

God's Design for Scriptural Romance

Part 2: Dealing With the Dating Dilemma

by John W. Thompson

Much credit for this article goes to other godly men who have preceded me in their writings on this subject, such as Paul Jehle, Jim West, Reb Bradley, Jonathan Lindvall and Dr. S. M. Davis, to name a few. It is with sincere appreciation and recognition that I build upon their abiding contributions.

A marriage begun through dating is like a "house built of cards," it is structurally weak and vulnerable to the winds of adversity. More than half such marriages collapse in divorce; those remaining are riddled with stress fractures. So in our first article on this subject (Issue #26), we pointed out the solid foundation of dating's scriptural alternative, biblical betrothal. Four cornerstones were carefully laid: (1) the underlying life philosophy (to please Christ vs. self), (2) the relevant passages (significant relationships and concepts), (3) a transcultural interpretation (normative for all time), and (4) the five fundamental principles (piety, patriarchy, purity, preparedness and patience). Now it's time to erect the superstructure of application, exploring how to "put off" cultural dating in order to "put on" biblical betrothal (cf. Eph. 4:22-24).

But why scrap dating? Though we already noted the "negative fruit" of dating (remember the used chewing gum?), this may still be a recurring question, especially among teens exposed to the world. It's difficult to dismiss what's familiar. Even some parents may wonder, Is dating really that bad?

Each of us has faced hazardous activities in our lives at one point or another. Some have served our country on the battlefield. Others have encountered perils on the job. Still others of us have endured danger due to our own foolish choices. I'll never forget the risky stunt I chanced as a youth trying to water ski on my back being pulled by my feet and nearly drowning when I couldn't release myself from the tow rope. Or my absurd attempt to navigate a treacherous inlet to the ocean in a tiny rowboat. Or, as a student pilot at age 18, when I stupidly flew a plane in stormy weather and had to dive the plane through an opening in the clouds at a speed far exceeding its design. Yet the most dangerous, misguided and ruinous activity that I ever undertook in my life was DATING!

It is amazing to me how blind we Christians have been regarding the dangers of dating. Dating is a threat to our physical purity. Dating is a menace to our emotional happiness. Dating is a liability to our spiritual growth. Yet society continues to glorify dating on television, in movies, in classrooms, in romance

novels, in magazines and on billboards. And Christians have thoughtlessly followed the Pied Pipers of our culture.

DATING DEFINED

More recently many godly Christians — especially in the homeschooling movement — have begun to wake up to the dangers of dating and wisely ask, Is dating consistent with the principles of scriptural romance? To answer that question, let’s first agree on what we mean by “dating.” One writer has called dating simply “a social activity between a man and a woman.” That sounds pretty tame. What could possibly be wrong or dangerous about a social activity between a man and a woman? But that definition is not precise enough in that it would include, say, a picnic between a girl and her brother. To be more accurate we must define a date as “a temporary romantic relationship focused on current enjoyment.” So a date is temporary rather than permanent, it is romantic (often only slightly at first) rather than platonic, and it is focused on current enjoyment rather than future matrimony.

A definition, however, sets forth only the bare essentials. More helpful, perhaps, is the following chart showing dating’s distinguishing characteristics in contrast to biblical courtship and betrothal. By this fuller description some Christians may realize that they are actually involved in dating (or a dating/courtship hybrid) but calling it “courtship.” A rose by any other name smells the same — and grows the same painful thorns!

DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS OF DATING AND BETROTHAL

Dating	Betrothal
1. Typically started at an age too young to marry.	1. Entered into ONLY after full preparation for marriage: spiritually, financially, etc.
2. Meet one another on their own in classroom, workplace, etc.	2. Meet one another through family gatherings and through father’s investigation/approval.
3. Purpose is personal pleasure, fun, and recreation. No strings attached.	3. Purpose is to lead to marriage. Betrothal is a binding commitment to marry.
4. Date is usually planned by the youths themselves.	4. Courtship/betrothal is planned by parents with cooperation/consent of son/daughter.
5. Oversight by parents is resented as an intrusion.	5. Oversight by parents is required and welcomed for moral protection.

