
From Singleness to Marriage

Malachi 2:13-16³¹

Russ Kennedy

Psalm 73:25–26 - [O Lord], whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Song of Solomon 1:2–4 - ² [My love] kiss me with the kisses of [your] mouth! For your love is better than wine; ³ your anointing oils are fragrant; your name is oil poured out; therefore virgins love you. ⁴ Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me into his chambers. We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine; rightly do they love you.

How do Christian parents and teens hold both of those texts with joy, peace and grace?

Struggles in Relationships

Many parents and teens struggle to establish normal, godly Christian relationships with people of the opposite sex without getting entangled in dating. Too often this is as much a problem with parents as it is the teen culture. Biblically, it should be normal for you to have friends who are male and female. I believe that we ought to create an environment of grace that enables and encourages even deep friendships between our young men and women.

Challenges for Discussing Dating

First, we need a shared understanding of what I am talking about when I use the word dating. You can use it any way you want. But for our purposes in this talk, dating is *the activities of building a relationship with the intention of finding a spouse*. Others have other definitions. There is no Biblical definition of dating. So we are using the term the way we choose as a label.

The second major challenge is the introduction of the idea of “Christian courtship” as an alternative to “worldly dating”. There is much that I will say that will be in accord with the concept of courtship. Parental guidance, developing normal relationships, having counsel and dating as intentional relationship building toward marriage. But, there are some views of courtship that introduce legalism and parental authoritarianism precisely at a time when young people are supposed to learning to live under counsel, by the Word and with God’s people. Unfortunately, many things that should be commended as wise counsel are taught in courtship circles as being Biblically man-

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dated: the perpetual authority of the father over unmarried daughters, the necessity for supervision and/or chaperoning, the parents as having the final decision over marriage.

So, this leads me to caution all of us about how we handle the Bible. The Bible records the history of pre-marriage relationships within the context of their cultures. The Old Testament era and the Jewish culture in particular practiced different forms of "courtship". Yet we find dating relationships recorded that do not follow the courtship model. No particular form of pre-marriage relationships is commanded. Therefore, we have to understand the culture the Bible exists in and the life activities the Bible records. After all, people in the Bible record wore sandals, and robes and most wore shawls or turbans on their heads. Does this mean that we must dress in the same way since that is the clothing of the Bible record? No, of course not. So we must be very careful with other cultural practices in the Bible including courtship.

Finally, the lack of clear Biblical commands on this subject leaves us to thinking about it in wisdom terms. Yes, there are fences. And we will talk about them. But much of this will really come down to "do what is best" without creating the "do not touch" of Eve's legalism.

Heart Issues

Dating, as in all relationships, will expose the heart. It will show us how self-centered, fearful, legalistic and control oriented we are. It will expose how little control we have over our spiritual and physical lusts. God is at work in this time of the life or parents and teens to see if all will obey Him from the heart and walk in wisdom, pleasing to God.

Biblical Components of Marriage

We must have a Biblical view of marriage or all else will go awry. How can you prepare to be pleasing to God in marriage if you do not know how God has defined and described marriage? Since the trajectory of dating ends in marriage, let's briefly review the Biblical components of marriage and think about how they affect dating.

As Covenanting with One Another

Malachi 2:13-16

¹³ And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. ¹⁴ But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. ¹⁵ Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. ¹⁶ "For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless."

Why won't God accept their worship?

There is a *promise* creating the marital union (v.14). So entering into the marriage covenant creates the marriage and its union.

This is a *pattern* pointing to New Covenant Union (v.15). It then is anticipating the indwelling of the Spirit and the birth of the children of God.

But there has developed a *problem* exposing their faithlessness in the union (v.14b,15b). It emerges first in heart separation – it is called *disloyalty*. Then it becomes physical separation – it results in *divorce*.

Finally God gives a *precept* calling for watchfulness in the union (v.15b, 16b). We are to guard against all that would cause our hearts to stray from a single minded loyalty to our spouses.

A godly relationship moving towards marriage must be honest, truthful and promise keeping. Those virtues must not only be deeply ingrained in our young people, but in their relationships as well.

