our family. So some of us hear what Paul says here and almost instinctively think *actually, I'd rather not be "family" with other people in the church. That doesn't sound desirable at all to me*. But thankfully, Paul *clarifies* what he means here by adding a phrase at the end. He says we should treat one another as family, "with (notice that phrase at the very end...) ***absolute purity.***"

Now I would guess **that word "purity"** is another word some people have mixed feelings about. But here's what *Paul* means by it. **To treat one another with "absolute purity" is to relate to one another in a way that is unstained, uncorrupted, and uninfluenced by sin.** And here, he doesn't just mean *sexual* sin—he means *all* kinds of sin. **Selfishness, bitterness, resentment, suspicion, distrust, dishonesty....we could go on down the line. Sin impacts our relationships in a lot of different ways. But what Paul is envisioning here is men and women relating to one another within the Church in such a way that is absent of all of that.** Or at least *aims* to be absent of all of that.

That, in his mind, is what it means to treat one another as family—with “absolute purity.”

It **means not concealing** our actual motives towards each other: not being *duplicitous*. It means we're not hoping to “get something out of” the other person, whether that's sexual, romantic, or otherwise. We're not assuming the *worst* of the other person. We're not operating out of a *suspicion* that they are actually *flirting* with us or *seducing* us or fighting for power *against* us. It means when a brother or sister comes and talks to us, we assume that they're talking to us because they're our family, and *that's what family does: they talk to each other.*

In fact, to me, this passage seems to have a **self-correcting feature** built right *into* it. It says *both* “treat one another as family,” and *also* “with absolute purity.” Here's why I think that's helpful. No doubt about it, there are churches out there that use *familial* language as attempted *cover* for impure behavior. *Saying things like “just trust us” or “lets handle this in-house” or even “we're family,” when they have objectively proven themselves to be untrustworthy.* They use *familial* language as *cover* for sinful things. But do you see how doing that violates the *second* part of the verse? That we should treat one another with “absolute purity”? We can't *use* the first part of the passage in a way that nullifies the second part.

But then, **on the other hand**, people will sometimes go *another* direction with it all. *Some will focus on the “absolute purity” piece and say well, since we need to treat one another with absolute purity, the best thing is to mostly avoid friendships with the opposite sex altogether. We'll acknowledge one another in passing, and be cordial with one another, but actual friendships between the sexes seems like it will lead to impurity, so we better steer clear of that.* But the *problem* is that **then, we've ignored the first part** of the verse: that we should “treat one another like brothers and sisters.” And surely when Paul said “treat one another like family,” he *didn't* mean, “mostly just avoid each another.” That would be a very confusing way of him communicating that idea.

So **when seen correctly**, I think this passage from 1 Timothy actually **guards against both** errors. **Treating each other like family shouldn't mean we take advantage of those friendships, because that wouldn't be absolute purity. And treating one another with absolute purity shouldn't necessitate that we avoid friendships with the opposite sex...because that wouldn't be treating them like brothers or sisters.** In the Church, we should “treat one another like family...*in* absolute purity.” Make sense?

So here's **where I want to go from here.** I want to offer a sentence to you that summarizes how I think we should *apply* this passage in 1 Timothy 5. The sentence I'll

give you has two parts (just like the passage), and we'll spend the rest of our time unpacking each part at-length. Sound good? Here's the sentence in its entirety:

**Men and women need friendships with each other...
...while being honest about sin and temptation (in those friendships).**

So let's spend some time on each of those. First...

Men and women need friendship with each other...

Sometimes, when we talk about friendship between men and women in the Church, I'll hear pushback along the lines of "maybe...but is that really *necessary*?" In other words, given the inherent *dangers* of those types of relationships, is it really *worth* it to pursue them? And it's an understandable question. But I want to explain why I believe the answer to that question is an undeniable "yes." I'll give you a few reasons why. First, there's the very important reason we've already mentioned today: *because the bible commands it* in places like 1 Timothy 5. Seems like a pretty important reason.

But I'll also give you a couple practical reasons. First, I think **men and women need friendship with each other because it provides a compelling alternative to our hypersexualized society.** Our *world* teaches us that *any* relationship between men and women is inherently *sexual*. Think about it: when's the last time you saw a movie or a TV show where a man and a woman had a vibrant friendship with each other—and there wasn't *some* kind of romantic or sexual undertone behind it? Those plotlines do *exist*, but they are *few and far between*. The lie we're told is that any relationship like that is somehow *related to* or *motivated by* sex. Women: according to Billy Crystal, if you *think* you have *guy friends*, apparently that's only true because they want to sleep with you. Or at least that's what the world would have us believe.

But if that's the default belief in the world, **imagine** with me **if the Church** could become a compelling *alternative* to that. **A place where women are valued, not because men are attracted to them, but because they are co-image bearers of God. Imagine with me if women in the church felt acknowledged, and known and valued by men...in ways that have absolutely nothing to do with their physical appearance.** Imagine if women valued friendships with men, not because those men are future potential *spouses*, but because they are trustworthy *brothers* to them. Imagine if when men and women came into our community, it became normative for them to *trust*—and not become *suspicious of*—the other sex. **Can you imagine some of the soul-level healing that could happen in a community like that? [...]**

Another reason I think **men and women need friendship with each other** is because **it gives all of us a fuller glimpse of God's character**. Remember back with me to week two of our series, where we said that **because men and women are both made in the image of God, we need both men and women to fully see what God is like**. So wouldn't it make sense, then, that friendships with the opposite sex would help us get a *fuller* picture of what God is like?

