

Dating

Moving from Singleness to Marriage in a Way that Honors Christ

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Session One: Introduction to Dating

As the title implies, this opening session serves as our introduction to the topic of dating. In this session we'll look at some reasons to study this topic. We'll also explore what the Scriptures say (or, more accurately, *don't say*) about this topic. By the end of the session, you'll see how we arrived at our working definition of "dating."

Why should we think carefully about dating?

It's important that we think carefully about the topic of dating for at least four reasons:

1. Blessings & Dangers

Dating brings with it incredible potential for blessing. A Christian realizes that through this process they may very well end up with a lifelong companion, which is one of life's greatest joys (Eccl. 9:9). But there's also an incredible potential for dishonoring the Lord if we idolize dating, marriage, or intimacy. We could end up "defrauding" one another (1 Thess. 4:1-8) and making provisions for our destructive fleshly impulses (Rom. 13:14).

2. Lots of Opinions

If you've ever gone into a Christian bookstore to find a helpful book on relationships, you've likely been overwhelmed. There are so many opinions out there on how to date (or court) the best way, but not all of them are beneficial. They tend to trend in one of two directions. Some add additional standards to what Scripture teaches, and usually try to mandate their particular method to *all* Christians. Others try to sanitize worldly dating methodologies, usually in reaction to the more conservative approaches. There's a tremendous need for biblical clarity—clarity that will lead to humble confidence for those who are dating or preparing to date.

3. Superficial Solutions

When it comes to common problems or temptations that come with a dating relationship, often superficial solutions are given. For example, couples are told to set up boundaries and have accountability partners (both good things in themselves!) to help curb their hormones. But the underlying idols of their hearts are never exposed, and lasting self-control is not actually cultivated.

4. Relevant to Everyone

We realize that not everyone who works through this material is currently dating. Some may not even be interested in dating. However, we believe this series will be useful for you, no matter what stage of life God has you in. We believe this study is relevant to:

- *Singles who desire to be married one day* (those with the gift of marriage).

The relevance of a series like this is obvious: we want to put in your minds the Biblical principles that will help you navigate this process if God brings you the opportunity to date. God will be glorified as you honor him and you'll receive the most blessing, joy and growth as a result. We also want you to be able to identify worldly motivations or extrabiblical principles that you've unknowingly embraced that are dangerous to your spiritual growth.

- *Singles who don't desire marriage* (i.e. those with the gift of singleness) or *married couples* who've already run the dating gauntlet.

No matter who you are, you will have friends and disciples who are dating or want to date. That means you need to have Biblical clarity and insight to help them navigate this potentially hazardous process in a way that honors Christ. Even if you're single and have no desire for marriage, you can still direct your friends to the biblical principles that should be applied as they date.

- *Singles currently in a relationship progressing toward marriage* (dating/courting, engagement).

For you folks, we ask that you treat this series as a grid to evaluate your thinking and your readiness for marriage. We want to encourage you to be genuinely objective with the word, and to bring others alongside you for help with objectivity. We hope that your readiness for marriage will be affirmed and confirmed! If we see warning signs, we may caution you as well as come alongside you for some intensive help, so that, later we can affirm the relationship. If it becomes apparent that the relationship is dangerous, unhealthy, or destructive, we'll advise you to end the relationship so that you can work through the issues the Lord has revealed before entering into a permanent marital covenant. Whatever the case, we urge you to trust God in the process. If you honor him (even when it's hard), he will always ultimately reward you.

What does the Bible say about dating?

That's a great question, because that should be our first question when we consider anything in life. What's God's mind about this issue? What has he said explicitly about the topic we are considering? The short answer is this: not much.

1. The Bible doesn't explicitly command any particular dating method for us.

God doesn't explicitly command any particular method for us as New Covenant believers. We will look at some implications from this below, but for now, I want us simply to make the observation.

Although dating methods aren't commanded, they are *described* in Scripture. We certainly have several to choose from, if you want to go that route (although not recommended). There's Adam's method: God could put you to sleep, cut you open, and design a wife for just for you. Or there's Isaac's method: your dad could send his employee back to your hometown by a gas station (the cultural equivalent of a well) and ask God for a girl to come out and fill up his car with gas (the cultural equivalent of watering and feeding his camels). Then he could bring her back to you without you even seeing her for an arranged marriage. Or if you're the girl in this scenario, you could be at work one day, then be whisked off to another country and married one week later. We're obviously not serious right now, and if we were to look at these texts in context, we would see exactly why things happened like they did. But the point is this: dating methods, if we can even call them that, are *described* in Scripture, but not *commanded*.

If there is no specific method required of us, how can the Bible help us? We shouldn't panic, because of the next principle.

2. The Bible does promise to instruct us to live wisely in every phase of life—including dating.

Although there's no one Biblical "dating method" commanded for us in Scripture, the Bible does claim to be *sufficient* for us in every area of our Christian lives. Consider 1 Peter 1:3: "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence." Peter says God has graciously and generously given us *everything* that's relevant to eternal life and to growth in godliness through the knowledge of God. Where do we get this knowledge of God? From his own revelation of himself in Scripture.

Paul says essential the same thing in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." The written word is God's very breath and is immensely useful for us. It teaches, challenges and trains us, so that we are fully mature (complete). Do you hear that comprehensive language? Scripture is given so that we might be equipped for *every* good work.

To summarize, the Bible claims to be enough for us, fully capable to save us, grow us and guide us in all stages of life. Does that include what we call the dating stage of life? You bet.

But how is the Bible sufficient when it doesn't command a particular process, like dating or courting or arranged marriages? The Bible provides us with truth—biblical principles—that can be applied to this stage of life, to the dating process. This will become clearer as we progress through the series. But for now, here is an example. We're commanded to live our lives in a way that pleases Christ (2 Cor. 5:9) and brings God glory (1 Cor. 10:31), and we're told explicitly how to do this. As we learn what pleases and doesn't please God, and as we learn what brings him glory and detracts from his glory, we will be equipped to date in a way that pleases him.

Not only does the Bible provide us with principles that will guide us in dating, but even the Bible's *silence* about dating can teach us some very important things.

3. The Bible's silence on dating (but not on singleness or marriage) is itself instructive for us.

According to Scripture, there are essentially only two categories: singleness and marriage.¹ The Lord tells us explicit things about each of those categories. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul describes the benefits of singleness in the New Covenant as it provides an occasion for more exclusive devotion to Christ. We're told a lot about marriage, too, from the first pages of Scripture on.² God tells us that he created marriage and why. He provides explicit passages about the roles and responsibilities of husbands and wives. He gives clear commands, promises and warnings that relate to those roles. So, God has been explicit about the nature of these two categories. But he hasn't been explicit about dating.

To underscore the point that Scripture doesn't recognize dating or courting as third separate category, notice what *isn't* said in the following passages. In 1 Cor. 7:39, Paul doesn't tell the widow who is currently single to *date* a Christian. Instead, he tells this single woman to *marry* one (cf. 1 Tim. 5:14). Likewise, we're told in Proverbs 18:22 that a he who finds a *wife*—not a girlfriend—finds a good thing.

That said, this silence is actually really instructive for us. We can draw several implications from the Bible's silence on dating.

¹ We realize that "betrothal" constitutes a possible third category in Scripture. Here is a brief description of betrothal in Israel from Andreas J. Köstenberger and David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*, 2nd ed (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2010), 185. "In ancient Israel, the betrothal between a young man and a young woman was viewed as akin to marriage (except for sexual intercourse, which was reserved for the latter) and hence the betrothal required the issuing of a formal divorce."

² See Köstenberger and Jones, chaps. 2–4. These chapters include a survey of the Biblical teaching of marriage in both Old and New Testaments.

