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## The Masculinist #25: What Do We Do About the Friend Zone?

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Welcome back to the Masculinist, the monthly email newsletter about the intersection of Christianity and masculinity.

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The crew at Christianity Today had me on their [Quick to Listen podcast](#) recently to talk about Christianity and men. It was a great discussion. Thanks to them for having me on. Thanks to their editor Mark Galli for putting me in his monthly newsletter. And thanks to those of you who found me via the podcast or newsletter.

Head's up New Yorkers. I'm going to be delivering two forthcoming lectures on masculinity at Central Presbyterian Church (64th and Park Ave.) as parts of its Vocare lecture series, which takes place Sundays at 10am prior to the service. One 9/16 I'll be discussing the neoliberalization of relationships. And on 10/7 I'll be discussing changes in the economy and household structure in the West. Whether or not you can make it, please [email me](#) if you're in New York, because I'd like to connect with my readers here. If anyone has a free moment to pray that these talks go well, I would appreciate it.

By the way, I've received some inquiries about speaking to groups. I'm not able to accept any out of town speaking engagements at this time.

### The Dreaded Friend Zone

The phrase "How do I get out of the friend zone" generates [45,000 hits](#) on Google. "Friend zone" by itself generates [4.8 million hits](#). Google helpfully defines "friend zone" as "a situation in which a friendship exists between two people, one of whom has an unreciprocated romantic or sexual interest in the other." Friend zone has its own [Wikipedia entry](#), which says, "In popular culture, the friend zone is a situation in which one member of a friendship wishes to enter into a romantic or sexual relationship, while the other does not. It is generally considered to be an undesirable situation for the rejected person."

The broader question of whether men and women can or should be friends is frequently debated in the church. In my observation, the church tends to advocate in favor of male-female friendship at some level, even in the most conservative precincts. Aimee Byrd, a member of the most conservative Presbyterian denomination, just wrote a book called [Why Can't We Be Friends?](#), which in effect argues that the Bible requires men and women to be friends. The famous book [I Kissed Dating Goodbye](#) strongly recommended male-friend friendships. Jen Wilkin [says](#) the church needs men and women to be friends. Injunctions against male-female friendship are generally directed only at those who are married, with some people (a minority I would estimate) advocating the Billy Graham Rule or the Mike Pence Rule or some such.

I will be super direct: other than actual sin, nothing else in my life has done me more harm than being friends with women. Nothing else even comes close. So I established a rigorous policy against it.

I will lay out my own personal policies later, but I will first say that I don't believe that it is my place or anyone else's to tell you how to live your life in this matter. This is a free country and people can do whatever they want. More importantly, the consequences good or bad are going to land on you, so you have to be accountable for making your own choice. Nobody else has skin the game for your life in this matter.

What I am going to do is analyze the nature of male-female friendships, which you can consider and combine with other research of your own to decide on the policy you want to live by.

The key to me is that friendships between men and women are characterized by endemic negative asymmetries in two areas: asymmetry of intent and asymmetry of outcomes.

## Asymmetry of Intent

An asymmetry of intent is the situation described in those friend zone definitions above. It occurs when one person wants more out of a friendship than the other person does. The usual case that's specific to male-female friendships is when one person wants to make the relationship romantic but the other person wants to remain friends.

A good example of this asymmetry is a story Tim Keller tells about his friendship with now wife Kathy, recounted in their book *The Meaning of Marriage*:

Though we were best friends and kindred spirits, I was still hurting from a previous relationship that had ended badly. Katy was patient and understanding up to a point, but the day came when she said, "Look, I can't take this anymore. I have been expecting to be promoted from friend to girlfriend. I know you to mean to be saying this, but every day you don't choose me to be more than a friend, it feels as if I've been weighed and found wanting – hoping that someday you'll want me to be more than a friend. I'm not calling myself a pearl, and I'm not calling you a pig, but one of the reasons Jesus told his disciples not to cast pearls before swine was because a pig can't recognize the value of a pearl. If you can't see me as valuable to you, then I'm not going to keep throwing myself into your company, hoping and hoping. I can't do it. The rejection that I perceive, whether you intend it or not, is just too painful.