As men and women, **we should be able to discuss** the Scriptures together in mixed gender settings. As men and women, we should be able to have honest discussions in our LifeGroups about our discipleship to Jesus in mixed gender settings. Now, are there some things that are probably better to discuss in separate gender settings? Absolutely there are. But it shouldn't be that we don't know how to talk at all about our relationship with Jesus when the opposite sex is present. Because the *ability to do* that gives us a fuller picture of who God is and what he's like. That's another reason we need these types of friendships with each other.

So a **few rapid fire suggestions** on cultivating these friendships. When your LifeGroup catches up on life and discusses the teaching, consider having that discussion *together*—with men *and* women in the same room—on a semi-regular basis. If you don't do that already. Probably doesn't make sense to do that *every* week, but make it a regular rhythm. When your LifeGroup is hanging out, try not to do the thing where all the men gravitate towards *one* room or *one* corner together, and all the *women* are all in another room or another corner. Mix it up.

Outside of LifeGroup settings, *married* couples: look for ways to do double or triple dates with other couples on a regular basis. Look for ways to do *group* hangouts where single people *and* married people are present. *Single* people: when you want to go do something as a part of a group, don't just text all people of your gender—invite men *and* women to wherever you're going. Now, if you've never done any of this, it might feel a bit awkward at first, and that's okay. Because it's absolutely worth it. We *need* friendship with each other within God's family.

Okay, second. We said **men and women need friendship with each other...**

**...while being honest with themselves about sin and temptation
(in those friendships).**

So, **even with everything we've just said** about men and women pursuing friendship with each other: **should** we be diligent about guarding against unhealthy attraction and sexual sin within those friendships? *Absolutely* we should. **Married men in the room: if after this**

teaching, I see you out at lunch every day with a woman, one-on-one, who you're not married to, and you tell me you're just "applying the sermon," I'm throwing a flag on that *immediately*. *Single* folks in the room: if I find out you scheduled three different quasi-dates with the opposite sex this week so you can become better "siblings" to each other—I'm gonna have some questions.

So my **point isn't that we should be wilfully naive** about our friendships with the **opposite sex**. We shouldn't operate in a state of *denial* about our own hearts, pretending that a relationship is platonic when it is obvious to one or both parties that it's not. *Married* people obviously have to be *especially* conscious of all of that. We shouldn't be pouring *gasoline* on situations that are knowingly dangerous to us and our marriage. In fact, I know men who have told other men in our church: "hey—this woman we both know is attractive to me, and if you see me trying to regularly pursue time with just her, or flirting with her, you need to call me out on it." I know *women* that have told other women the same thing about their relationships with men. I think all of that is really *wise* and really *healthy* to do.

I think **single people have to be really clear** about their intentions with each other so that they don't end up in these really weird, ambiguous situations that confuse and hurt everybody involved. So a couple quick tips for those of you who are single: if you are asking someone out on a date, say it's a date! If you are just wanting to hang out as friends, then don't make it feel like a *date*. Probably doesn't need to be one-on-one, especially if you don't know the other person that well. Being clear about your intentions is an incredible thing. So do that.

And additionally, I will **just point out**: you **don't have to** hang out **one-on-one** with someone to cultivate a *friendship* with them. In fact, that's probably a good rule of thumb: if the *only* way you know how to be "friends" with someone of the opposite sex is to hang out with them one-on-one, you might want to think a little more critically about what's motivating that friendship. Additionally, if you find yourself only pursuing friendships with people you find physically *attractive*, you probably should think critically about that as well.

Um...I'll **give you an indirect way** to guard against sinful tendencies in opposite sex friendships. It'll feel super random at first but I actually don't think it's random at all. You ready? Do your absolute best to remove **porn** from your life. I think **one thing that has done substantial damage to our ability to have platonic friendships is the prevalence of porn**. *Because think about this for a second. What does porn teach us to believe about other human beings? That they are objects that exist mainly for our pleasure. And porn teaches us that if people of the opposite sex are in the same place*

for any length of time (or for that matter, people of the *same* sex), it's only a matter of time before they sleep together.

Some of the more recent studies I've seen estimate that somewhere around 98% of men and 73% of women have viewed porn in the past six months.¹⁰ Do you think that could be hurting our ability as a society to view relationships platonically? *Sure would think so.* So **probably for a lot of people, one of the most helpful things you could do would be to get porn out of your life.** Put blocks on your device that you can't change. Confess any struggle with it to your LifeGroup. Ask God to change your heart to not desire it anymore. Whatever you need to do. As much as you are able, get porn out of your life. *I think that would go along way towards helping us cultivate healthy, platonic friendships with others.*

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So **all of that to say**, there are **certainly cautions** and *considerations* we should take in our friendships with the opposite sex. We shouldn't be naive. We should think critically about what's motivating those friendships. We should talk *openly* with our LifeGroups about those friendships. *All* of that is healthy and necessary for followers of Jesus to do. For some of us in the room, there may be ways we need to be honest with ourselves about sin and temptation in our interactions with the opposite sex. And for those attracted to the *same* sex, about the sin and temptation *there*.