- It implies **we shouldn't create a third category of dating**. It's fine and appropriate to recognize that something different is happening, because it is! But it's more important to realize, in God's eyes, that you're still single. It's tempting in a dating relationship to play marriage or to reach for some of those gifts that are reserved exclusively for marriage. We will explore how to navigate some of those things later in this series, but for now simply observe that the Scriptures are clear: you don't stop being single until you're married.
- It also implies that **the purpose of dating should be to test companionship for marriage** (more on this in the next session). If there are only two categories—singleness and marriage—then “dating” (i.e. what happens in between) should have marriage as its exclusive destination or purpose. If you're dating (or wanting to date) simply because that's what people your age do, or to just have fun, or so that you don't feel insecure about yourself, or because you're lonely and you crave intimacy, you're dating for the wrong reason.
- Finally, a cascading implication that flows from everything we've just looked at is this: **we should give significant thought to marriage, and to preparing for it *before* we date**. If marriage is the only goal of this process, and it's where we want to end up, we need to know what the Bible says about it. At this moment, do you know most significant biblical passages on marriage? Can you name them? Could you articulate the purpose of marriage (i.e. why God created it)? Could you articulate to someone from Scripture what a husband's role in marriage is? Guys, do you know the specific commands the Lord will now hold you accountable for? Can you articulate a wife's role from Scripture? Ladies, do you know the specific commands the Lord will hold you accountable for once you get married? We're going to hit this topic of preparing to date in the third session. If you feel inadequate to answer these questions, a great place to start would be to read through *Marriage and the Family: Biblical Essentials* by Andreas Köstenberger.

Even though the Bible doesn't speak directly to dating, God's silence on the issue is still very instructive for us.

So what exactly is dating?

If Scripture doesn't give us any direct revelation on the topic, how should we define it? Here's a crack at my definition, based on everything we've worked through in the preceding paragraphs: “Dating is the process of going from singleness to marriage in a way that honors Christ.” When I say, “dating,” in this series, this is the definition I have in mind.

Session Two: The Purpose of Dating

In this second session, we will examine our purpose, or goal, in the dating process. It's incredibly important we know where we're going when we date, because our destination informs the path we take to get there. In this session we will look at some of our Christian sub-culture's common goals, or motivations, in dating and compare that with the Biblical goals for dating.

What are some common goals in dating?

At the outset, we should explore some of the common goals for dating in our Christian sub-culture, so that we can evaluate them with Scripture. Not all of these goals are necessarily sinful, although some are. This will help you evaluate your own motives and goals in dating.

1. To have fun.

This is one of the more common (and seemingly least sinister) goals. That's because it's true to our experience. We realize that spending time with the opposite sex is exciting and ought to be fun. We've all heard something like this expressed after a breakup: "Yeah it's over, but at least we had fun." The danger of making fun our ultimate goal is that it often trivializes the glory of marital companionship and, in so doing, comes up short of the larger purpose of dating.

2. To feel loved and desired.

People often date because they want to experience love as they perceive it. They want to be desired and fear being lonely. In one sense, this is normative to the human condition. We are designed to be interdependent, and God has wired most of us for marital companionship. Even unbelievers recognize this and move toward companionship in some form.

3. To experience intimacy and pleasure.

This is worldly motivation, if you're trying to fulfill this in some form in a sexual dating relationship. But we all recognize why this is a deep motivation. It is exciting. We are sexual beings by God's good design. But sin and rebellion have entered the picture, and we idolize sexual fulfillment. Often people want to experience foretastes of marital intimacy—and the foreplay designed to lead to it—without the covenant that God designed to contain and beautify it. If the fire is let out of the fireplace, so to speak, it will consume the house.

4. To feel important, personally significant, or needed.

Often people are motivated to date in order to meet some perceived need in themselves. As a single person, you're tempted to walk into church alone and insecure because of it.

But when you come in with someone on your arm, you feel may feel significant or more important. You may be motivated to date so that you feel needed and necessary, or justified in your personhood. This, too, is a worldly motivation that reveals something deeper about your heart.

5. To get married one day.

Marriage is good and desirable, and you recognize that dating is the path to get there. So a deep desire for marriage motivates your pursuit to date. This can be a wonderful, God-given desire, or it can turn into an idolatrous desire. We'll look more at that below, but for now, we'll just make the observation that marriage is a common goal and powerful motivation to date.

6. To have the potential for a family.

Along with marriage often comes a deep desire to have a family. And like marriage, the family is God's gift, intended to be enjoyed for his glory and our good. Family can be a powerful motivator to date.

7. To gain security for the future.

This becomes an acute feeling, especially for those who are approaching the end of their collegiate experience or are past what they perceive as the "normal" time to meet someone. You begin to fear that our opportunity to date is coming to a close, so you ratchet up your effort to find someone. Often motivating this is a desire to stabilize or control your future.

What are Biblical goals in dating?

To arrive at biblical goals for dating, we need to look at what Scripture says is the goal of our lives as believers. Then we should zero in on God's explicit purpose for marriage. Ultimately, we should align our goals for dating with both. Picture these twin goals like a target. The entire target is our overarching goal, and the bullseye is our specific goal in marriage.

1. The Overarching Goal: God's Glory

Our goal for dating should be consistent with the overall aim of our Christian life. In 1 Cor. 10:31, Paul instructs us to do *everything* for the glory of God—even the most mundane tasks. So, if we should eat and drink for God's glory, we should also date for God's glory.

But that implies something else: you actually *want* to live for God's glory. Is living for the glory of God compelling to you? Do you want your God to be magnified in the community because of and through your dating relationship? If not, why?

We desire to live for God's glory when we've truly come to know him and have experienced his salvation. This is a theme that runs throughout Scripture. One clear example of this is Psalm 50:14, where God says to his people, "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you and you will glorify me." Deliverance, or salvation, leads to glory. Another Psalm that provides a real time example of this principle is Psalm 34, where David calls the people to "magnify the Lord with me" (34:3). His cries for deliverance have been answered (34:4, 6). He was protected (34:7) and his life was redeemed (34:22). A delivered person is someone who wants to magnify the Lord.

As Christians, we've come to realize the utter hopelessness we're in apart from Christ, and what we deserve for our sin. And we've also come to experience God's radical forgiveness. We've received Christ's righteousness and have been set apart by his grace. And our conversion was completely his doing. Our eyes have been opened to the beauty of the King, and we want the world to see his glory through our transformed lives. That includes him getting glory from the way we date.

If his glory isn't our highest goal, it reveals that something else is. If we want something else more than to please Christ, it reveals an idolatry. An idol is a false god—a substitute for the one true God. It's what we love most, fear most, and trust most. Someone or something else is lord in our hearts, calling the shots for our lives. And if we're honest, that lord is usually us. We want to please ourselves, to do it our way, to trust in our own wisdom, and to be wise in our own eyes. This process of learning to identify the idols of our hearts, turn from them and grow in true worship of Christ is the process of sanctification. We grow in realizing Christ's lordship *functionally* in every area of our lives, including the area of dating.

A dating relationship (or marriage) can often be an unchecked idol in our hearts. If we simply made marriage the goal of our dating relationship, without considering God's glory, this idol of our heart would go unchecked. We often trust in someone of the opposite sex to provide for our needs and our desires, because at some level they really do *seem* to. And we're willing to sin to get what we really worship—to fulfill those desires and cravings in our hearts.

To help you put a little shoe leather on this concept, here's what idolatry of marriage could sound like:

- "I'm terrified of being single the rest of my life. I can't live with loneliness. Marriage would fix my craving for completeness. I'm incomplete without a spouse, and I'll never be truly happy until I'm married."
- "I can't control my lustful urges without a wife/husband. I'll never be ultimately satisfied or gain victory in this until I can express my sexual longings with a spouse."

- “I won’t be satisfied in life unless I have children. I can’t imagine living without ever having a family. Once I have children, I’ll finally realize my purpose on earth.”
- “I can’t *really* grow unless/until I’m married.” Or, “I can’t grow as well until I’m married.” Or, “No one will treat me as a real adult until I’m married.”
- “I can’t believe [person X] is dating [person Y]. Why does [he/she] always get asked out and not me?”

These kinds of statements are made out of a heart that’s idolizing marriage (cf. Matt. 12:34). We believe the lie that a marital relationship is our greatest need and, as a result, should be our ultimate pursuit.

If you think you may be idolizing marriage, there’s tremendous news: there is overflowing forgiveness and great grace in Christ (John 1:16)! Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15); he lived and died to cleanse idolaters (1 Cor. 6:9-11). He lived a sinless life, which means he never idolized anything! And his perfect obedience is transferred to us by faith. He is our propitiation, which means he absorbed all of God’s wrath for our idolatry in our place, so there’s no judgment left for us to experience. He knew about our personal idolatry long before we did and is the one who is graciously exposing it today, so that we can find the joy of truly worshipping Christ. Marriage can’t deliver you like God can, so don’t trust in it. Marriage, though it is a wonderful gift, is a faulty hope and a terrible god. So trust exclusively in the true God, the God who *created* marriage.