As Being a Companion with One Another

Genesis 2:18-25

¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." ¹⁹ Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. ²¹ So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³ Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man."

²⁴ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. ²⁵ And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

God created marriage and initiated the first marriage. The Genesis record shows us God's basic design of marriage for companionship.

It is a God declared necessity (v.18). It is based on God's Trinitarian community. It is an expression of God's Trinitarian communion. We are designed for companionship because God lives in fellowship.

It was a man discovered reality (v.19-20). In marriage, nothing is to become a substitute. Nothing is to supplant, to undermine the marital companionship.

It is a God fashioned provision (v.21-22). God designed the woman for marital companionship. She will desire it and will provide it. But the husband is responsi-

ble to cultivate and to protect it. God presents the woman to Adam. She is God's design. She is to become Adam's delight. That mutual desire and delight will fuel real companionship.

It is the man welcomed delight (v.23). We see Adam's initial joy. But then that was to mature into a sustained delight.

Friendship and companionship are essential in marriage. So, cultivate the beginnings of friendship and companionship in your dating relationships.

As Complementing and Completing One Another

The Genesis text also shows God's design to complement and to complete each other.

Eve is described as a Helper. Her primary role in the marriage was to assist, help, partner with her husband in the task God had given him. This does not make her place in life or in the home less, no matter what moderns say. Her role as a helper is *just as significant and essential* as his role. Fulfilling her assigned role enables him to fulfill his assigned tasks. That does not exclude her from assisting him; but it does mean that she is freeing him to focus on his vocation.

Eve is designed to be exactly fitting for Adam. She is exactly what he needs. This is first about her design as a woman and wife, then about her as a person named Eve. Christian wives and teens should respect and respond to this truth. There must be a Biblically informed high regard for the role a wife has with her husband and in the home.

These are developed over whole Bible. They are truths and analogies that point towards Christ and the church. And they put into practice by Christians in the church all over the world.

This has tremendous significance for dating.

Parents must be an example of this kind of marriage. How can you expect your teens to believe and prize this kind of marriage if you don't?

Parents and teens need to keep these truths in mind in the dating relationship. Habits of leading, respecting, submitting, serving should be developed even before the marriage takes place.

Parents and teens, within the bounds that God has set, you should be thinking wisely about your future spouse. How well do you complete and complement one another? How are your own strengths and weaknesses offset by their strengths and weaknesses? How similar are you in Biblical understanding. If far apart, is there a poise to change where the Bible is clear and poise to accept differences where Bible allows?

As Moving towards Leave and Cleave

Genesis 2:24-25

²⁴ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. ²⁵ And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

I am going to say more on this in a moment. But listen carefully. God has ordained that in marriage there is the establishment of a new, independent, sphere of authority called a family. There is to be a clear movement from the household of parents to the formation of new household.

Parents, are you ready for your teen leave? Are they prepared to leave? Have you taught and equipped them so that on that day, they are on their own?

Teens, are you ready to be independent? Do you know how to lead and follow? Have you established Biblical habits that form the foundation of a godly home? Do you have the necessary skills to leave and cleave?

What a joy it is in love to pray, plan, talk, teach, counsel, guide and admonish your sons and daughters so that the leaving and cleaving is simply the full and final step.

Biblical Focus on the Heart

Parents must have a Biblical focus on the heart. All our behavior and emotions arises from our beliefs and wants, our motivations. We must help our teens to obey the Lord from the heart.

Our Struggles

Our struggles often appear to be primarily with the external. There is physical beauty and physical desire which fuels temptations. There are sweet moments and emotional bonds. And so we are presented with temptation. But the Bible tells us that temptation is presented through the external to the internal. It is the heart that is drawn aside, that is oriented towards sin, that excuses consequences and quietens conscience. It is in the heart that God's Word and Spirit can join with enabling grace so that the temptations are seen for what they are: immediate pleasures and satisfactions that bring lasting pains and forego long term joys.

Parents and teens will struggle with legalism, with controlling external behavior without understanding its roots in the heart. We will set rules and boundaries all of which have value only if we are carefully listening to our heart talk, to that constant internal conversation that rules us.