6. Complete privacy is permitted by parents and expected by the youths.	6. Complete privacy is disallowed and avoided. Chaperoned time together, usually at the family home.
7. Physical affection is allowed and expected.	7. Physical affection is reserved entirely for marriage.
8. Romantic emotions for multiple partners causes fragmented heart.	8. Romantic emotions (whole heart) saved entirely for future spouse.
9. Dating is rooted in a selfish, feeling-oriented love: "falling in love."	9. Betrothal is rooted in a selfless, commitment-oriented love: "growing in love."
10. Loss of romantic feelings or presence of disagreement produces "breaking up."	10. Feelings/disagreements worked out through biblical problem solving, not "divorce."
11. Heart is wounded by emotional scars, bitterness, and insecurity.	11. Heart is protected by one romance for life.
12. Conscience is generally defiled and seared by impurity.	12. Conscience is kept blameless through a pure relationship.
13. Future marriage is troubled by past emotional bonds, unrealistic standards of comparison, and appetite for variety and change.	13. Future marriage is free from any past "baggage" from dating.

DATING'S HISTORY

Understanding dating's distinguishing characteristics, you may wonder how such a destructive activity ever developed. And worse, how Christians became so duped by it. Let's take a moment, then, to briefly review dating's history.

In Scripture, dating was an exception and a violation of God's design for man-woman relationships. Samson is a sad example of a man with a dating spirit, reaping its disastrous consequences (Judg. 14-16). Dating became the norm in Western culture only in the twentieth century, particularly during "the roaring 20s." Secular historian Ellen Rothman in *Hand and Hearts — A History of Courtship* has noted,

A first-class revolt against the accepted American order took place among American youth in the 1920s. This was not a sudden eruption, but rather a series of seismic tremors that occurred with increasing intensity and frequency through the 1910s and 1920s. By 1930, the terrain through which young Americans passed en route to marriage would be almost unrecognizable to their parents. (p. 289)

In his penetrating book *Christian Courtship vs. The Dating Game*, Pastor Jim West concurs, "The phenomenon of dating is a relatively new institution in the

United States. Prior to 1920, courtship laws included rigid supervision of the female. Courtship was not entered upon unless parents were first consulted and their approval secured” (p. 4). Interesting, isn't it, that what's "cultural" is not betrothal but dating!

But how did this new cultural practice take root? The attitudes that undergird modern dating arose out of the eighteenth century philosophical movement called "Romanticism" which emphasized making decisions based on emotions rather than on reason and commitment. This movement influenced not only literature, music, and art but ultimately relationships as well. In contrast to the biblical mandate to love the one you marry (Eph. 5:25), the Romantics taught the reverse — to marry the one you love. Thus they concluded, couples must cultivate love-feelings for one who was not yet their spouse.

With this flawed philosophical base, several innovations of twentieth-century culture contributed to dating's moral carnage:

(1) The rise of feminism encouraged young women to leave the loving protection of their father and, for the first time in history, enter the work force where they would meet young men.

(2) The Industrial Revolution and World War I drew young men away from the restraining oversight of parents, church, and community.

(3) Increasing urbanization crowded more people into closer living situations with inadequate parental supervision.

(4) Co-ed universities permitted young women to live on campuses with young men, a major historical shift.

(5) The accessibility of the automobile to young people gave uninhibited freedom from the watchful eye of parents.

(6) The movie theater gave opportunity for Hollywood's romantic expression of love to influence millions of young viewers.

(7) New dances were no longer group oriented but couple oriented, and couples romantically danced cheek-to-cheek.

(8) New dress styles were immodest, encouraging lustful dating rather than loving betrothals.

(9) Most significantly, fathers abdicated their God-ordained responsibility to teach the biblical practice of betrothal and to safeguard their children in male-female relationships. With their primary focus on a job outside the home, they were blindsided by the subtle encroachments of cultural change. And they failed to ask the question that every father must now address, Does dating fit the principles of scriptural romance?

COMPARING DATING WITH SCRIPTURE

Think it through as a Berean (Acts 17:11). Compare dating with the five fundamental principles of scriptural romance: piety, patriarchy, purity, preparedness and patience. Ask yourself, Does dating foster general piety, godliness and righteousness in both attitudes and conduct, imitating Christ's relationship with His bride, the church? Or does dating encourage wrong goals, wrong motives, and wrong behavior in male-female relationships?