When God’s glory is our ultimate goal in dating—it puts everything else in its place. It’s our plumb line for the entire dating process. When we’re truly worshipping Christ, when we want to see him honored in our lives, we’ll work to bring our dating practices under his lordship!

2. The Specific Goal: Testing Companionship for Marriage

The more specific goal in a dating relationship —the center of the bullseye, so to speak— is to test companionship for marriage. This just means that, while you date, you’re exploring whether companionship in marriage something you should explore together.

What is companionship?

If our goal is testing companionship, we need to know what companionship is and what it involves. In the approach below, we’ll explore the meaning of the term, “companion,” and then see how Scripture applies it specifically to the marriage context.

1. The term, “companion,” means close friend (Ps. 55:13-14).

In Psalm 55, David is lamenting the fact that it’s not an outright enemy that’s taunting him, but his “companion” (v. 13). He further describes what he means by “companion”

in the next phrase, which is a close synonym: “my familiar friend” (v. 13). This phrase could be translated more woodenly as, “my known one,” implying unity and intimacy in the friendship. David continues describing what companions do. In the next verse, he says they used to “take sweet counsel together” (v. 14), meaning they shared and received helpful encouragement from one another. So, putting it all together, a companion, in its most basic sense, is a close friend.

2. This term, “companion,” is also used to describe a marriage partner (Prov. 2:17; cf. Mal. 2:14; Song. 5:16).

In Proverbs 2, Solomon tells his sons how they can escape the enticements of an adulteress. In this passage, he describes this tempting woman as someone “who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God” (v. 17). The “companion of her youth” is a clear reference to her husband, the man she covenanted to as a young lady before God.

In a more positive context, the wife in the Song of Solomon celebrates to those listening that her husband, her “beloved” is her “friend” (5:16). Although this is a different Hebrew word than what we examined before, it is virtually synonymous with “companion.” And again, the idea (as translated by the ESV) is that a spouse is also a friend.

So, we’ve learned that a companion is (1) an intimate friend, and that (2) spouses are described using this same friendship language. But where did these later biblical authors, like Solomon and Malachi, get this idea that a spouse is also a companion? Although the specific term isn’t used, they recognized the concept of companionship is *embedded* in the very first account of marriage, described in Genesis 1-2.

What can we observe about marital companionship from Genesis 1-2?

From these opening chapters, we can make at least three observations about marital companionship, adding to what we learned above.

1. Marital companionship is aimed at fulfilling God’s mission for his glory (Gen. 1:26-28; cf. Eph. 5:32).

In Genesis 1, we learn that human beings are the pinnacle of God’s creation. Unlike the rest of creation, men and women resemble God in unique ways because they are made in God’s image and after his likeness (1:26, 27). And God intends to display his glory uniquely in and through mankind (cf. Ps. 8:5).

But how? We’re given insight through the most foundational mission statement of Scripture, Genesis 1:28: “And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and

multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”³ God intends his image bearers (1:27) to increase and mediate his blessed reign over all creation (1:28). To put it slightly differently, God intends his glory to fill the earth through the increase of his image bearers who trust him, worship him, serve him, reign for him and enjoy him forever.

In Genesis 2, we learn specifically that God’s mission is accomplished, initially,³ through the institution of marriage. In God’s abundantly good creation (1:31), Adam is all alone (2:18). That’s *not* good, because he can’t fulfill God’s intentions to multiply his image and increase the mediation of his reign over the earth by himself. So, God profoundly creates a woman from the man to help him fulfill this glorious mission. This shows us that marital companionship points outside itself. Its ultimate aim is to fulfill God’s mission.

2. Marital companionship is a “one-flesh union” in thoughts, goals, plans, efforts and bodies (Gen. 2:24).

When God creates the woman, he doesn’t fashion her from the dust, like Adam (2:7). Instead, he creates her *out of* the very flesh and bone of Adam (2:21-23). This becomes the *basis* for the one-flesh union of marriage (2:24). In marriage, God joins an individual man and woman together into a harmonious single entity, described here as “one flesh.” This unity includes sexual unity but goes far beyond it. God intends this one-flesh language to represent unity in thoughts, goals, plans efforts *and* bodies.

3. Marital companionship is complementary (Gen. 2:18).

As we continue to pan out in this chapter, we realize the one-flesh unity is achieved not by uniformity (that is, making them exactly the same), but through complementary diversity. The Lord says he will make Adam a “helper fit for him” (2:18; cf. 2:20). This phrase could be translated, “a helper like his opposite.” The woman, Adam’s wife, will *help* him fulfill God’s mission by being opposite to him, and very different from him! Like two pieces of a puzzle, the man and woman are *designed* to fit together perfectly.

³ The fall will severely threaten this mission, though God will remain committed to it (cf. Num. 14:21; Hab. 2:14). After the fall, God’s image bearers no longer implicitly trust him, but instead trust in idols. They are no longer blessed, but under God’s curse of death. They are banished from his presence in the garden and will return to the dust. But in the midst of judgment, God makes a promise that one of the children of Eve will ultimately deal with this problem (Gen. 3:16). Through later revelation, we learn that this child is Jesus. Through his obedience and death, he will renew God’s image in mankind and mediate God’s blessed reign through God’s people. And God’s renewed people will again be fruitful [increase] and multiply (notice this very language in Acts 6:7; 9:31; Col. 1:6). They will multiply into all nations as disciples are made, extending the reach of his reign, until he comes again to put all things under his feet. This will culminate in a new and more glorious creation, in the realization of an everlasting kingdom that cannot be destroyed.

Husband and wife are to work harmoniously together, fulfilling different but essential roles. Thus, marital companionship is complementary.

Over the last few pages, we've learned a lot about marital companionship. Let's try to crystalize our observations into a working definition. "Companionship in marriage is an intimate and unified friendship, where husband and wife work together in complementary ways for God's glory and mission." That's what the Bible is after when it talks about companionship in marriage.

Now let's apply this to dating. If you're dating (or aspiring to date), you should be testing whether or not companionship with this person is a good decision. That's what the dating process is all about. This leads us to our next question.

What is involved in "testing companionship" for marriage?

We have established that our goal in dating is God's glory as we test companionship in marriage. We've also fleshed out the meaning of marital companionship, to know what it is we're pursuing. Now we need to examine what is involved in actually testing companionship during the dating phase.

To answer this question, I'm taking direction primarily from 1 Corinthians 7:39. In this verse, Paul says if a woman's "husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord." My first two elements of "testing companionship" are found in this verse.

1. Testing companionship asks if marriage to this person is permissible (1 Cor. 7:39).

Paul only puts one stipulation on who this single widow is to remarry: a genuine believer. If they aren't, it's sin. That's what he means when he says this man must be "in the Lord." So, as you get to know a person, you're looking for evidence that they are a genuine follower of Christ. Are they a member in good standing of the church? Do they have a biblical understanding of the gospel? Do you see patterns of humility, repentance and faith in their life? Do they exhibit the fruit (even if small) of a genuine follower of Christ? Are the elders confident in the spiritual genuineness of the person you want to pursue? These are helpful questions to test this initial aspect of companionship. If you're a believer, you can't fulfill all God intends in marital companionship with an unbeliever.

2. Testing companionship considers if marriage to this person is desirable (1 Cor. 7:39).

But just because this person is a believer doesn't mean you have to marry them if you don't want to. Notice what else Paul says. This widow is free to be married to "whomever she wishes" or desires. Marriage isn't a mandate. Paul extols the spiritual benefits of singleness in the New Covenant in this same context. This implies you should actually *desire* companionship with this person. Do you enjoy the friendship? Are they easy to talk with? Are you intrigued? Do you find this person spiritually and physically

attractive? God has wired us to be *attracted* to our spouses—it's implied in the one flesh language. Marriage to a *particular person* should be desirable to us. If it's not—don't force it!⁴

3. Testing if marriage to this person is wise (various texts).

We've added a third aspect to testing companionship for marriage, which we believe other Scriptural texts imply. You should also consider whether or not marriage to this person is a wise decision. We will explore this in more depth in the next section.

Determining the wisdom of dating might involve asking some of these kinds of questions:

- Do each of you demonstrate growth in Christlike character?
- Do you each understand marriage and the roles you'll be accepting?
- Does each set of parents approve? If not, why?
- Have the cultural or ethnic differences been explored?
- How do your spiritual gifts align?
- What do the wise people in your church think of the relationship?

