

The Dangers of Dating

Love and marriage, love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage. This refrain from a song that predates my generation comes a lot closer to reflecting biblical truth than most of the music of my Baby-Boomer peers. At least back then it was cool to celebrate marriage as the natural context for love (though we don't kid ourselves that these folks were into betrothal). Music since has generally celebrated the liberation of "love" from marriage. It has been the music of the dating culture.

One of the more wholesome fruits of the home education movement, and the rediscovery of biblical family values that has accompanied it, has been the renewed interest in the concept and practice of courtship and betrothal. "Courtship" is not a biblical term. "Betrothal" is. But both refer to a process of moving toward marriage that respects certain fundamental values, including parental authority and protection, moral purity, exclusivity of affection, and a God-centered understanding of marriage. None of these values characterize the surrounding culture of dating that we have grown up in and in which we are now raising our own children.

In the future we will explore more carefully the meaning of courtship and betrothal and the positive pattern given in God's Word for bringing a man and woman together in marriage. Our purpose in this article is to set the stage for future studies by setting aside the practice of dating as an unacceptable model for Christian families.

As our response to the mercies of God in Christ, we are called to worship God in all that we do. "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:1,2). Christians have conformed to this world's patterns of boy-girl relationships, preparation for marriage, and marriage itself. We need to work hard at renewing our minds by taking every thought captive to Christ in these too often unexamined areas of life (2 Cor. 10:5).

Someone once said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." For Christians it's worse than that: the unexamined life may destroy your children and dishonor Christ. The practice of dating must be excluded from any family that is serious about raising godly children and pleasing God in their conduct. Why is that? Let's consider four ways in which dating falls short of God's glory by contrasting dating and courtship in the light of God's Word.

Parental Authority & Protection

And she'll have fun, fun, fun 'til her daddy takes the T-bird awaaaay. This popular hit of 30 years ago pictures a teenage girl who takes the family car (or one of them) and cruises around on her own, having fun with her friends. The only threat to this state of teen bliss is the prospect of the girl's father

playing party pooper by taking the car away. Of course we might ask why Daddy let her take the car in the first place, or how his control could be so loose that she takes it without his knowledge! And we may wonder if indeed this lackadaisical father will bother to intervene in any case. Dad here is not the godly father of Scripture; he is simply a potential threat to fun, fun, fun. This is a fair description of a father's role in the dating culture.

The first and major error of dating is that it removes youths from the authority and protection of their fathers. Isn't the whole idea of dating to "go out" together, away from parents and family? This is consistent with the modern practice of removing children from parental oversight, counsel, and care, but its effects are disastrous.

In contrast to this is the biblical teaching that fathers are responsible to guide and protect their children through the whole period of their upbringing. Abraham was commended as a man who would "command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD" (Gen. 18:19) Do you think Abraham would have let his girl sneak off on his most sporty camel to carouse with the local pagans? Nor would a Christian father who is admonished concerning his children to "bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). This process doesn't stop when a youth can drive or when the world around considers him or her old enough to date.

In particular, this process of bringing young men and women together is always to be guided by the father, not carried on independently by the couple themselves. God, the original Father and model to all of us, took complete oversight of the process of bringing Eve to Adam and "giving her away" to him (Gen. 2:22). Abraham took initiative to find a wife for his son Isaac (Gen. 24:2-4). Jacob had to win the permission of Rachel's father, Laban, before he could marry her (Gen. 29:18,19; see also Ex. 22:16,17; Judg. 14:1-10; 1 Sam. 18:17-21; 1 Cor. 7:36-38). This total oversight of the coupling of youths is perfectly consistent with the father's responsibility to guide and protect his children. Dating removes the father from the process, cedes authority to the youths themselves, and leaves them unprotected from the very real dangers of being alone together.

Sexual Purity

It's not surprising that mild lyrics like *I want to hold your hand* in the early Sixties gave way in just a few years to jarring lines like *I can't get no satisfaction, I can't get no girlie action* (to use a printable example). The one leads to the other as surely as night leads to day. And any parent who denies this is willfully blind.

The second error of dating is that it tempts youths to sexual impurity and most often leads to sin and damaged lives. God's standard is that there is to be no sexual touching before marriage. It is His design that when a man and woman are alone together their interest develops along sexual veins, especially once any physical contact takes place. This is not evil, it is good —

but it must be kept within the boundaries God gives: romantic touching is for marriage. When God gave Eve to Adam He immediately declared the propriety of their becoming “one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). A male and female being alone together logically and properly leads to sexual union. That’s why it is not safe or proper for a man and woman to be alone and to touch outside of the bounds of marriage vows.

Proverbs 6:29 warns a man regarding his neighbor’s wife that “whoever touches her will not go unpunished.” Do we imagine that this man could affectionately embrace, kiss and pet, and otherwise touch as long as he did not have sexual intercourse? Of course not. The mildest form of sexual touching leads inexorably down a path that ends in bed. When God protected Sarah from any advances from Abimelech it was not that he stopped short of intercourse but had his way with her short of that. We are told that he “had not come near her” and that the Lord did not allow him to “touch her” (Gen. 20:4,6). Even if Scripture did not have evidence on this point, common sense would tell us that there is no safe line to draw in this matter other than “don’t touch.” The separation and isolation of couples characteristic of the dating experience is a direct invitation to break God’s protective rules against immorality (Matt. 5:28; 1 Cor. 6:18; Eph. 5:3).