Some of us might even need to take *stronger* measures in these friendships to account for particular struggles we have. *Someone who struggles with sex addiction. Someone with a past marked by infidelity. Someone who is still working through the impact of past sexual abuse, such that they feel unsafe around the opposite sex. People in those types of situations may have some preliminary work to do, in order to get to a place where they can enjoy the gift of platonic friendships. If that's you, it's okay for extreme measures to be a solution for you for a season, while you do the work to address the underlying issues. That can be a very, very wise thing to do.*

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But **I am saying** that **avoiding the opposite sex shouldn't be the default posture for all followers of Jesus, at all times.** Let's get the help we need to get to a healthier place, but let's not make the permanent decision to *reject* something that God actually intended for our *good*. The bible **says we should "flee sexual immorality."** Yes and *amen* to that. But if *every interaction* you have with the opposite sex makes you have to "flee sexual immorality," that's a much *bigger* problem than just the friendship itself. *Avoidance* is not the same thing as *purity*.¹¹

¹⁰ Data from [this study](#) (link is free from explicit images but the content is still probably NSFW).

¹¹ Credit for this tagline also goes to Aimee Byrd.

So we **started off today** with one very simple, and yet profoundly *complex*, instruction from the bible: treat older men as *fathers*, older women as *mothers*, younger men as *brothers*, and younger women as *sisters*...in “**absolute purity.**” So I want us to *conclude* today by asking and answering one more question: **where does purity come from?** We’ve established that it doesn’t originate from *avoidance* of the opposite sex. While that *can* be a *temporary* strategy, it’s not a *long-term* strategy. So how *do* we *become* pure?

Look with me at **1 John 3, v. 3:**

But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

So I want you to notice the logic in that verse. **The assumption being made there is that none of us, as it is, are pure.** Right? Otherwise, there’s no need for us to be *purified*. Apparently, all of us are in *need* of being *purified*. So this idea that purity is something that we can perfectly achieve on our own, by abstaining from friendship, or abstaining from sexual sin or from sex *altogether*—all of that misses the point a little. Because even if you’re one of the fortunate few who successfully *abstains* from *sexual* sin, have you ever had *other* types of ulterior motives in friendships? Ever been motivated to be friends with someone for selfish reasons? Ever used another person to boost or prop up yourself or as a means to an end? That, still, according to the bible, is *impurity*.

So all of us, evidently, have some amount of *impurity* in us as human beings. Purity, biblically speaking, is not really something we *achieve*. It’s not something that we succeed or fail at. And even if it was, *most* of us—including myself—have failed at it far more often than we’ve succeeded. So **if we are going to become pure, it’s not going to be something we arrive at in our own strength; it’s going to have to be something we are given.** And how does 1 John 3 say we are *given* purity? Where does purity *come* from? According to what we just read, it comes from *Jesus*. From *seeing* Jesus, *beholding* Jesus, and ultimately from *hoping* in Jesus.

Now, **as we’ve mentioned before** here on Sundays, “**hope**” is a stronger word in the bible than it is in most modern vocabularies. When we talk about *hope*, we tend to mean “wish.” I *hope* it doesn’t rain tomorrow. I *hope* Tennessee makes it into the College Football Playoff. What we mean by the word *hope* is generally “I really want this to happen, but to be honest, I have no idea if it will or not.” But **when the bible talks about hope—and specifically, about hoping in Jesus—it means to have an expectation of**

something happening. It means having *confidence* that it will happen. It's not a *wish*; it's a *trust*.

So when 1 John talks about *hoping* in Jesus, it's talking about having *confidence* in him. It's talking about a posture that says "Jesus, I trust that when you say something is *good* for me, it's good for me." "Jesus, I trust that when you say something is *bad* for me, it's bad for me." "And I trust that when you say life works best a certain way, it *really does work best* that way."

And *specifically when it comes to* being pure: *hoping* in Jesus means that when he says his blood is enough to purify us, no matter what we've done, or what we've failed at...he *means* that. And John says that *that type of hope is where purity actually comes from*. Not from how successfully we rid sin from our hearts. Not from our sexual history or lack thereof. Not from how perfectly we execute male/female friendships or how innocent we are in them. *Purity* comes from *hoping* in Jesus. And trusting that whatever sin is there can and will be dealt with by the power of the cross.

When we come to the tables each Sunday and take communion, that is precisely what we are proclaiming. That's what we're remembering: that *we*, on our own, are *not* pure. But *he* is. And he can *make us* pure as we hope in him. So this morning: can I invite you to remember that he can make you pure? Can I invite you to realize that he *wants* to do that? And can I invite you to know that he is *good* enough to do that? [...] Let me pray and I'll give us some space to celebrate those things.