Scripture is clear that marriage to certain kinds of people will bring either blessing (Ps. 128:1-4; Prov. 12:4a; 31:10-31) or difficulty into your life (Prov. 12:4b; 21:9, 19; 25:24; 27:15; 30:23). We want to *be* the kind of person that Scripture would commend. And we should be judicious and wise about who we consider entering into this sacred, life-long covenant with.

What is the purpose of dating?

So after everything we've learned in this session, what's our purpose in dating? We could say it simply like this: our purpose in dating is for God to be glorified as we test companionship for marriage.

⁴ This is not to say a romantic desire can't develop over time as the friendship deepens, even if it originally wasn't there—it certainly can! But the point remains the same: if you don't desire to be married to the person, don't take the friendship further.

Session Three: Preparing to Date

In the third session, we will explore the often-overlooked need to prepare for a dating relationship. We will begin by establishing why we should prepare. Then we'll look at some general qualities that ought to characterize our lives, along with some other qualities particularly relevant to men, on the one hand, and women on the other. Our goal in this lesson is that you know what Christ wants to see developed in your life as you begin this dating process. These qualities will affirm that you are a wise person to date.

Before we get started, I want to clarify what I *don't* mean. I'm not arguing in this session that you must arrive at some abundantly mature spiritual state before you can get married. What I'm going to articulate is very attainable to those with the Spirit of God.

If you want it in summary form, what I will argue is a healthy, growing, humble Christian is one who is ready to date. Humble Christians make excellent spouses. We want you to be confident that, as you date and eventually marry, Christ is pleased. We want you to have the assurance that your decision to date and marry is wise. And we want you to be a blessing to your future spouse in marriage. As you cultivate proven character, wrought by Christ's Spirit, you'll also grow in this confident assurance. So, even if you're convicted after this session, the aim is that you're *encouraged* toward growth, not discouraged away from it.

Why should I prepare?

At the outset, it's important to establish that we should actually prepare to date. What's more typical in our Christian sub-culture is for a young person to *assume* they should date. To put it another way, we often view dating more as a right deserved, rather than a privileged earned. When we arrive at a certain age or stage of life, we're tempted to think we are entitled to date. In college, most people assume they can and should date. College is the time where you get a girlfriend or boyfriend, and that will (hopefully) go well and turn into a marriage after graduation.

But in life in general, we prepare for things we want to be ready for. That's especially true when we know we're not yet ready for it. Take your most recent exam, for example. The very reason you came to college was to prepare for a career of some kind after college. And the *failure* to prepare can have very serious consequences, not only for yourself but for others, too. If, as a medical student, you fail to prepare, your lack of readiness could jeopardize the lives of others.

Also, in life, you don't get an increase in responsibility until you've proven your ability to be faithful with what you currently have. A wise boss typically doesn't promote a lazy employee. An increase of responsibility means that a measure of proven character is there.

The same is true of marriage. As you enter into a marriage covenant, your responsibilities increase. Husbands become responsible for their wives and, as the Lord grants children, the entire family. He's responsible to care for and shepherd his wife. The wife is responsible to now follow and help her husband, to care for her family and disciple her children. The influences of husbands and wives upon each other are incredible. They'll also influence their children and likely their children's children. This increase of responsibility and influence implies that we need to be (1) aware of the increase and (2) preparing for it if we want to date.

So, why should we prepare to date? Put simply: because marriage is an increase in spiritual responsibility, which requires a measure of proven faithfulness.

In general, what qualities should be in my life?

When we're talking about "proven faithfulness," we need to explore the seedbed from which godly character grows. To put it differently, in what follows we'll examine the core of a *genuine* believer, someone who has been born again by the Spirit of God. We're essentially saying the same thing as Paul, when he tells the widow she is free to remarry whomever she wishes, "only in the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39). "In the Lord" means this person is a genuine believer.

It's important to think this through, especially in our Christian sub-culture, where everyone claims the name of Christ. It's especially tempting to simply *assume* someone is a Christian because they attend your Christian university. We're tempted to take their profession at face value, dating them without ever seeing any evidence of the Holy Spirit's work in their lives.

In what follows, we'll examine several key passages (Isaiah 66 and Titus 2) that helpfully identify what we're calling the "core" of a genuine believer. These are character traits that the Lord instills in every believer as he brings us to genuine faith in Christ. From these passages, we can draw out at least four "essentials" that need to be in our lives to affirm we are genuinely "in the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39).

1. Humility (Isa. 66:2)⁵

We observe this first character trait of **humility** in Isaiah 66:2.⁶ At the opening of this chapter, we see a grand vision of Israel's God. He is the infinite Creator-King, who owns and reigns over the entire world (66:1-2). And in the midst of this glorious assertion about himself, he *identifies* the characteristics of the person that catches his eye, the person "to whom [he] will look," the person that receives his gracious favor. What kind of person is this? "He who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word" (66:2).

⁵ For further study, see C. J. Mahaney, *Humility: True Greatness* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2005).

⁶ The structure of these first three points is adapted from pastor Daron Roberts' series, "Dating According to Scripture," preached at Grace Immanuel Bible Church, Jupiter, FL.

Every true believer has been humbled and is growing in humility before the Lord. Humility is a prerequisite to truly believing the good news of the gospel. In the gospel, we are told that we've rebelled against an infinitely good God and deserve his punishment because of it. To believe the gospel means we must *agree* with this assessment of ourselves. We aren't in need of a slight alteration—we need to be *completely* forgiven and remade. Even our *best* actions are stained with sin and offensive to God. God must bring us to this realization that we have absolutely no hope unless he intervenes with sheer mercy. And the glorious gospel we proclaim is he has! He has intervened in Christ, who lived and died for us in our place. Only a humble person receives Christ. And once we're in Christ, he grows us in this humility. We grow in our ability to see and acknowledge our sin. We become teachable and less defensive. We resign ourselves more quickly to the will of God. We trust less in our own assessments and more in what we read from God's word. This is what it means to grow in humility.

2. Contrition (Isa. 66:2)

Every genuine follower of Christ is also **contrite** and is growing in brokenness over their sin. Our eyes have been opened, and the sin we once loved we now hate. We begin to see the lies of sin more clearly, and the destruction it leaves behind. We truly know that the sin that promised life only leads to death. As a result, when we come to recognize the sin in our lives, we're broken by it. It affects us. We mourn over it. We don't glory in it anymore. We don't want to grieve the Spirit or bring displeasure to the Christ who saved us. Our hardened hearts have become tender by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit. And he continues to break us more and more as we grow in maturity. Our lowliness increases as we come to him and find his love unchanging toward us in Christ.

3. Reverence (Isa. 66:2)

Every person indwelt by the Spirit **trembles** at God's word and is growing in this reverence before him. This is the last quality listed in Isaiah 66:2. Before we knew Christ, we were apathetic toward or indignantly opposed to God's word. One of the most grieving evidences of an unbeliever is that "there is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3:18). But now, we tremble with joyful awe at the words of our God. We heed his warnings, rely on his promises, and zealously repent when sin is revealed. Over time, God grows all his children in this awe. It may ebb and flow, as may the other qualities, but it will increase over time. This reverence for God's word will be expressed in a longing to study it, hear it taught, and live according to its teaching.

4. Devotion (Titus 2:14).

Finally, every genuine believer will also be zealously **devoted** to the Christ who saved them and growing in that devotion. This is expressed clearly in Titus 2:14. This verse is part of a paragraph that's explaining *why* the church should live godly lives now. The

same grace that saved us is also training us out of sin and toward righteousness (2:11-12). He ends the paragraph by describing the end goal of Christ's work on our behalf: "[Jesus Christ] gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works" (2:14). Christ's death has secured our redemption from sin and has cleansed us. We now belong to him. This purifying work actually creates a people who are zealous, eager, and fervent to pursue good works. In other words, the purpose of our salvation is that we become zealously devoted to Christ, our Savior-King.

These characteristics form the core of a genuine believer. This helps us unpack Paul's statement that those we marry must be "in the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39). To be a Christian, we must know Christ and his gospel. And if we do, the Scriptures assert our lives will look different from the world. There needs to be evidence, even if it's small, that we really do belong to Christ and that his Spirit has taken up residence within us.