That's exactly what she said. It got my attention. It sent me into a time of deep self-examination. A couple of weeks later, I made the choice.

Since there are already rules named after men, let's name this one the "Kathy Keller Rule." The Kathy Keller Rule is:

*Do not stay in a friendship where your desire for romance is persistently denied, but deliver an ultimatum (or ask the other person out on a date), exiting the friendship if the other person chooses not to reciprocate your desires.*

People don't necessarily move in the same speed in relationships. But if one person wants to take the relationship to the next level and the other person does not, and this persists for longer than a limited window of time, then the situation is fundamentally exploitative. Kathy recognized this and took appropriate action.

Everyone understands this when it comes to dating. The stereotypical case is that a man and woman are dating and the woman is looking to move forward towards marriage by getting engaged or taking concrete steps in that direction, but the man does not, and "takes evasive maneuvers." I know people who have gone on for years in this situation. In all of these cases, they were having sex, triggering the well-understood maxim that "if you're getting the milk for free, you ain't never going to buy the cow."

In my experience, the situation is generally reversed when it comes to friendship. That is, when a man and woman are "just friends", it's usually that the man wants to be in a romantic relationship but the woman does not. And generally similar reasons apply as to why she's happy with the situation. She is already getting the many of the non-sexual benefits of a boyfriend or even of marriage without having to actually date him.

Some Christian pastors even explicitly teach that single men should give away the benefits of marriage early, even to just friends. Matt Chandler calls this "imaging headship." For example, he [says](#):

As a single man, you image headship with borrowed authority by serving and protecting women as sisters. Let me unpack that. I have an older sister and a younger sister. Here was a frequent conversation my daddy had with me. "Buddy, at school, you look out for your sisters. If some other guy is messing with your sisters, I want you to tell a teacher. If that teacher will not listen, I want you to punch them in their face and keep punching and keep punching and keep punching until an adult drags you off of that little boy. When they drag you off, what I want you to do is be like, 'Get off me! Get off me!' You go back at them until they...There needs to be a healthy kind of fear of you when it comes to your sisters. You protect them."

Matt here suggests that men owe a special duty of protection to their female friends and other women, even to the point of initiating physical violence on their behalf. She need not marry or even date him to qualify for this. Likewise, Chandler calls on men to serve these women. Again, milk, free, cow.

Rather than "imaging headship," I suspect Kathy Keller might call it "throwing pearls before swine."

Men aren't noted for their emotional sensitivity, but I've yet to encounter one of these men who were dating women

that wanted to get married claim to be unaware of her desires. (I notice that Tim Keller doesn't claim to have not known that Kathy was interested in more than a friendship even before her "pearls before swine" speech). Similarly, it's almost certain that the woman in these friend zone situations is well aware that the man is romantically interested in her. That is why I categorize these types of relationships as exploitative.

Kathy was quite correct in delivering that ultimatum to Tim, but she should not have had to do it. If you are in a friendship or dating relationship with a woman and you know she wants to take it to the next level but you don't, then you have an obligation to take action yourself, probably by breaking it off. I feel confident being directive here, because taking advantage of other people is sinful. Her willingness to stay is no excuse.

If you are on the other side of that relationship you have to understand that you are being exploited. It is fully in your power to do exactly what Kathy did. If you don't, then you are willfully choosing to be exploited and should expect to reap the consequences of that.

Some people argue that they really are just friends and that there's no romantic interest on either side. It's true that male-female friendships often start out that way. But these friendships are dynamic and evolve over time. If a man and woman find out they don't have any real connection or chemistry between them, their friendship will probably die on its own, just as two men who don't have some sort of a connection aren't likely to sustain a friendship. But if they do have some connection or spark to their friendship, this generally evolves in a romantic direction for one or both parties. Hence male-female friendship is unstable.

I can't think of a single case in my entire life where a man and a woman were friends for longer than a year and one of them didn't want it to be romantic, with the exception of female friendships with gay men.

Again, my observation is that it's mostly men who find themselves in the friend zone situation. And this newsletter is for men. So guys, let me ask you: are you in a friendship with a woman that's lasted for longer than six months or a year? If so, are you content as "just friends"?

