

God's Design for Scriptural Romance

Part 5: How to Marry - The Friendship Stage

by John W. Thompson

Nearly every day, in personal, phone or email counseling, a young man, young woman, dad or mom will say something like this to me: "I am fully convinced of the error of dating and the blessing of biblical courtship and betrothal. But HOW, specifically, do I go about it? What is God's step-by-step process for bringing about a marriage the biblical way?" That very practical question may be on your mind too, particularly after reading all that has been said in the prior articles. If you have embraced God's principles for romance (article #1), renounced worldly dating (article #2), prepared your children for betrothal (article #3), and understood biblical guidance (article #4), then you are ready to explore the actual practice of biblical courtship and betrothal, the "constructing" of a godly marriage.

In Jesus' graphic parable of the Two Houses in Matthew 7:24-27, our Lord compares the Christian life with two ways of building a house: one upon shifting sand (man's ways), the other upon solid rock (Christ's ways). Consider how this applies to constructing a marriage through dating versus betrothal. The foolish man built his house upon sand without keeping the future in mind. He never pondered the unfailing truth that seasons change, that the wind and rain will eventually come. And when they "burst against that house, it fell, and great was its fall" (v. 27). Like a house with a sandy foundation, a relationship that is not founded upon God's five fundamental principles of scriptural romance (piety, patriarchy, purity, preparedness and patience) will often collapse in divorce when the relational storms come - and they always do!

But like the betrothal approach to marriage, the wise man built his house to last a lifetime. He knew that it must weather intense storms. So when the wind and rain "burst against that house, it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock" (v. 25). Two builders: foolish and wise; two foundations: sand and rock; two outcomes: destruction and stability. Christ's analogy applies to marriage just as much as to houses.

Let's compare these two building approaches more closely. Each building system involves four relational steps toward marriage. The worldly way of relationship building includes friendship, dating, engagement and the wedding. We're only too familiar with this. The biblical method likewise begins with friendship, but then moves through courtship and betrothal to finally arrive at the wedding. Though they may look alike on the surface, these two practices of relationship building are really very dissimilar at every point and result in radically different outcomes.

WORLDLY RELATIONSHIPS vs. BIBLICAL RELATIONSHIPS

	Worldly Relationships	Biblical Relationships
Friendship	Peer-oriented	Family-oriented
Dating	For pleasure	Explore for marriage
Engagement	A breakable proposal	A binding promise
Wedding	Til divorce/remarry	Til death do us part

Notice, for example, that the world's view of youth friendships is peer-oriented whereas the Bible's view is family-oriented, providing oversight and protection by parents. While the world's hormone-driven youth are dating for the purpose of personal pleasure, biblical families are involved in courtship for the purpose of investigating a potential spouse. The world's concept of engagement is a breakable proposal, but biblical betrothal is a binding promise to marry.

At every point God's design for a male/female relationship is more serious and more guarded because God knows how vulnerable the human heart is. He knows that if young people pursue a relationship for self-centered pleasure and without the safeguarding of parents, they will carry into marriage a heart wounded by emotional scars and a conscience defiled by moral impurity. The conclusion, then, of the worldly approach is a wedding that will often lead to divorce, because the marriage is so troubled by past emotional bonds, unrealistic expectations and an appetite for variety and change. On the other hand, the biblical path to matrimony produces a steady and unshakeable union, "til death do us part."

WHETHER TO MARRY

Surely the preliminary step in addressing the question of HOW to marry is first to determine WHETHER to marry. Should I or shouldn't I? How can I know for sure? The popular feeling-oriented, "mystical" view of God's will urges us to interpret our outward circumstances and inward impressions. But God's Word urges us to "examine the Scriptures," our all-sufficient guide for "everything pertaining to life and godliness" (Acts 17:11; 2 Pet. 1:3-4). So, what saith the Scriptures?

Christ's only recorded comment on singleness is found in the context of His teaching on divorce in Matthew 19:8-12. In their stunned reply to Jesus' very strict view on divorce and remarriage, His disciples suggested that it would actually be better just to remain single. After all, they reasoned, a man may unwittingly marry a contentious woman who could make life miserable for him (Prov. 21:9). But there was something shortsighted about the disciples'

viewpoint. So beginning with the word “but” in verse 11, Jesus explains and then illustrates how a believer can have the strength not to remarry if he finds himself unbiblically divorced. In short, Jesus taught in this passage that singleness and marriage are both acceptable to God. Marriage is not commanded for anyone; neither is singleness, except for the one who is unbiblically divorced. Now, what Jesus declares here in capsule form is amplified by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 7.

Here is the central passage in the Bible on whether or not a Christian should marry. Paul’s remarks are made in response to a letter he had received from the believers in Corinth. And heading the list of questions in that letter was their inquiry regarding whether or not a Christian should marry. Paul’s answer to this question addresses not only the decision itself but also its consequences. Here’s what he says.