We want to make sure, at the outset, that we first look to ourselves, that we possess and are growing in these fundamental qualities of a believer. Does your life evidence a pattern of humility, or are you a critical, proud and unteachable person? Are you broken and repentant over your sin, or do you rarely confess your sin to God? Do you tremble with expectation at God's word, or does it bore you? Are you now zealously devoted to Christ, or would your life reveal you are zealously devoted to something or someone else? No one is perfect in these qualities, and everyone will acknowledge they need to grow! But do you see little evidences of conversion in your life? If so, rejoice, and excel still more! If you're wondering whether or not these qualities are in your life, don't wait. Find leader who can disciple you and help you learn to trust Christ, repent of sin, and cultivate these qualities. There's no shame; you can truly trust Christ today and he will begin remaking you into his glorious image.

Now that we've looked at what characteristics form the core of a genuine believer, we will consider some qualities that are particularly relevant for men and women who want to date and eventually marry. My approach is to work backwards from the roles of men and women in marriage and examine how you might start cultivating these things now as singles. We will begin with the men.

As a man, what specific qualities should be in "seed form" in my life?

The language in the question is intentional. We are looking for qualities in "seed form" in your life. This means these qualities likely won't be mature, full grown trees just yet. The reality is you're young and inexperienced in these areas. So we're looking for the little evidences of these qualities in your life.

1. Self-Sacrificing Love (Eph. 5:25ff.)

The first quality that needs to be in seed form in a man's life before he dates is what we will describe as self-sacrificing love. In Ephesians 5:25, Paul tells husbands to love their

wives just like Christ loved the church. In other words, the pattern for a husband's love for his wife Christ's love for the church. How does Christ love the church? Paul draws out the *sacrificial nature* of the love of Christ and the end of verse 25: Christ "gave himself for her." Jesus, at great cost to himself, dies so that his wife might be purified. In the same way, Jesus calls a husband to die so that his wife might flourish. This is one of the core elements of a husband's role.

So, guys who want to be married, how are you practicing laying down your life for the welfare of others in the body as a single person? Are you serving the church in a way that actually costs you something? You've got to cut at root of the self-orientation of your heart. How are you learning to die to yourself for of good for others? Are you preoccupied with yourself or preoccupied with the needs of others? Can you listen patiently and draw others out or do you dominate conversations? Ladies, don't be deceived; if he's not doing this now, he will not do it in marriage.

Again, we're not looking for perfection, but for patterns. And when it doesn't happen, we're looking for brokenness and contrition, like we learned above. We're looking for zeal to get after practicing it by faith.

2. Pure Fidelity (1 Tim. 5:2; Heb. 13:4)

A second quality that must be on a guy's radar when he's preparing to date is pure fidelity. Fidelity in marriage means faithfulness and loyalty to your spouse. Purity in a man's heart is a key element to what makes a man faithful to his wife. So, we're calling this trait "pure fidelity."

There are several texts we will quickly consider on this point. In 1 Timothy 5:2, notice how Paul commands Timothy, a younger single man, to treat younger women in the church: he's to treat them "as sisters, with *all* purity." When it comes to our purity as younger men, there should be no question about our motives toward our single sisters in Christ. Our interactions with them should be characterized by complete, comprehensive purity.

But purity doesn't end once you get married. Purity extends into marriage and is the foundation upon which a marriage is built. The author of Hebrews commands the church to keep the marriage bed undefiled, warning that God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous (Heb. 13:4). This means meaning that marriage should remain pure, as husband and wife are devoted exclusively to one another.

A man has no ability to lead his wife in purity if he's not devoted to the purity of his own heart. Pornography needs to be radically repented of, and especially before dating. Can you imagine picking up a man's daughter and explaining to him that she's only one of the other ladies in your life you hope to derive pleasure from this week? It's a lie that marriage will fix or help the porn problem. Porn isn't a physiological problem—it's a moral problem, a pride problem in your heart. Ladies, please don't be naïve; a man's

self-indulgent heart doesn't change just because he now has a wedding ring. But if, by God's grace, he has taken the log of impurity out of his own eye, he will be able to see clearly to help you take the speck out of yours.

So, what does a man devoted to purity act like? He is committed to actively renewing his own mind with the promises and warnings of God. He refuses to indulge in pornography or any other form of sexual immorality. He treats the women in his church not as objects for his pleasure, but as sisters in Christ and co-heirs of the grace of life. He respects them, defends their purity, helps to protect them, guards their reputation and does good to them. Men, aspire to this Christ-like behavior! Pure fidelity now is foundational for purity in marriage later.

3. Compelling Followability (1 Tim. 4:12)

Finally, the last quality I want to put before you men is what we're calling "compelling followability." We want you to aspire to live a life that's increasingly worth following. This principle is bound up in what it means to be a leader. Paul called the churches to imitate both himself and others who lived like him (Phil. 3:7; cf. 2 Thes. 3:9). He told Timothy and Titus to be an example of godly living for the congregations they were shepherding (1 Tim. 4:12; Titus 2:7). Part of an elder's job responsibility is to be an example to the flock (1 Pet. 5:3). Someone whom God tasks to lead is expected to live a life that worthy of imitation.

Husbands are tasked with the leadership of the family. We praise the Lord for godly wives, but it's a tragedy when a wife must take the spiritual leadership mantle of the family because of the failure of her husband. Husbands are called by God to set the pace spiritually, with God's promise that believing wives will flourish in this environment (Ps. 128).

So single men, if you want to be a husband someday, start cultivating a life that's actually following Christ and worthy of imitation by others. Don't waste your time now; be wise and prudent, seeking to please the Lord with the days he's given to you. Know that you're following Christ. Have a plan and work that plan. Work hard at identifying and repenting of idols in your heart, so that you can see clearly to help others. God will call upon you, as a husband, to help and shepherd your wife. You need to make it easy for her to follow you. And single ladies, find a man worth following!

So if we're targeting sacrificial love, pure fidelity, and compelling followability for the guys, what should we target for the ladies?

As a woman, what specific qualities should be in "seed form" in my life?

As with the guys, we will maintain the same expectations and follow the same approach. Regarding our expectations for these specific qualities, we're looking for them in seed form,

not full-grown oak trees. The go-to Proverbs 31 passage is incredible and worthy of your full aspiration, but you're not going to get there overnight. Growth takes time. Regarding our approach, we'll again work backwards from the commands given to women in marriage, and examine how you might be cultivating these things now, before dating and marriage.

Our anchor text for the particular qualities we've chosen to highlight is 1 Peter 3:1-6. In this passage, Peter addresses wives in the church who were in a particularly scary situation. Many of them had unbelieving husbands. Yet Peter calls all the wives⁷ to "be subject" to their husbands, knowing that this Christ-like humility may indeed be used by God to bring their husbands to faith in Christ (3:1-2). Even for wives with *believing* husbands, this call to voluntarily submit yourself to the leadership of your husband and to pursue his good can be a very difficult task. Tucked away in this passage are at least three fundamental characteristics that all women can cultivate now, that will enable them to fulfill God's directives in marriage.

1. Confident Hope (1 Pet. 3:5)

The most fundamental characteristic in this passage is mentioned so briefly that we're tempted to miss it. As Peter is instructing wives to beautify their hearts (3:4), he reminds them that the wives in the Old Testament, like Sarah, adorned themselves with the same heart-characteristics (3:5-6). But what's particularly striking is how he describes these wives as "the holy women *who hoped in God.*" Sarah, whom Peter says submitted to her husband, knew God intimately and hoped in him exclusively. She knew her God controlled her husband. She knew her God had commanded her to arrange herself under her husband. And she trusted God would take care of her and make good on his particular promises to her. She was anchored in the character of her God.

Apart from this kind of hope, there's no ability to joyfully and willingly submit yourself to another sinful human being, who has particular weaknesses that *will affect you negatively*. Even believing husbands are in process and will make many mistakes in their leadership. But God calls you to hope exclusively in him, and this kind of enduring hope will enable you to trust him and voluntarily subject yourself to the leadership of your future husband.

So, ladies, how well do you know your God? Do you know what he's promised you in his word, or do you just have vague notions about him that you think are supported *somewhere* in Scripture? Is your hope staked in him alone, or do you find yourself trusting in other things or people for security? Is he your anchor and protector in times of fear and difficulty, or do you take refuge in other gods? Cultivate this kind of hope

⁷ It's worth noting that Peter exhorts every Christian to be subject to governing authorities (2:13-17), and servants to be subject to their masters (2:18-25) in the preceding context. In other words, submission to authority is part of the Christian life for the glory of God.

now by immersing yourself in his word and prayer, and by imitating the faith of the older, more mature women around you.