Conclusion: Friendships between men and women have the characteristic that they often evolve into asymmetry of intent, which is exploitative if it persists. Remember the Kathy Keller Rule. And remember, just as no woman is under any obligation to go out on a date with a man such as you, you are under no obligation to be a friend to women. She has no right to your companionship.

## Asymmetry of Outcomes

The ideal investment is one with small and capped downside but unlimited upside. This is a positive asymmetry. The worst situation is a negative asymmetry where your upside is small and limited, but your downside is potentially huge.

Male-female friendship has this negative asymmetry of outcome. Admittedly, there actually is one very high value potential positive outcome from being friends with someone of the opposite sex. It could turn into a romantic relationship that leads to marriage. If you meet your future wife as a result of being friends with her first, the way Tim met Kathy, you had a very positive outcome.

Except in that one scenario, the positive payoffs for male-female friendship are pretty low because the benefits of most friendships today are pretty low generally. The base case is that you get to enjoy socializing and conversation, and maybe some mutual aid now and again. (In my experience, the aid usually flows towards the woman in any case, such as by helping her move furniture, etc. in line with Matt Chandler's "imaging headship." This is a clear subtext of the church's calls for male-female friendships. There are a lot of singles in church, meaning a lot of single women, and they need help with things like [moving sofas](#). Solution: promote friendships between men and women).

Consider the many possible negative outcomes – including potentially very negative outcomes - that could result from being friends with a woman:

- Falling for her romantically and finding your interest unrequited – moving from friend to friend zone.
- Spending years of your precious youth that you'll never get back waiting patiently in the friend zone in the vain hope that she will want to date you, passing up opportunities to meet many other high quality girls who might actually want to go out with you.
- Her falling for you romantically and you not being interested in her, putting you in an awkward and risky spot (if she doesn't take your rejection well and decides to try to get revenge).
- Committing sexual sin, with the potential effect of destroying your marriage if you are a married man, getting her pregnant, etc.

- Getting into a major fight that ends the friendship, and also forces you out of your mutual circle of friends or even your church.
- Getting into a major fight and getting falsely accused of sexual harassment, etc. (Even if you are innocent, in a #MeToo world merely to be accused is to be convicted).

Some of these may be remote possibilities. But if one of these “black swan” events happens to you, it could be life destroying. Given the instability of male-friendships as a “just friends” situation, a negative outcome of some sort appears to be the most likely scenario. Very bad outcomes are not uncommon.

## Sapping of Motivation

One potential negative outcome deserves its own heading. When you have a friend of the opposite sex, your motivation level to find a girlfriend (then hopefully wife) is reduced.

Consider a simple and common case: you need a date to an event. If you have a female friend you can bring as your +1, this dramatically reduces the level of motivation you have to go ask women out on an actual date. Friendship in this case gives you an easy out from the difficult task of overcoming your fears and focusing on finding dates. Or allows you to avoid making the personal and life changes that would make you more compelling as a romantic partner.

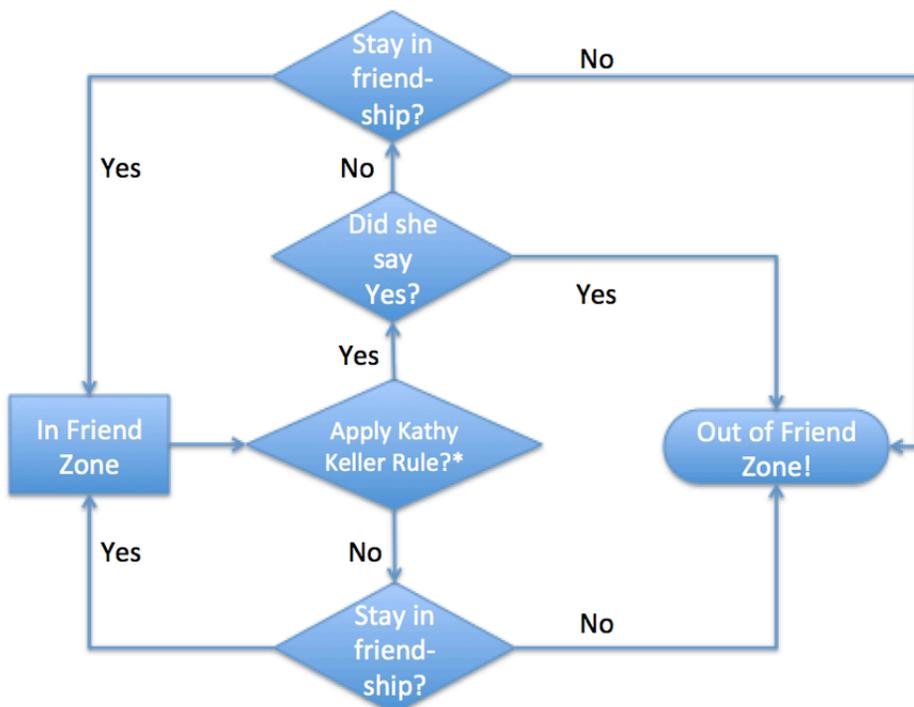
It can be the same the other direction. If you are the equivalent of Carrie Bradshaw’s gay +1 from Sex and the City, or if you step into the boyfriend/husband role by being the furniture mover and such whenever she needs it, you might well be doing her a long run disservice.