In regard to patriarchy, Does dating fit with a father's physical, moral, and emotional protection of his child? Or does dating promote the release of a young person to an unprotected situation? Does dating enable a father to provide his son or daughter with a godly spouse? Or do dating partners meet on their own, plan their dates for personal pleasure, and generally avoid parental oversight?

With respect to purity, Does dating nurture physical morality, treating "the younger women as sisters, in all purity"? Or does dating tempt one toward physical affection through unchaperoned meetings, often at night? Does dating cultivate emotional purity, preserving all of one's romantic emotions for his/her spouse ("for I betrothed you to one husband" — 2 Cor. 11:2)? Or does dating result in emotional promiscuity, fragmenting the heart with each dating partner, leaving hurts, bitterness, and insecurity — and preparing young people for unfaithfulness and divorce?

Concerning preparation, Does dating facilitate a young person's preparation for marriage, both spiritually and vocationally? Or does dating actually distract a young person from commitment to God and completion of his or her vocational training, creating emotional attachments that interrupt God's plan for his or her life? One pastor has observed, "Most young people in the dating culture are nowhere near ready to get married. Mentally, they haven't completed an adequate education. Spiritually, they haven't developed deep convictions necessary for a successful marriage. Financially, they haven't become sufficiently stable to support a new household. Physically and emotionally, they haven't matured in self-discipline to remain one hundred percent pure."

Finally, pertaining to patience, Does dating promote a patient attitude of "walking by faith and not by sight," trusting in our sovereign God to work through imperfect fathers to accomplish His perfect plan? Or does dating awaken prematurely a young person's emotional affections, resulting in hasty, ill-advised marriages? The answer to each of these questions is obvious and indisputable to any honest, God-fearing parent or teen.

As I said at the outset, dating is a dangerous threat to our young people's physical purity, emotional stability, and spiritual growth. This is true because dating opposes every fundamental principle that God has given us for scriptural romance. It is a game of Russian Roulette, a pistol to the head with five of the six cylinders loaded. And knowing that God allows us to reap what

we sow (Gal. 6:7), five out of every six young people are going to be seriously injured by it. But what if a young person is having a tough time resisting the desire to date? How might he gain victory over the dating spirit?

VICTORY OVER A DATING SPIRIT

A “dating spirit” is a desire or yearning to enjoy the romantic appeal, glamour, and allurements of dating, even though you know in your conscience that it dishonors God’s principles and distracts you from a single-minded devotion to Christ (1 Cor. 7:32,35). A “dating spirit,” therefore, may be found in a young man or a young woman who is committed not to date, but who still allows his or her heart to become attached emotionally to someone prior to betrothal. A “dating spirit” is like lusting rather than committing adultery — it’s not as bad, but it’s still very wrong and dangerous.

Dating, even Christian dating, generally results in a series of emotional attachments or bonds with different dating partners. To express this in the language of romance, a young woman gives “a piece of her heart” to a young man when she becomes emotionally involved with him. By the time she meets the man she will marry, she will have only a fragment of her heart left to give. Even without going out on a date, a young woman can give “pieces of her heart” to several young men during her youth, so that by the time she marries, she is no longer a “one-man woman” (1 Tim. 5:9). Yet Paul’s analogy of Christ and the church in 2 Corinthians 11:2-3 explains that a pure maiden saves her love for one man only, not just physically but emotionally too. The goal is not just physical purity but emotional purity — only one romance for life! Every emotional attachment that a young person saves for his or her spouse is like another weld in the marriage that bonds them tightly and securely together.

Do you have a dating spirit, a desire for romance before betrothal? See how you fare in our “Quiz for a Dating Spirit.” Answer YES or NO to the following questions (be honest with yourself):

- 1) Do you desire a relationship for fun and recreation rather than one that leads to marriage?
- 2) Do you excitedly look forward to meeting the opposite sex at recreational events, in the classroom, or at your workplace?
- 3) Do you desire romantic emotions before you are both ready to marry?
- 4) Do you desire physical affection in a pre-marital relationship?
- 5) Do you resent the thought of your father initiating, investigating, choosing, and overseeing your romantic relationship?
Instead, do you want control, “freedom,” and privacy in your relationship?