2. Contented Gentleness (1 Pet. 3:4)

As you cultivate this confident hope in God, you will also notice growth in this next quality we want to highlight from this passage, which we're calling "contented gentleness."

Back in verses 4, Peter calls the women of the church to cultivate inner beauty: "Let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart." What characteristics does he say actually beautify a woman's heart? "A gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious" (3:4). Peter says that you beautify your heart as you cultivate gentleness, which has the idea of Christlike meekness or humility (Matt. 11:29). Quietness doesn't mean silence; rather it has the idea of being peaceful or peaceable. It's the opposite of contentious or argumentative.

So what does this look like in real time? It doesn't mean you're mute, never expressing how you feel or what you desire, or that you're a doormat, always being taken advantage of. Instead, it means you've rooted yourself in God, and as a result have humbled yourself before him. Since you trust God, you're content with life's circumstances because God has ultimately arranged them. You believe deeply that he has provided exactly what you need, even when your emotions beg to differ. And whatever *will happen* is also up to this same God. So you don't have to worry about getting your way because you're afraid. You don't have to dominate, control or domineer. You don't seek to manipulate others to get your way.

Ladies, how are you doing in cultivating gentleness and tranquility in your inner person? Are you content with life's circumstances now, even in your singleness? Do you treat others with gentle kindness, or do you easily blow up? Are you argumentative when you don't get your way, or do you submit to God in those circumstances? Guys, don't be fooled; if the girl you like isn't content now, she won't be in marriage!

3. Trustworthy Diligence (1 Pet 3:6; Prov. 31; cf. 1 Tim. 5:13)

The last characteristic, that flows from the first two, is what we're calling "trustworthy diligence." I want to show you this theme from several passages, and we'll start with our anchor text in 1 Peter 3:1-6. As Peter concludes the paragraph, he tells the women of the church they follow in the pattern of Sarah if they "do good and do not fear anything that is frightening" (3:6). Instead of being afraid in legitimately scary circumstances, they should get after doing good to please Christ. But what does Peter have in mind when he tells them to do good? We know the Lord certainly intends both men and women to do good to everyone (cf. Gal. 6:10; 1 Th. 5:15), but *this* command in context calls *wives* to do

good to their husbands (cf. 3:2). In other words, the Lord intends married women to diligently seek the good of their husbands.

This same theme is echoed in Proverbs 31:10-31. In verse 12, the author writes: “[An excellent wife]...does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life” (Prov. 31:12). The rest of this poem really unpacks what doing good to her husband (and family) looked like in Israelite culture under the Old Covenant. We could sum it up by saying this woman works really, really hard for the express purpose of the welfare of her household. What’s the result of this incredibly selfless behavior? First, she has the *complete* trust of her husband (31:11). Second, the husband is a well-known leader in Israel at least in part because of his wife’s diligence (31:23). And finally, husband and children praise her and reward her publicly (31:28-31). So doing good is tightly bound up in being diligent, which results in the trust of a husband.

This diligence is the opposite of laziness, which is a particular temptation for the young. In 1 Timothy 4:11-15, Paul doesn’t want the church to financially support younger widows. Instead of trying to remain single for the rest of their lives when they clearly had a desire for marriage (v. 11), Paul encourages them to remarry, have children, and learn to diligently manage their households. Many of them were, instead, learning to be lazy and were gossiping because they had too much time on their hands without the maturity to steward it well.

So, ladies, are you actively cultivating diligence in your life right now, or are you lazily wasting your time with things that don’t ultimately matter? If someone were to evaluate your life, would they characterize you as someone who is busy doing good or busy living to please yourself? Do you diligently complete your class assignments, if you’re a student? What is your reputation at work? Are you known as a selfless servant in the church, or would people be surprised to see you serve? The way you handle your current responsibilities reflect how you will handle your new responsibilities in marriage. Guys, I’ll admonish you with the concluding words of Proverbs: “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised” (31:30). A woman who works hard now for the glory of Christ will be an inestimable blessing to her future husband.

We’ve now examined not only general qualities, but specific qualities that both the guys and ladies should be pursuing before they date. Again, we’re not looking for perfected arrival, but humble patterns in these areas. But this raises another question we must answer before we end this session: how do I know when I’m ready to date?

When am I ready to date?

Based on what we’ve covered in this session, you should be (1) convinced from Scripture you’re in the faith, (2) cultivating a growing understanding of marriage and its responsibilities from Scripture, and (3) beginning to cultivate the character necessary that would make being married to you a wise (and not a foolish) choice according to Scripture.

Beyond that, here is one additional directive that will help you figure out if you should be dating now, or if you need a little more time to grow. **Ask and genuinely listen to your spiritual authorities—parents, elders and disciplers—as they direct you in the way of wisdom.** The Lord works through these wise authority structures for our good (Prov. 11:14; Heb. 13:17; Eph. 6:1-3). All are important, and especially your elders. Lean heavily upon them for their assessments because it is so hard to self-assess accurately. This means you must humble yourself, take initiative, and seek them out.

Here are a few questions I would encourage all of you to ask these people, even if you're currently dating:

- Do you think it would be a wise decision for me to date now? Why or why not?
- If I were your [son/daughter] how would you advise me?
- Where am I weak, that you've observed? Where do I need to grow? How can I grow in that area now?
- What areas do you see growth in?

I realize even the very act of asking these kinds of questions may be nerve-racking, because you're submitting your decisions to the wisdom of others. But do not miss that this act, in itself, is the outworking of humility, *which God expressly promises to bless!* You can trust that, as you humble yourself, you will receive God's grace and guidance (James 4:10; 1 Pet. 5:5). And being under God's guidance *always* leads to what is ultimately best, and most satisfying, for us.

So, when you're confident from your authorities and from Scripture that dating is a wise decision for you, go for it! My encouragement for you to date is not dependent on age, but on spiritual readiness. It's based on the growth of your faith and likeness to Christ. One pastor likened it to a crew of men sailing across the ocean. Imagine two men on the crew, one older and the other younger. The older man had been a part of the crew his entire life but had only sat around on deck, never really working. The younger man, however, had recently joined the crew, and for the last year had been working consistently and relentlessly, doing anything and everything the captain asked of him. The younger man quickly surpassed that older man in ability and experience because he diligently pursued it. He will be promoted over the older man, not based on his age (or lack thereof), but based on his readiness. So, your age doesn't tell you whether you should date or not—only your growth in Christlikeness can!

Session Four: The Process of Dating

In this final session, we'll examine the what a healthy dating process should look like. A dating process usually (but not always) develops out of a pre-existing, healthy friendship. This friendship then blossoms into interest. Once it's established that the feeling's mutual, some form of exclusivity occurs (dating, courting, boyfriend, girlfriend, etc.). If all goes well, this turns into engagement, and eventually winds up in holy matrimony. In this session, we'll examine each of these stages in the process. Our goal is to guide you in wisdom through each stage.

Friendship

Throughout the New Testament, men and women who are not biologically related are described in familial terms as brothers and sisters in Christ. That's because we are all spiritually related. Paul told Timothy he should treat older men as fathers, older women as mothers, younger men as brothers, and younger women as sisters (1 Tim. 5:1-2). This all implies you should be cultivating sincere relationships with your single brothers and sisters in Christ because they are your spiritual siblings, whether you're romantically interested or not!

So, practically, how should you relate to another single person of the opposite sex? You should avoid the two extremes, which are both unhelpful. One extreme is flirting; the other extreme is complete avoidance, usually out of a desire to not give the wrong impression. Instead of these extremes, you should strive to relate to other singles sincerely as spiritual siblings.

Here are a few examples of healthy, familial love. Brothers and sisters in Christ should:

1. Treat one another with care and concern, not aloof to their needs or desires.
2. Treat one another with interest and knowledge, not with disinterestedness simply because you aren't romantically interested.
3. Encourage one another to grow spiritually.
4. Treat one another with sincere love, seeking what is best for the other.
5. Treat one another with purity, seeking to guard and promote the other's godly reputation.

This almost goes without saying, but the local church at Timberlake is a perfect environment for these kinds of friendships. In a local church, we commit to one another in membership. We aren't just Christian acquaintances at Liberty or in the workplace. We know we believe the same things doctrinally. There are built in opportunities to get to know each other as you serve together, go to small group together, and attend corporate worship together.

As you serve and grow together with your brothers and sisters in Christ, you get to know them truly. You have a front row seat to see how Christ is working in their lives. And out of

these healthy friendships, singles will inevitably at some point find desires for something more than a friendship. Which leads to the next stage: “Exploring Interest.”