The decision itself - to remain single or to marry - is based on one’s wise application of God’s principles to his own situation. Paul’s opening statement, “It is good for a man not to touch a woman” (a figure of speech for marriage), reveals his personal preference for the single life. Yet Paul recognizes that those who are single are especially vulnerable to temptation (v. 2). Still, neither singleness nor marriage is commanded (v. 6); whether or not to marry is an area of moral freedom, a wisdom decision. On what basis, then, does Paul direct that this morally free decision be made? What are the criteria? In short, Paul goes on in 1 Corinthians 7 to explain three factors to weigh in making a wise decision about whether or not to marry.

THREE FACTORS

First, says Paul, evaluate your marital gift: “each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that” (v. 7). Paul means here that some are gifted by God to enjoy the opportunities of singleness while others are gifted to enjoy the companionship and responsibilities of marriage. How do you know that you have the gift to remain single? First, it seems, you will have little problem exercising moral self-control. If moral self-control is not readily present, then you probably don’t have the gift to remain single. Second, you will not have a yearning desire to share life closely with someone in the fulfillment of your life goals - someone to share your burdens as well as your joys. So evaluate your marital gift: Do you have a gift to be single or a gift to be married?

A second factor to weigh in making a wise decision about whether or not to marry is your current circumstances (v. 26-35). The Corinthian Christians were likely passing through a particularly difficult circumstance, perhaps some persecution or hard times. In a situation like that, Paul recommends the single life in order to avoid needless troubles, to make better use of limited time, to be free from concern for a spouse and to be able to give undistracted attention to the things of the Lord. Other Scriptures may give additional circumstances that would make it wise to postpone marriage, such as the need to fight in a war (Deut. 20:7) or the need to complete one’s occupational

and financial preparation before marriage (Prov. 24:27).

A third factor to weigh in making a wise decision on whether or not to marry is your life goal. Even if you can be personally satisfied without a wife, your specific life goal may require a “suitable helper” for dominion or for ministry (Gen. 2:18). In 1 Corinthians 7 we see how marriage provides excellent opportunities for ministry to one’s spouse and children (cf. v. 14). But beyond ministry to the family, a man’s life goal may best be achieved if he has a wife to aid him in that life goal. So even though Paul might have had a strong preference for his own state of singleness, each man has to choose what is best for himself.

Although we are morally free to choose singleness or marriage based on a wise evaluation of one’s marital gift, current circumstances and life goal, once we have done so, we come under the biblical regulations which govern each of these two marital options. That is, we incur certain obligations that go with the territory. For example, 1 Corinthians 7:2 makes it clear that the sole regulation for singleness is to remain morally pure (cf. also vv. 8-9). If you think self-control is going to be a serious problem, then you better not choose singleness.

But the moral regulations governing marriage are many, and regulate our selection for marriage, our selflessness in marriage and our potential separation after marriage. First, of course, is the regulation that a Christian may select only another Christian to marry: “she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord” (v. 39). Second, Scripture enjoins the believers’ responsibility of selflessness once the marriage is in force. For example, Paul promptly informs husbands and wives in 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 of their conjugal duties toward each other. Other marital duties are listed in Ephesians 5, such as the husband’s duty to love his wife as sacrificially as Christ loved the church, and the wife’s duty to respectfully submit to her husband’s leadership. Actually the first marital duties were assigned in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 1-2 where the husband and wife were commanded to be partners in dominion (with the husband leading and the wife his helper), as well as partners in fruitfulness, the bearing and rearing of a godly seed. A third area of regulation for marriage pertains to any unbiblical divorce that occurs after a marriage bond is formed: “let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband” (v. 11).

WHOM TO MARRY

The moral regulation just mentioned, to marry “only in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39), raises a few puzzling questions that cannot be ignored. For example, does this mean that, as long as my spouse is a Christian, God doesn’t care whom I marry? Should I myself care about whom I marry, or just pick a name out of the proverbial hat (only Christian names, of course)? What about the “right man-right woman” doctrine?

Some Bible teachers have used the example of Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:21-25)

to suggest that, for each person with the gift to marry, God has specially “fashioned” a spouse who is ideally suited to be his or her mate. And that God will, in His perfect timing, bring these two partners together for the purpose of marriage. This is commonly called the “right man-right woman” doctrine. Up to this point in the argument, it is an accurate description of God’s sovereign guidance. But according to this teaching, it is essential to go one step further by deciphering circumstances, blessings, inner impressions and personal desires in order to discern WHO is the Mr. Right or Miss Right that I am sovereignly intended to marry.

Yet, do we see anything in this passage about Adam or Eve examining their circumstances, blessings, inner impressions or personal desires in the selection of one another for marriage? In reality, what we encounter in this passage is an example of God’s non-normative, supernatural guidance whereby Adam and Eve were miraculously brought together as husband and wife. No promise is given in this passage that God will ever repeat this extraordinary event for the rest of the human race. Yes, there are universal principles behind God’s activities with Adam and Eve; but none of these principles involve probing our outward circumstances or inner impressions. Instead, they are the five fundamental principles of piety, patriarchy, purity, preparedness and patience which Adam and Eve obeyed under the loving hand of a sovereign God. Adam and Eve both submitted to the patriarchal leadership of their father (God) and maintained purity and piety; as verse 25 explains, they were “not ashamed.” Furthermore, Adam was fully prepared vocationally as the cultivator of the garden and overseer of the animals. And though Adam took notice that among the animals “there was not found a helper suitable for him,” there is no evidence whatever that he became impatient. So we find no confirmation in the account of Adam and Eve that circumstances, blessings, inner impressions and personal desires are God’s indicators for whom to marry.