If you answer “yes” to any of these five questions, then you probably have a

dating spirit, that is, a desire for the appeal, glamour, and allurements of dating. What can you do about it? How might you keep a blameless conscience before God? How can you preserve your whole heart for your future spouse? You must “renew your mind” (Eph. 4:23) in the way you think about dating, both spiritually and practically.

SPIRITUALLY RENEWING YOUR MIND

But how exactly do you “renew your mind”? From a multitude of Bible references we understand that the terms mind, will, soul, spirit, conscience, and heart all refer to the “inner man” in contrast to the “outer man” (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16). In brief, your mind/heart is the locus of your mental, emotional, and spiritual activity. Outward behavior is simply the overflow of what’s in the heart. “Watch over your heart,” warns Solomon, “for from it flow the springs (lit. ‘the outgoings’) of life” (Prov. 4:23). That’s why the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:2 grounded “not being conformed to this world” (your outward behavior) upon the “renewing of your mind” (your inward beliefs and desires).

The writer of Hebrews gives us even greater insight into the mind/heart when he explains, “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, ... able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). Our “thoughts,” of course, are our beliefs. Our “intentions” are spoken of elsewhere in Scripture as our desires, motives, lusts, cravings, passions, and yearnings. Although there are many ways our desires manifest themselves (laziness, sensuality, materialism, approval, control, pride, etc.), there are actually only two fundamental motives that underlie all of our attitudes, emotions, words, and deeds. Either we will be controlled by a desire to please Jesus Christ, or we will be controlled by a desire to please self. Christ vs. self — these are the two conflicting “roots” which, Paul declares in Galatians 5, will produce either the fruit of the Spirit (growing out of love for Christ) or the deeds of the flesh (growing out of love for self).

It is equally enlightening from Romans 1:24-26 that uncurbed desires will cause us to embrace lies so that we may rationalize those desires — “they (homosexuals) exchanged the truth of God for a lie.” Satan, who is the Tempter of our lusts and the Deceiver of our minds, knows this well and uses this weakness to gain a foothold in our lives. Consequently many Christian young people will strive to find some justification to satisfy their hunger for dating. They are driven by an appetite for romance that is constantly being fed by Hollywood’s movies, television, videos, advertisements, magazines, music, and romance novels.

Parents, shouldn’t we be sheltering our children from the lies and lusts of the Evil One? Are we at least partly responsible for their failure to love Christ more than self? Make “knowing, loving, and obeying Christ” the trademark of your home, and your children will find victory over the dating spirit.

But Hebrews 4:12 mentions the “thoughts” (beliefs), in addition to the “intentions of the heart,” as needing renewal. What renewed beliefs about

dating will enable us to “prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2)? In our first article we learned about the five fundamental principles of scriptural romance: piety, patriarchy, purity, preparedness and patience. But did you know that there is a direct, New Testament command against dating?

GOD’S COMMAND AGAINST DATING

Since God’s truth, not man’s opinion, is our standard for belief and behavior, please read my comments with your Bible open so that God can speak directly to your heart what He says about dating. His clearest and most instructive word on this subject is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8. Paul’s first epistle to the Thessalonians reflects the moral climate of that seaport city of mostly pagan Greeks. He wrote not only to encourage these new converts in the face of persecution but also to exhort them concerning several temptations within their culture, one of which was moral laxity (much like our day).

In verse 1 Paul writes that he regards his forthcoming exhortations as simply the outworking of a loving desire to please God. Since desires will influence beliefs (Rom. 1:24ff), this is Paul’s starting point — and ours as well — for child training. But lest his remarks somehow be viewed as optional, he calls them by a first century military term, “commandments ... by the authority of the Lord Jesus” (v.2). God’s will, Paul continues, is that His people be holy, set apart from sin unto God in all our daily experiences, and particularly from any and every form of sexual immorality (v.3). But how are we to maintain purity in our relationship to the opposite sex?