Exploring Interest

So you’ve met someone you’re interested in and you want to pursue it further. Now what? Initially, ask your parents and one of your disciplers or pastors if they think you are ready to date (see “Session 3: Preparing to Date”). If they express concerns, take the time to work through those concerns *before* making your interests known. You likely need to grow up a little before you take on the responsibility of another person.

If you’ve got the green light, how you proceed depends on which gender you are. Guys, since part of the role of the husband is to initiate, you should have the courage to put yourself out there first and express interest clearly. Don’t flirt with her to try to get her to show you if she’s interested before you make your move. That’s self-preserving. Trust the Lord and put yourself out there, clearly expressing interest and seeing if she reciprocates.

Ladies, when this happens, please give him an honest answer. If you’re not sure and need to think about it, say, “I’m not sure. Let me think about it and I’ll get back to you.” It’s that simple. And please, if you know you’re not interested, spare the fellow and tell him clearly—even if it’s awkward! Don’t try to let him down easy or, worse, ignore him and hope he gets the hint. Both of those are ultimately self-preserving on your part. Also, keep in mind you’re not agreeing to marry the guy if he asks you out. It’s just a date, the very beginnings of exploring if something more than a friendship could be there. And ladies, if you’re just dying to know if someone else shares your interest, come talk to us. There’s nothing wrong with your pastors discreetly helping the process along.

As you begin spending time together, enjoy the process. Don’t get wrapped up in whether you think you should marry him/her after the first date. Get to know the other person more by asking good questions and listening well. And do the really spiritual thing: have God-glorifying fun!

Exclusivity

After you’ve gone out a few times (and there’s no magic number), you should determine whether you want to continue spending one-on-one time together. If the feeling is mutual that you should, then you typically become “exclusive.” In other words, you’re saying to the other person, “I’m focused on pursuing (or being pursued by) you. I’m not entertaining ideas about anyone else right now.” It’s up to you to determine what you call it—dating, courting, intentional friendship, etc.—but the undergirding principle is that you’re exclusive. Obviously, either of you are free to choose to end it at any time, but exclusivity with another person is most loving to them (and most helpful to both of you) as you’re trying to determine if marriage *to this person* is a good choice.

Goals in Dating

So what should you focus on in this new, exciting stage? Again, you're still testing companionship (see Session Two). But more specifically, you'll continue building on the developing friendship as you grow in knowledge of each other, as you build trust, as you serve in together in the church, and as you grow in relationships with one another's families and friend groups.

The Temptation to "Play Marriage"

As exciting as this stage is, you need to be aware of a very powerful temptation. You're tempted to assume in this stage that **God now sees the two of you differently because you're "dating."** In one sense, there is a legitimate difference from your status before. You're romantically interested, the feeling is reciprocated, and you've increased the commitment level. But in God's eyes, *you're still very much single* (see Session One). Because we deeply desire the benefits of marriage, there's a temptation to "play marriage" before you're actually married. It's a dangerous and deceitful path, so we've got to be on guard against it. In reality, it's an *idolization of marriage*. Marriage is a good thing, but when it becomes the ultimate thing, we'll sin to get it and we'll sin if we don't have it.

Here are a few common you may be tempted to "play marriage" before you're married:

1. Spending all your free time with the other person, to the detriment of other responsibilities the Lord has given you. All your time is engulfed in the relationship and you're not being faithful in your church, in your school work, in your other friendships, or in your family relationships.
2. Being unreserved in your communication. In marriage, typically there isn't anything held back as we share our hearts with one another, as an implication of our one-flesh union (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:6). But as you date, not *everything* is appropriate to share. Some topics, such as details of a sinful past, should wait until commitment has increased and trust has been established.
3. Planning your future married life together before engagement. You begin to fanaticize together about where you will live, or you may start ordering things for your wedding, before you have any firm commitments. As a caveat, there may be some extenuating circumstances where this is appropriate, but often times the proverbial cart (marriage planning) comes before the horse (engagement).
4. Becoming increasingly involved physically. As commitment grows, so does the desire to become physically intimate. In one sense, this is how God designed relationships to work. The more we grow together spiritually as spouses, the more we romantically desire one another. But again, we must come back to the truth that God sees you as fundamentally single, *even though the relationship is growing toward marriage*. Physical intimacy is such an important topic that we need to take some additional time to think through it in the paragraphs below.

Thinking through Physical Intimacy

At the outset, it's vital to remember that physical intimacy was created by God and is a fundamentally *good* thing (Gen. 2:25). In other words, the desire for sex isn't inherently evil. Sexual fidelity in marriage is described as blessing from God, full of joy and delight, and is thoroughly encouraged (Prov. 5:15-19; 1 Cor. 7:3-5; cf. Eccl. 9:9). In fact, an entire book of the Bible, Song of Songs, is a celebration of an Edenic-like marriage relationship, including a celebration of physical attraction and intimacy. Sex is a glorious gift to us from God.

But, like any other of God's good gifts to us, we often begin to worship physical intimacy (Rom. 1:24-25). A good desire in our hearts quickly turns into a demand, a sinful and lustful craving. Instead of trusting God and seeking gratification of that desire in the way he intends (through marriage), we want to begin gratifying it now (through dating). Whether we crave the gratification of the sexual impulse (typically the guy's temptation) or the gratification of an insecurity, a perceived need to feel loved and cherished physically (typically the girl's temptation), we are still overreaching in unbelief. We reach out to take something that doesn't belong to us. As one pastor put it, "Intimacy is the reward, the fruit of commitment—not the means of achieving it. Intimacy thrives inside commitment—and is destructive without it."⁸

One of the fundamental lies dating couples are tempted to believe is that physical intimacy is good for the relationship. Put differently, we often think, "Can our relationship be healthy if we aren't intimate?" What we don't realize, however, is that pushing physical boundaries runs the risk of *damaging future intimacy*. How is that? True, God-glorifying intimacy develops from trust. But trust is jeopardized when we defraud one another through sexual immorality. Instead of damaging future intimacy, we want to maximize it as God intends.

So how should you think through relating to your boyfriend or girlfriend physically? Use the following texts a grid-system for making all your physical decisions:

1. "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Rom. 13:14). Whatever you decide to do, don't allow any wiggle room for the flesh to operate. Beware, also, of overestimating your ability to withstand temptation.
2. "[Treat] younger women as sisters, in all purity" (1 Tim. 5:2b). Like we learned earlier, your girlfriend or boyfriend is in actuality your spiritual sibling before God. Make sure however you treat them, it is done in *all* purity. Don't do anything that would risk the reputation of the other, even if your intentions are pure.
3. "I adjure you...that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases" (Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4). Put bluntly, don't do anything that arouses or stimulates your boyfriend or girlfriend. Arousal is meant to lead to something: sexual intimacy. So don't wake it up.

Guys, you especially need to lead in this area instead of weakly depending on your girlfriend to "hold you accountable." When you push these boundaries, you aren't doing it because

⁸ Capitol Hill Baptist Church Core Seminar, "Singleness and Courtship," Ch. 8: Intimacy and Accountability.

you love her, but because you selfishly desire to gratify your impulses. Not only are you violating your girlfriend's purity, you're eroding confidence in your future leadership. How can she trust you to lead her to Christ in marriage if you aren't leading her to Christ now?

On the other hand, guys, you also have a tremendous opportunity here. You can actually cultivate the loving heart of a Christlike husband *by denying your selfish craving* and pursuing her purity. When you remove your arm from around her because you sense arousal is about to happen, you're *leading* her in purity in that very moment. You're actually loving her the way Christlike husband loves his wife, by guarding and cultivating her purity (Eph. 5:25ff.). And ladies, you have to see it this way. Don't discourage him or tempt him if he's trying to lead you in purity. So what if it seems radical or different than a "normal" dating relationship? Would you rather have a guy who has conviction and fears Christ, or a guy who can't control his sexual urges? You must be willing to confront your own craving for security that often comes from physical intimacy, and surrender that to Christ. God will bless your marriage and the joy of pure sexual intimacy within it.

Practically, we should flee this temptation (2 Tim. 2:22) in the following ways:

- Don't do anything that is sexually arousing.
- Set clear guidelines.
- Avoid being alone together in private.
- Dress modestly.
- Guard your thinking.
- Pursue accountability.