Courtship protects the couple from sexual immorality by keeping the couple in the context of family, under the oversight of parents. The concept of chaperoned encounters is the only one consistent with the principles of parental authority and protection from sexual impurity. Absolute privacy not necessary or safe. Meetings can occur under the watchful eye and within earshot of the guardian father. Any conversations too intimate for this setting are too intimate for this stage of the relationship.

Exclusive Affection For One Partner

‘Cherish’ is the word that I use to describe all these feelings that I have hiding here for you inside. Dating leads necessarily to a mutual giving of hearts — but without commitment. Breaking up is hard to do. Indeed it is! Will I see you in September or lose you to a summer love? Breaking up, making up, changing partners — this has been the stock and trade of rock and country music for at least a generation. And it is a natural part of the dating scene. If you get tired of the girl you have, trade her in for another. If you’re not with the one you love, love the one you’re with. Broken hearts and violated affections are the inevitable accomplice of the institution of dating.

The third error of dating is that it is the practice of serial relationships and thereby promotes emotional fornication and is a rehearsal for divorce. God’s plan is that one man have one woman for life (Gen. 2:24) Even if a dating couple manage to avoid the trap of sexual involvement, they will be involved emotionally and will set their affections upon one another. This point is really just an extension of the last, but it is worth separate emphasis.

One of the most damaging things about dating is that it encourages youths to

give their hearts to others, over and over. When it comes time to marry someone, they will not be able to offer their hearts to that one with pristine purity. They will have the memories of all those (or even just the one) to whom they had given their hearts, if not their bodies, previously. Surely if God means for each person to have a singular life partner, He means for that partner to get not only exclusive rights to the body but also to the affections of that person (1 Cor. 7:4).

Moreover, those who have been in the practice of changing the objects of their affections will be tempted after marriage to do the same thing. This will lead to sin and dissatisfaction within the marriage and will often result in divorce. After all, divorce is just another form of “breaking up.”

Courtship guards against emotional fornication by limiting one-on-one encounters to those couples who are seriously pursuing the possibility of marriage. It is even wise to require a young man to affirm his commitment to marriage before even allowing him regular contact with the young lady in an effort to win her heart. Otherwise, he may succeed in winning her heart only to decide she’s not the one for him. Then we have the same problem as with dating. Young men need to consider carefully and be prepared to commit themselves if they succeed in winning the girl’s heart. The aim is to have each one give his or her heart to only one other.

The God-Centered Purpose Of Marriage

Love can't be wrong when it feels so right, for you light up my life. These lyrics from about 25 years ago (by a professedly Christian popular singer) reflect the focus of the dating culture: self-gratification. If it feels good, it’s OK. Dating is a self-centered practice whose purpose is the fulfillment of personal desires. This subjective, emotional preoccupation drowns out God’s standards for what is right and wrong.

The fourth error of dating is that it is an exercise in pleasing self rather than God. It is obvious how this is so when a couple engages in sexual sin. But self-centeredness is no less the purpose when a couple date just to have fun and enjoy the company of someone they think is attractive. Personal pleasure still defines the content of the encounter.

The purpose of courtship is marriage. The goal is the formation of a new family unit to the glory of God. A young man must have serious intent if he asks a young lady’s father for the privilege of seeking to win her hand in marriage. But there can be no other justifiable reason for developing a relationship between a young couple. Without the end of marriage in view, “courtship” simply becomes dating by another name.

Conclusion

Each September those who watch the newspapers are treated to a sad sight.

It seems without fail, usually on the front page, there appears a photograph of a five-year-old boarding a yellow school bus, in tears or near them, going off to his first day of school. This rite of passage is considered normal and healthy. Yet it is the beginning of an alienation of affection that will hinder family life in general and the development of that child in particular. The natural parent-child bonds are violated for the “wisdom” of peer-oriented, mass education.

Letting go. This is the great mandate thrust upon parents. They let go of wee ones to the kindergarten, and at the other end of childhood they let go to college or career. Now parents do indeed need to let go when the young person is ready to set up a household of his own, but short of that “letting go” is not the mandate. Instead parents should be holding on, and shaping, and disciplining, and pouring themselves into their children — not to stifle development, but to fully develop all their potential to the glory of God. Dating is part of the perverse “letting go” syndrome. *Let the teens go have their fun. They need to be alone. After all, we did it when we were their age.* Yeah, we sure did, and suffered for it.

Fathers, you are failing your teens if you let go of your authority and protection over them and abandon them to the dangers of dating. It’s not God’s way, and it’s harmful to your dear children. Let their teen years be ones in which you draw them even closer and lovingly assert your authority and protection over them. Don’t be conformed to the pattern of this world. Be a father to your children.