Paul’s answer is found in verses 4-6 where God gives to man the “know how” for properly “acquiring his own vessel (wife),” something of an expansion of Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians: “because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife” (1 Cor. 7:2). Although commentators throughout the centuries have differed over the meaning of “vessel” (body vs. wife), the word meanings, grammar, context, Septuagint usage (Greek version of the Old Testament), and rabbinical literature give greater evidence for this being God’s instruction on getting a wife. Indeed, Paul uses the word this way in 1 Peter 3:7 where the wife is spoken of as “the weaker vessel.” Thus, many commentators both old (Augustine, Zwingli) and new (Alford, Ellicott, Hendriksen, Lange, Lenski, Moffatt, Nicoll, Robertson, Vine) favor this view as interpreted in many Bible translations.

HOW TO ACQUIRE A WIFE

So in what way should a man acquire a wife? Paul explains that he should pursue courtship in “holiness” before God and in “honor” before men (v.4), “not in lustful passion” (v.5) which shows neither restraint of sin nor respect of persons. Indeed, this is the debased practice of the Gentiles (unbelievers) who don’t know God, a theme more fully developed in Romans 1. “Lustful passion” describes the ultimate outcome of today’s dating culture, whether

it's intended or not. If personal pleasure is dating's purpose, if romantic emotions and physical affection are promoted, if complete privacy is permitted and oversight by parents is resented, then you may be sure that, sooner or later, "lustful passion" will defile and dishonor the relationship. God's principles simply cannot be compromised without consequence. "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (Gal. 6:7).

Pursuing a wife "in sanctification and honor" (courtship/betrothal rather than dating) states Paul's exhortation positively. Verse 6 states the case negatively: "that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter." The term "transgress" literally means "to go beyond what is proper, to exceed the proper limits." To this Paul adds a metaphor taken from the world of commerce: "defraud," meaning "to cheat, steal, have more than one's due, selfishly attempt to gain more while disregarding others and their rights." In the context of acquiring a wife, these two terms refer to exceeding the proper limits of a male-female relationship and thereby stealing the physical and emotional affection that belongs to a brother. But who is this "brother" that is being defrauded? It can only be the woman's future spouse! Noted commentator Leon Morris in the New International Commentary on the New Testament concurs: "Promiscuity before marriage represents the robbing of the other of that virginity which ought to be brought to a marriage. The future partner of such a one has been defrauded.... It reminds us that all sexual looseness represents an act of injustice to someone other than the two parties concerned" (p. 126).

This "theft of affection" that typically occurs in dating may never be known by the future spouse. Will justice be denied for stolen kisses? Not according to verse 6, which solemnly warns us that "the Lord is the avenger in all these things." God will punish those who refuse the path of purity in "acquiring a wife." No man can reckon on escaping the consequences. Again we are reminded that "God is not mocked; whatever a man sows, this he will also reap." You may be tempted to spurn these words as just one man's opinion. But this very passage concludes with a caution against such flippancy: "he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you" (v. 8). Defrauding a brother is not a failure to keep some man-made rule but is sin against the Holy Spirit, our Sanctifier. This should motivate us spiritually to resist the dating spirit.

DISCARDING THE MYTHS OF DATING

There are also some very practical reasons that can motivate us to resist a dating spirit. We can categorize these reasons under two topics: the myths of dating (untrue) and the dangers of dating (true). In Proverbs, chapters 2, 5, 6 and 7, God cautions young men not to be ignorant about their relationship with young women (cf. Prov. 7:6-10). Young men who fall into immoral relationships are lacking good sense because they have believed several worldly myths about dating. These myths, gleaned from Paul Jehle's book *Dating Vs. Courtship*, must be biblically exposed in order to understand the

faulty foundation of modern dating.

MYTH #1: "I need a boyfriend/girlfriend to overcome my loneliness and fulfill my social needs." This myth is a contradiction of 1 John 1:6-7, "If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another...." God has designed fellowship with Himself and within the church to fulfill our loneliness and social needs. Adam was alone, meaning he needed a helper to fulfill the dominion mandate to be fruitful and rule the earth. But Adam was never said to be lonely because he enjoyed perfect fellowship with God. Only repentance from the sin of self-pity will overcome loneliness. The real social need of individuals is to learn to fellowship with Christ and His church. Having a boyfriend or girlfriend actually works against true fellowship because it creates a relationship that focuses on one and excludes others.