Male-female friendships can make it so comfortable to be single that people don’t take the steps they need to in order to move forward towards marriage.

## How to Get Out of the Friend Zone

How to get out of the friend zone is apparently a popular question, so if you find yourself in this situation, I put together a flowchart that shows your possible paths.

### How to Get Out of the Friend Zone



\* Kathy Keller Rule: Give ultimatum or ask for date

Your options are very simple.

1. You apply the Kathy Keller Rule by either asking her on a date or giving her an ultimatum. If she says Yes,

congratulations. You are now out of the friend zone and dating.

2. You exit the friend zone by terminating the friendship.

In all other cases you are stuck in the friend zone, with asymmetry of intent, probably in a state of being exploited.

It's possible that at some point she will express interest in you the way Kathy did for Tim. But don't count on it. To repeat, in situations where a man and women are dating and she wants to move towards marriage but he doesn't, the man is almost always aware of her desires. Similarly, if you are friends with a woman and interested in dating her, you can be virtually certain she already knows about your interest at some level and is taking active measures to manage the relationship to keep you engaged without having to take that leap. If she had wanted to date you, she probably would already done something like what Kathy Keller did. If you want the situation to change, it's highly likely you are going to need to be the one to make a move. And besides, if you are so scared that you have to wait for the woman to ask you out, you've got much bigger problems than being in the friend zone.

## **My Rules on Opposite Sex Friendship**

To put my own cards on the table, I will tell you the personal rule I follow for friendships with women. It's very simple:

*Never have a 1:1 personal friendship with a woman.*

I am married, but I followed the same rule while single. It's not about the appearance of impropriety or the risk of having sex or any of that. Rather, it's the bad things that happened in the past when I had tried to be friends with women. After enough disasters, I finally said enough's enough. No more throwing pearls before swine or good money after bad. The results of that change and following the rules above have been incredibly positive and I've never once regretted it.

Note that I said personal friendships in this. I do maintain professional friendships with women. I do meet women professionally for coffee or have a business lunches with women. But these are not personal friendships that exist outside of the professional context unless my wife is involved.

Speaking of which, while I will not have 1:1 personal friendships with women, my wife and I do have friendships with them as a couple. This includes other couples obviously, but also singles. We make a point of inviting single people, men and women, over for dinner, for example. In fact, a single woman from church is coming over to our apartment for dinner on Tuesday.

I also have a handful of women I would classify as personal acquaintances. I see them very rarely so it's hard to really say there's a friendship. For example, there's one colleague of mine who works remotely who I go to an opera dress rehearsal with once or twice a year. There's a significant age gap between us as well. I see no reason to militantly cut this off.

Then there are familial relationships that I am very firm about not classifying as friendships: my mother, my stepsisters, and my wife. A lot of men like to call their wife "my best friend." I think of mine as my wife – which I think is a much deeper and more significant relationship.

That's what I do. Again, you must do what you feel is right for yourself because the harvest will be yours. You are all big boys. Just remember that if you end up in the friend zone it's your own fault.