I can't underscore enough how all of this is rooted in faith in God's word. Your emotions will often act contrary to what we're talking about here. It will "feel right" to become more and more physically intimate as time progresses and as commitment escalates. But we have to act on what God's word *says*, not what we *feel* (Prov. 3:5-6; 2 Cor. 5:7), trusting his promises and heeding his warnings. If we do, we will have great assurance that we're actually worshipping Christ and building our dating relationship upon his firm foundation (Luke 6:46-49). And as a result, our marriage and family will be a God-blessed one (Ps. 128).

Engagement

As trust is built and you've worked through a lot of the significant areas, attention turns to what needs to happen in order to take the dating relationship to the next phase: "Engagement."

Timing

"How should I think through when to get engaged?" you ask. There's no "silver bullet" answer to that question, but here are some general guidelines we believe are wise. First, determine together what questions still need to be asked and answered, and work through

them. One very helpful resource on this topic is a little booklet entitled: *Pre-Engagement: Five Questions to Ask* by David Powlison. Second, make sure your authorities can affirm the wisdom of the decision. What do your parents think? What about the elders of your church? If you have a particular discipler or small group leader that knows you well, get their insights, too. You will be well served if you seek their counsel now rather than after you decide to get engaged.

One Thing to Remember

Once you're engaged, the main thing to remember is this lofty theological truth: YOU'RE NOT MARRIED YET. In case you missed it, let me rephrase it: you're still not married, even though you're engaged. As obvious as this sounds, it's easily and conveniently forgotten. When commitment increases, so does temptation. Don't be surprised if you hear this subtle lie rising up in your heart: "You're as good as married anyway, so what's the risk in going a little further?" You'll need discipline in your thinking not to fanaticize over the sexual side of marriage.

Pre-Marital Counseling

In addition to remembering the lofty theological truth in the previous paragraph—that you're not married yet—you'll also want to get enrolled in pre-marital counseling with one of our TBC pastors or counselors. If you're unfamiliar with the concept of pre-marital counseling, it's essentially intentional time to prepare yourselves for marriage. Being married is quite a change from living the single life, and as shepherds we want to make sure you're prepared for it.

Another benefit of pre-marital counseling is that it helps you interpret things that are happening *after you get married*. In the counseling, our objective is to equip you with the tools you'll need for a God-glorifying (and happy!) marriage. You'll come back to the truths you learned in your sessions as you try to apply it day-in and day-out after you're married. Think of it as pre-marital discipleship.

To enroll in pre-marital counseling at TBC, your first step is to notify the church office and set up an initial assessment with our Biblical Counseling Director. After the assessment, we will work with you to decide the best pastor or counselor available to do your counseling.

Wedding Planning

Engagement is the time to plan the wedding. Here are a few principles to keep in mind as you plan. First, as counter-intuitive as it may seem, the stress and pressure of wedding planning are ultimately good things. The pressure is God-intended and it reveals areas you need to grow. And it also provides you with some front burner examples of conflict to work through during your pre-marital counseling. 😊

Second, don't idolize "The Day." In other words, don't put all your hopes, dreams (and finances!) into it. Why not? Remember, our idols dishonor Christ and ultimately leave us empty. You'll make unwise decisions and, instead of being fulfilled, will only end up discontent. Instead, worship Christ and seek to please him on your wedding day. You'll actually enjoy the day, and so will everyone else! "The Day" should be ultimately about Christ anyway since he created marriage, gave it to you as a gift, and will sustain your marriage as you walk with him.

Third, I want to say a quick word about vows. Think really hard before you make the decision to write your own. The traditional vows are time-tested and reflect a mature vision of marriage. My rule of thumb is that you should only write your own vows if you're going to make them *more robust* Biblically than the traditional ones.

Marriage

As you go from engaged to married, enjoy the good gift from God. Weddings are celebratory, and rightly so. A spouse is an incredibly good thing (cf. Prov. 18:22) and should be enjoyed (Eccl. 9:9).

Areas of Focus

As sweet as it is, the first few years of marriage are critical times. It's helpful to know what to focus on proactively to build a God-honoring marriage. Here are a few categories that are by no means exhaustive:

1. Building spiritual unity and intimacy. Unity is built around Christ and involves several things. It involves learning how to talk honestly with each other, to draw one another out, to ask good questions and to listen well. It involves learning how to share what Christ is doing in your life. It involves learning how to confess sins, to lavishly forgive, and to pray for one another. And finally, it involves learning how to counsel and encourage one another in the truth.
2. Practicing the roles of husband and wife. That first year of marriage will be a lot of trial and error as you try to put on a new role. Husbands, initiate and humbly lead. Wives, encourage and enhance his leadership.
3. Investing in the body of Christ. Just because you're newlyweds doesn't mean you need to take a break from service! Find an area the church has need and begin serving Christ together.
4. Establishing healthy long-term routines. The first year is critical in setting routines that you will likely continue through the course of your marriage. Once a habit is established, it's harder to break. So think carefully about what you're putting in place.
5. Pursuing post-marital discipleship. This is incredibly important and often neglected. Sometime after the wedding when the newness starts to wear off, you'll begin to realize marriage is a little tougher than you thought it would be. That's when you need others

the most! Faithful disciplers will remind you of the truth, encourage you to be humble, and model for you what a healthy marriage both looks like and requires.

Particular Temptations

In addition to areas you should focus on, you should also be aware of some common temptations in the newlywed phase:

1. Slacking off in pursuing Christ now that you've got your spouse, especially if your premarital was good. If this is happening, it likely reveals something deeper: Christ was a means to an end of getting what you really wanted—a spouse.
2. Withdrawing from the church into each other. This would look like neglecting friendships, discipling relationships and service opportunities in the body.
3. Pursuing sexual intimacy instead of spiritual intimacy. This happens when you think that sexual intimacy is the sum total of intimacy instead of realizing that God calls you to be unified with your spouse spiritually. Fulfilling sexual intimacy is an increasingly sweet gift from God when we are rightly related to him and not idolizing it.
4. Not fully leaving and cleaving—i.e. staying too connected to previous family units. This happens when a spouse stays tethered to Mom and Dad and dependent on them emotionally or spiritually. Your spouse now takes priority over your previous family units because you each have broken off to become a new unit together.
5. Maintaining unrealistic (or naïve) expectations from your spouse.
6. Not repenting of bitterness and extending true forgiveness.

How should we view marriage?

As we wrap up our section on marriage, it's appropriate for us to step back and ask the question: "How should we be thinking about marriage?" We should avoid the unbiblical extremes, thinking marriage is really hard with no enjoyment, or thinking that marriage is all fun with no work. Instead, we should embrace the biblical vision that marriage is created by an infinitely good God for our ultimate good. This means marriage will require humility and death to self as we trust and obey Christ's objectives for our marriage. But, ironically, as we yield to Christ, he will produce eternal fruit in you through your spouse, which will result in joy and increased intimacy, friendship and unity. What an amazing God we serve!

Recommended Resources

Manhood & Womanhood

- *God's Design for Man and Woman: A Biblical-Theological Survey* by Andreas and Margaret Köstenberger

Dating

- *Picking Up the Pieces: Recovering from Broken Relationships* by Lou Priolo
- *Danger Signs of an Unhealthy Dating Relationship* by Lou Priolo
- Capitol Hill Baptist Church Core Seminar, "Singleness & Courtship." Accessible for free online at <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/resources/core-seminars/series/dating-courtship/>

Premarital

- *Tying the Knot: A Pre-Marital Guide to a Strong and Lasting Marriage*, by Rob Green
- *Pre-Engagement Questions: Five Questions to Ask* by David Powlison
- *Preparing for Marriage God's Way* by Wayne Mack

Marriage & Family

- *God, Marriage and Family* by Andreas Köstenberger
- *When Sinners Say, "I Do"* by Dave Harvey
- *Missional Motherhood: The Everyday Ministry of Motherhood in the Grand Plan of God* by Gloria Furman.
- *The Complete Husband* by Lou Priolo

Purity

- *Finally Free: Fighting for Purity with the Power of the Gospel* by Heath Lambert
- *Making All Things New: Restoring Joy to the Sexually Broken* by David Powlison

Christian Life

- On the Gospel & Justification – *The Gospel for Real Life* by Jerry Bridges
- On Sanctification & Growth – *Free to Be Holy* by Jerry Wragg and Paul Shirley
- On Decision-Making – *Just Do Something* by Kevin DeYoung