MYTH #2: "A necessary part of maturing is having someone with whom you can share your affections and trust (True). Dating fulfills this need (False)." Here is a myth that denies Romans 12:9-10, "Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor." The dating game is the worst atmosphere to honestly share your affections since "love" in dating is hypocrisy, a sensual love disguised as true love. What we need is brotherly and sisterly affection from true friends who will not abuse our trust for selfish romance.

MYTH #3: "Physical affection in dating is normal, natural, and okay, just keep it under control." But what does 1 Corinthians 7:1 say? "It is good for a man NOT to touch a woman." And Ecclesiastes 3:1,5 reminds us, "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven... a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing...." With Solomon we must ask, "Can a man take fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned?" (Prov. 6:27). By God's design for procreation, one touch leads to the next. God intended physical affection ONLY within marriage, and not before.

MYTH #4: "Dating was the way we adults found our spouses, and it hasn't hurt us any. So it must be okay for our kids." Yet this myth compromises 1 Peter 1:15, "Like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior." There are two serious errors in this myth. First, most adults who don't think they have been harmed by dating are not comparing their dating or their present marriages to God's standard. Our standard as parents must be the very holiness of Christ. The second error is that of making our own experience with dating, rather than God's revealed principles about romance, the standard for our children.

MYTH #5: "One of the purposes of the church is to help our young people find their mates through the youth group." But Scripture teaches us in 1 Corinthians 14:26, "What is the outcome, then, brethren? When you assemble... let all things be done for edification." God does have a purpose for the church in preparing young people for marriage, but it is NOT to set up a dating forum through the church youth group so that the same sinful patterns

can be practiced on believers instead of unbelievers. Instead, our purpose in coming together is to learn the principles of God's Word for righteous living, including righteously finding a spouse. And these principles are best learned in a family setting, not in a youth group.

MYTH #6: "If you don't date, you will lose out to others who are dating and marrying the best ones." Don't we believe Psalm 84:11, "No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly"? The issue here is, Can I trust God with the provision of my marriage partner, or must I see this as a competitive market? To put it another way, Am I going to get a wife by faith or by fear? "Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4).

DISCERNING THE DANGERS OF DATING

The above myths of dating are all untrue. Seeing them biblically exposed will help young people to combat the false arguments of the dating culture. But there are other practical reasons to oppose dating. In *Dating: Is It Worth the Risk?*, Pastor Reb Bradley discusses the following dangers of dating; and they are all true beyond dispute.

LUST. Dating promotes lust (inappropriate desires). God commands us to "flee youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2:22), to "make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts" (Rom. 13:14) and to acquire a wife "not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God" (1 Thess. 4:5). Yet, dating promotes the sin of lust which clouds one's ability to think clearly, even to the point of murder for King David (with Bathsheba's husband). Likewise, Samson should have seen right through Delilah's deceptions, but because of lust he lost his eyes, his freedom, and his life. Solomon, too, was blinded by lust when he forsook the living God and worshipped the idols of his foreign wives. Because of lust, the powerful become weak and the wise become fools!

As parents we must ask ourselves, If these three godly leaders were no match for lust, should we suppose that our children will not be its victims? Do we think that we can send young men and women off by themselves and they not fall prey to romantic desires? They will then enter marriage robbed of purity, robbed of self-discipline, robbed of spiritual strength. No wonder so many marriages start off in trouble! If a man lacks self-restraint before marriage, he will lack self-restraint after marriage and be very prone to self-centeredness and unfaithfulness.

SELF-CENTERED, "FEELING" LOVE. Dating develops a self-centered, "feeling" concept of love. Dating is based on the idea that two people should kindle an emotional attraction for one another before the commitment of betrothal. But it turns out to be a self-centered love that likes how the other person makes them feel. Anyone in a healthy marriage will testify that selflessness, not feelings, is the key to a great marriage.

PERMANENT, EMOTIONAL BONDS. Dating creates a permanent, emotional

bond between two people who will not necessarily marry one another. Dating, with its emphasis on emotional intimacy, knits the hearts of two people together forever. Now, the bond may fade somewhat over time; but most married people will testify to its permanence. Ex-boyfriends and ex-girlfriends may be gone, but the emotional heart ties, along with the scars and calluses, remain. In fact, it is said that “nothing can be sweeter than first love.” Even Revelation 2:4f exhorts us to “return to our first love,” who is Christ. Because of this principle, marriage partners who have not been “one-woman men” and “one-man women” often fantasize about their first love. Young people, you will only have ONE first love — don’t ruin it by dating!