Teens will struggle with legalism, usually against it. Dating is simply another area in which our sons and daughters are gaining independence. They are moving toward the leave and cleave. Sometimes we are putting too much trust in our rules and boundaries. No rule will keep the heart from wanting. No rule can control the body's craving. But the grace of God moving in the hearts of parents and teens can sustain dating that will be pleasing to God.

Beloved, the fight to be pleasing to God in dating feels like it is in the body but it is really in the heart. It is about what you really believe and want. It is about trusting God and submitting to Him.

God's Purposes

So, parents, do you understand God's purposes for this time? Dating is a time when teens are moving toward leave and cleave. That is God's purpose. How then do you begin to serve and submit to God's purpose in the time between singleness and marriage? Do you see that as an abrupt break at the wedding ceremony? Or is it wiser to treat it as a loving, caring, mutual transition that reaches its fulfillment at the covenant of marital union?

Parents, sit down and list your purposes for dating (or courtship, if that is your conviction). Teens, sit down and list yours. Be honest. Be self-critical. Don't put up a fake list that you don't mean. God is seeing your words and is evaluating them. How much do your true purposes for the time between singleness and marriage align with God's?

Our Transformation

One of God's primary purposes in this transition is your transformation. He is exposing your doubts and lack of faith in God's Word. He is exposing your idols, what you crave and desire more than you want to please God. He is bringing you to repentance. He is bringing you to confession of sins against one another and to granting forgiveness. Beloved, you will need to cultivate an environment of love and grace. Parents will fail. Teens will fail. There will be bad fruit and deeds of the flesh. Why? Just because we are people who sin? No, because God has planned and purposed to use your sin as a means of showing you what is going on in your heart. God is at work through His sovereign providence to effect your transformation.

Do you hear this simple, but often forgotten truth? Teens, it is God who is using your parents to transform you, even when your parents sin against you. Parents, it is God who is using your teens to transform you, even when your teens sin against you. Do not resist the transforming work of God.

Biblical Wisdom for the Way

For a few minutes, consider a few examples of areas that you can meditate on and grow in. These are simply a part of discipleship. As a parent and a teen, are you involved in discipleship?

Living Examples

Parents have a responsibility to model what your sons and daughters are aiming for. You can model love, forgiveness and compassion. You can model leading and submitting. You can model mutual respect, responsibility and reasonableness. You can immerse your teens in the Word by being immersed in it yourself.

Identify other godly examples of marriage. Encourage your teens engage them. Teens seek to be involved in other families than your own. Engage the community of Christ in the church seeking to be taught and to be warned. Talk. Listen. Learn. Grow.

Loving Relationships

We must help our teens to think Biblically about their relationships. There is so much here.

Is your growing love God-centered and God-oriented?

Is your growing love pure and holy?

Is your growing love sacrificial and self-giving?

Is your growing love respectful and honorable?

Is your growing love gracious and generous?

Is your growing love kind and forgiving?

And we haven't even begun to think about communication, children, vocation, family and so on.

Laying out Goals

Parents must have Biblical goals for dating. So, during this time from singleness to marriage, we must help our teens to embrace these goals as well.

To glorify God in dating.

To become more and more saturated with the Word in the course of dating.

To grow in grace through dating.

To seek wisdom in the choices dating involves.

To be Biblically pure through the process of dating.

To value marriage as honorable and desirable without it becoming an idolatrous pursuit.

To be gripped by the lifelong obligation being pursued in dating.

In addition, parents and teens may sit down and establish some personal purposes and goals. These will be unique to your situation, your history, your sinful bents, your needs for particular grace, your strengths and weaknesses, your growing virtues and diminishing vices. These personal goals will be designed to help you achieve the larger, Biblically define purposes.

Cultivating Habits

Habits developed in dating relationships will carry over into marriage. While there is the best foot forward stuff, often young people fall into habitual ways of treating one another that will be more difficult to change after. One of these bad habits is of not being "normal" or sincere and honest. Small disrespects, self-serving, demands, manipu-

lations will all be amplified once the marriage takes place and so much more is at stake.