## **Does the Bible Require Male-Female Friendships?**

I always stress that I'm a cultural critic not an authoritative Bible teacher. In this case I think I have to at least address the theology, because if the Bible requires men and women to be friends, that overrides any other consideration. My analysis may well seem perfect, but as we know, there's a way that seems right to a man but the end thereof is death.

Does the Bible require men and women to be 1:1 personal friends? I have not seen an even halfway convincing argument to this effect.

My pastor, who is very sharp, did an entire sermon series on friendship and I don't recall him referencing this at all. My takeaway from that is that the Bible doesn't speak to it, meaning it falls into the category of our general call to be wise.

I read Aimee Byrd's book. It was thoroughly unconvincing. Jen Wilkin's Gospel Coalition piece linked above references only one verse of scripture (Mark 3:35) that doesn't even contain the word friend. In Matt Chandler's sermon, he does not refer to any scripture to justify his discourse on imaging headship. They all seem to rely on the idea of Christians being sisters and brothers to justify these kinds of 1:1 personal friendships. I'm not buying it, and as I noted above, I consider familial relationships fundamentally distinct from friendship. If not, why ever talk about friendship as a distinct entity?

If someone has a compelling theological argument to the effect that men and women must be 1:1 personal friends, I would love to read it. Please send it my way at [arenn@urbanophile.com](mailto:arenn@urbanophile.com). If appropriate, I'll share in a future issue.

## Noteworthy

Apropos of [last month's issue](#) on responding to institutional decline that referenced Donald Trump's "delegitimize" strategy towards the media, the Atlantic just ran a piece saying, "[Trump Has Changed How Teens View the News.](#)"

The Atlantic: [The Jordan Peterson All-Meat Diet](#) – Jordan Peterson is apparently on some crackpot diet of nothing but beef, salt, and water. I've said at some point his wave will crest, and this may be an indicator that he's starting to lose the plot.

GQ: [Sperm Count Zero](#)

BBC: [The strange truth about the Pill](#) - There are nine different kinds of hormones in the contraceptive pill – some of which have subtle 'masculinising' effects. Why? And should we be concerned?

NYT: [The age that woman have babies: the gap that divides America](#)

Fortune: [Why Women in Their Early 20s Are Out-Earning Men](#)

NY Post: A woman used Tinder to [set up bogus dates with hundreds of men](#) at Union Square as part of a viral marketing campaign.

NYT: [He asked permission to touch, not to ghost](#) - this is a very good article on the state of the modern relationship market. And about the reality that casual sex, no matter how "safe" in its construction, is personally damaging, not satisfying.

## Coda

A Masculinist reader shared the following observations on Jordan Peterson:

I've been puzzling over the Jordan Peterson question since reading his book, and wondering why this non-theistic guy is communicating with guys (like me) in a way Men's Ministries could only dream. I think I understand at least some of the problem and how the church can do better.

The biggest reason is Peterson doesn't just give people rules to live by, he's giving them explanations for how the world works and why it works that way. He answers (wrongly, but compellingly) the most basic questions: why are we here, how did we get here, why is it so hard, how do we manage it, etc. His rules are couched in a philosophy of the entire universe. He's showing people how to look at the world and his rules flow out of that. People want to participate in his story about the world. They want to bring order to chaos, and Peterson states clearly and simply how to do it.

I also think this is why men in church are so depleted. Peterson invites you into a story of conquering dragons, standing up straight, and telling the truth. Men's ministers usually say, "Hey, try not to spend so much time at work. Porn is bad. Sign up for our prayer breakfast." There's no invitation to a great story. They just tell men to calm down and try to keep it in their pants. NT Wright's book, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* is the closest thing I'm aware of to connecting our behavior with the story arc of scripture. It's not explicitly for men, but it attempts to do what Peterson does. Wright connects eschatology with ethics. I think Peterson does something similar, though from a secular perspective, which is why people are drawn to him.

The church misses the mark by not connecting men's place in the world with God's story about the world. It can connect to men more by teaching the story of God's interaction with the world, and how we should take part. It's an

amazing story that gives reason to the rhyme churches are trying to sell men. Wright's book does this so well (it did for me, at least). I think his method of explaining our choices in the context of God's story can resonate in churches the way Peterson resonates elsewhere.

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