UNREALISTIC STANDARDS OF COMPARISON. It’s not uncommon, after the newness of marriage wears off, that marriage partners find themselves discontent with each other. Often, then, they will mentally compare their spouse to someone they knew in the past. Men sometimes think thoughts like this: “She doesn’t cook like so and so; she doesn’t kiss as good as so and so; she isn’t as pretty as so and so.” And women are tempted to think thoughts like: “He isn’t as sensitive as so and so was; he just doesn’t listen to me the way so and so did; maybe I should have married so and so — he made me feel so cherished.” If we had never been intimate with so many “so and so’s,” we wouldn’t have such extensive standards for finding fault with our mate but would find greater contentment in marriage.

SCARS OF REJECTION. Dating generally results in “breaking up,” causing scars of rejection, callused hearts, emotional insecurity, fear of commitment, failure to trust others, and less ability to give of our love. God designed us to become emotionally attached to just one person “til death do us part.” Therefore, the pain of breaking up is, in seed form, the same as divorce. It is harder to give love the second time around. God’s grace can certainly help us with these scars, but they are the consequences of violating the way He made us. The human heart was not designed for multiple joinings and tearings!

PREPARATION FOR DIVORCE. Dating literally trains young people to break off difficult relationships rather than to work through their problems, conditioning them more for divorce than for marriage. They learn that when the going gets tough they don’t have to hang in there but can bail out of relationships. Not only do they not learn the selfless, unconditional love needed for a strong marriage, they learn instead intolerance and lack of commitment.

APPETITE FOR VARIETY. Dating develops an appetite for variety and change, creating dissatisfaction in marriage. The stimulation of multiple dating adventures often causes one to become bored when married to just one person. After having multiple relationships “with no strings attached,” marriage can give the feeling of being “tied down” to just one person. The courtship/betrothal process protects young people from this wrong attitude.

DESTROYS FELLOWSHIP. Dating destroys fellowship, leaving Christians alienated in their relationships with each other. Christ places a high premium

on unity among his people. But dating and breaking up promote alienation, hurt, and bitterness among believers, just like divorce does. Youth groups are full of such “divorced” couples whose ministry together is hampered.

LACKS PROTECTION. Dating lacks the protection afforded by parental involvement. Under the guise of freedom and responsibility, the modern church claims it is wrong for parents to direct the romantic affairs of their adult children. But this line of reasoning criticizes the biblical principles, precepts, and practices which have produced consistently good fruit. And according to Christ, a tree is known by its fruit.

WARPS “REALITY.” Advocates of dating claim that betrothal doesn’t prepare young people for life’s realities, like rejection, temptation, and abuse. In truth, however, dating itself creates these difficulties by warping the reality that God wonderfully created for a warm, stable marriage through courtship and betrothal.

HOW CAN PARENTS RESIST?

Dr. S. M. Davis, a devoted pastor, suggests several crucial things that parents can do to combat the dating spirit. First, capture the heart of your teen. Make this the highest goal of your parenting. Malachi 4:6 foretold that “He (Christ) will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers...” Godly fathers, then, will plead the words of Solomon, “My son, give me your heart...” (Prov. 23:26). This is where a young person’s heart is to be focused prior to marriage, committed to Christ and his family. And parents are commanded to keep their children’s hearts safely protected from the deceptions and temptations of the Evil One!

Next, pray daily with your children for their future spouses. Pray for their spouses’ growth in godliness, character, wisdom, purity, and skillfulness. Then when your son or daughter is ready for marriage, search diligently to find that suitable spouse so your children won’t lose heart.

Always be teaching your children self-discipline which is necessary for control over their emotions and desires. They must learn to do what is right regardless of their feelings. Believe it or not, this begins at the dinner table by training them to eat what they don’t like. “You don’t have to like it, you just have to eat it,” has been a common saying in our home.

Teach the truths of betrothal regularly and diligently to your children “when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way, when you lie down and when you rise up” (Deut. 6:7). The world’s philosophy of dating is constantly bombarding them and requires your continual correction.