Observing Commands

Here are some absolutes that should be taught and expected of your teens. I am assuming our shared understanding of what is referred to by “dating”. Remember, I have defined it as *the activities of building a relationship with the intention of finding a spouse*.

Keep yourself pure for marriage.

Fornication is a sin against God, against the person you are having sex with and against yourself. Consider **1 Corinthians 6:15–20**:

¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.” ¹⁷ But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. ¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. ¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰ for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

You may date anyone who is of the opposite sex and is a believer.

The Bible establishes two inalterable commands.

You can only marry someone who is of the opposite sex. Homosexual and lesbian unions are wicked and evil.

You can only marry someone who is a believer. You may marry, but “only in the Lord.” You may be unequally yoked with an unbeliever.

But look at this way as well, you may marry *any* single, believer of the opposite sex.

Do not date someone you cannot marry.

Believing teens should not enter into serious relationships with unbelievers.

There is no evangelism by dating. Dating in order to win someone to Christ is a kind of presumption. Remember that the ultimate decision for a person’s salvation is God’s not yours or theirs. Since regeneration is not the effect of a human decision, you have no guarantee that the unbeliever you are dating may one day be persuaded to become a Christian. Just because some have had a good result, does not mean that it is pleasing to God and wise.

Unbelieving teens should not enter into serious relationships with believers.

Considering Singleness

1 Corinthians 7:8–9; 25-26; 36-38

Paul addresses the issue of lifelong singleness.

⁸ To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. ⁹ But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

²⁵ Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. ²⁶ I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is.

³⁶ If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. ³⁷ But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. ³⁸ So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

I commend to you several observations that parents and teens should discuss together.

Marriage is honorable and to be respected by believers. (Hebrews 13:4)

⁴ Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.

Singleness may be a gift from God and empowered by the Spirit. This call to life-long singleness seems to be rare with marriage the right and ordinary course for most Christians (1 Corinthians 9:5).

⁵ Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?

Singleness is good in the eyes of God. Jesus was never married and lived a life totally pleasing to God as a single man. Paul was single (either not married or widowed) and commended singleness to those who were able.

Singleness is a period to not be anxious about marriage and to give undistracted devotion to the Lord and to the church. Many well-known church leaders have chosen life-long singleness to the sake of the kingdom. As an example, the Apostle Paul, John Stott and R.C. Lucas.

Reflect and Respond

Let me summarize by giving you some characteristics of godly living during *the activities of building a relationship with the intention of finding a spouse*.¹

Begins with as fellowship with friendship and trust as a foundation.

Only Biblical candidates for marriage are considered with a goal of establishing a Biblical commitment through the covenant of engagement and marriage.

Will be deeply concerned to know and understand how the heart is being transformed and prepared for marriage through study, meditation, self-examination, and prayer.

Is marked by a willingness to work for the long term but also able to decide quickly.

Recognizes the dangers of serial emotional attachments that breed heartbreak and regret.

Values purity and pleasing God in physical things without recourse to either legalism or license.

Humbly seeks and welcomes the counsel of parents and trusted mentors to help navigate the choice to marry or not

Seeks to become mature and ready early in the teen years so as to enter marriage with wisdom and ability.

Aims to be content while single and enjoy that time of life through deep fellowship with the Lord and with others.

Intentionally looks for ways to see who a person really is, particularly in responses to hardship, disappointment, and being sinned against.

Focus is on pleasing the Lord so you obey God's word and seek God's wisdom.

Sees God as the only one who can satisfy the deepest longings of your souls. Each couple gives out of their fullness in Christ.

And there is the key: finding the place of joy and peace that enfolds both:

Song of Solomon 1:2–4 - ² [My love] kiss me with the kisses of [your] mouth! For your love is better than wine; ³ your anointing oils are fragrant; your name is oil poured out; therefore virgins love you. ⁴ Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me into his chambers. We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine; rightly do they love you.

Psalm 73:25–26 - [O Lord], whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

¹ I was helped in this summary by several web sites on dating and courtship as well as Josh Harris' writing on the subject of dating and courtship. A word of caution: while many of these web sites are thoughtful and balanced, many are not. Handle with deep care and caution.