Keep your protection level high. You cannot overprotect a young person from ungodliness. Be alert to the dating spirit coming into your home through ungodly friendships, television, magazines, romance novels, movies, music, etc. Remember that the media is aggressively opposed to biblical fatherhood.

Even the movie “The Sound of Music” portrayed Captain von Trapp as rude and intrusive upon his 17 year old daughter’s affections for a young man who turned out later to be a Nazi. Parents, you must be alert to what is influencing your children.

Beware when you let your sons (and certainly not your daughters) take jobs in the secular work force where many Christians have been swept off their feet by the flirtations of worldly co-workers. Even worse is the college campus! Far better to develop a family business and to pursue “college at home” (see “College at Home for the Glory of God” in Issue #14).

Finally, don’t yield to fear. Many parents fear conflict with their children. They fear their kids won’t like them. Or, they fear their children will run away from home if life is too strict. But if we are to expect God’s blessing in our home, we must rear our children out of faith, not fear.

HOW CAN YOUNG PEOPLE RESIST?

Young people must likewise fight the dating spirit in practical ways. First, give your heart fully to your parents. Young people, parents don’t have to be perfect for God to use them in finding your spouse. He’s been using imperfect parents since the fall of Adam with amazing success! Start thinking of you and your parents as a team that works AGAINST the devil’s dating scheme and FOR God’s betrothal plan.

Next, look to future blessings, not present pleasures. Anticipate how exciting it will be to give your whole heart to your future spouse, where you haven’t torn away “pieces of your heart” throughout your youth and given it to others — not even in your imagination. Think how incredibly strong the bond will be with the man or woman God has chosen for your mate.

Be careful about defrauding other young people. Defrauding means cheating someone by offering something you can’t righteously fulfill. Girls, even attracting others through your eyes, walk, or dress is defrauding! Boys, treat every young lady the way you want other men presently to be treating the woman you will one day marry.

When you are tempted to flirt, even in your imagination, pray for your future spouse, that God will keep them pure in heart just as He is helping you to resist temptation. Think of your future spouse rather than the person your heart is currently being drawn to.

Get a bigger vision than just your own life. The decision you make regarding a mate will affect not merely you, but your children and your grandchildren, and so on for many generations (Isa. 58:12) — either for good or for bad. Commit your life to a multigenerational vision.

Delight in God’s protection through your parents just as you would a large, strong umbrella during a torrential downpour. Be glad you have parents who

keep the umbrella of protection over you and won't allow boy after boy, or girl after girl, to toy with your emotions.

Be willing to be laughed at by your relatives and others who don't understand God's truth. Every great person in the Bible who took a stand for God was ridiculed. Be ready to give them a godly answer.

Maintain a 1 Corinthians 7 focus of "undistracted devotion to Christ" (1 Cor. 7:32,35). Dating people are acting like married people by focusing on one another. But Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 7 that single people are to focus on their devotion to Christ, how you may please and serve Christ during this special period of your life.

Finally, young people, go to sleep emotionally, and wait for God to awaken you through the provision of a spouse by your parents. You must not arouse love prematurely through impatience (Sol. 2:7). Instead, you are called to "walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7) — faith in a sovereign God to work through imperfect parents to accomplish His perfect will for you. Until then, follow the advice of "attention toward all, intentions toward none."

GOD'S SOLUTION TO THE DATING SPIRIT

Earlier I asserted that dating is dangerous — even reckless — like playing Russian Roulette with five of the six cylinders loaded. Perhaps in your home you would be more comfortable with only two or three of the cylinders loaded. But do you really want to gamble with your children's future marriages at all? A recent study revealed that 43 percent of evangelical Christians who date fall into moral disaster! If you knew that an airline would lose 43 percent of its passengers in plane crashes, would you put your child on one of their planes? Of course not! Then why risk them morally to dating?

What is God's solution? Repentance of the dating spirit! Repent means to change your mind (both desires and beliefs) with a resultant change in behavior. It means to please Christ more than self and to "acquire a wife in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion." In short, it means not to eat dessert first, just like your mother always told you. Christ has a banquet in store for you, but dessert before the meal ruins the appetite. Will you be hungry for His feast when He brings it to you?

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