A second passage frequently cited in support of the “right man-right woman” doctrine is Genesis 24, the story of Isaac and Rebekah. You remember, of course, how Abraham, now about 140 years old, took the responsibility of sending his trusted servant, Eliezer, to the city of Nahor in Mesopotamia to seek a wife for his son Isaac from among Abraham’s relatives. Upon arrival at his destination, the servant stopped by a well and made his request of God for a miraculous sign (vv. 12-14). Well, before he could even finish praying, Rebekah came to the well and fulfilled this sign completely. The servant then visited her family, Rebekah agreed to become Isaac’s wife, and the servant was able to take her back to Canaan - mission accomplished!

Does this passage teach that Christians are to seek detailed guidance beyond the moral will of God? Is this the way we are to identify the specific person we’re to supposed to marry? No, as we mentioned in our last article, the experience of Abraham’s servant is an example of God’s special, supernatural guidance utilizing angelic assistance: “God will send His angel before you”(v. 7). This was not even the norm for believers in Bible times! Nevertheless, just as with Adam and Eve there are universal principles behind God’s activity

with Isaac and Rebekah. Here again we notice the five fundamental principles of scriptural romance: piety, patriarchy, purity, preparedness and patience – which each party obeyed under the loving hand of a sovereign God. The fathers took full responsibility, the spouses remained 100 percent pure, the focus was on character rather than beauty, both were spiritually and vocationally ready for marriage, and they were patiently serving God as they trusted Him to work through their parents.

ONLY IN THE LORD

Well, if the accounts of Adam and Eve and Isaac and Rebekah aren't normative for whom to marry, then where do we discover this vital information? As mentioned above, there is one and only one command in Scripture related to this question, namely, that a believer may marry **ONLY** another believer. In 1 Corinthians 7, it is assumed throughout the entire chapter that Christians should marry only other Christians, especially in verses 12-16 which view "mixed" marriages as particularly troublesome. But the command is most clearly stated in verse 39 which we read earlier, "she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord." One needs to look only as far as verse 22 of the same chapter to find that the phrase "in the Lord" means to be a Christian: "he who was called in the Lord (i.e., called to be a Christian) while a slave, is the Lord's freedman." Paul stated his case even more directly in 1 Corinthians 9:5, "Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife..."

Now, the cross reference for 1 Corinthians 7 is 2 Corinthians 6:14-16, "Do not be bound together with unbelievers..." The phrase "be bound together" calls forth a mental image from Deuteronomy 22:10 of an ox and a donkey being harnessed together in a double yoke. That image became crystal clear to me when I was about thirteen years old. My father had taken an early retirement from military service and bought a 220 acre farm in middle Tennessee which came complete with an assortment of old-fashioned, horse drawn equipment that we used the first summer to get in our crops. I was taught by my grandfather how to use this equipment properly and then given the unenviable task of mowing forty acres of hay with a very mismatched team that also came with the farm – I think one was a horse and the other a mule. At any rate, they certainly didn't pull well together; each wanted to go in a different direction which made it nearly impossible to follow a straight path. That's precisely the picture given here in 2 Corinthians 6. No believer is to be "mismatched" with an unbeliever because each will be headed in a different direction, making it impossible to follow the straight and narrow path of Christ. The passage then continues with four vivid contrasts to illustrate this point. A believer bound together with an unbeliever is like righteousness with lawlessness, light with darkness, Christ with Satan, and the temple of God with idols. The point is that not only are the believers' values, standards, goals, motivations and methods for living incompatible with those of the unbeliever, they are *diametrically opposed* to each other! They are serving two different lords who are arch-enemies of one another, just as the Israelites were arch-enemies of the Canaanites whom they were not to marry lest they

compromise their holiness (Deut. 7:1-6).

The application of this passage to marriage is obvious. Indeed, marriage is even more than a double yoke, it is a joining together of two individuals into a “one flesh” relationship. It is the most intimate relationship which two human beings can enter into. So for a Christian to marry a non-Christian is to guarantee that marriage will never accomplish its God-ordained purposes unless the non-Christian becomes saved. Yes, there will still be a witness in that home. And the children will certainly be benefited by the one Christian parent (1 Cor. 7:14). But it will be a house of conflict just as surely as Satan is in conflict with Christ!

This fact has been repeated by so many Christian teachers and writers that nearly every Christian knows it to be true. Yet when push comes to shove, an astounding number of Christian young people disregard this prohibition and marry unbelievers. What might possibly lure our children to rationalize this clear teaching of Scripture or blatantly disobey the revealed will of God?

The answer is called “falling in love.” You see, Hollywood love is a counterfeit love. It is, in reality, one of the desires of the flesh called sensuality or lust. It pleases self rather than Christ, is desire-driven rather than self-disciplined, and makes decisions based on feelings rather than Scripture. Consequently, when Scripture conflicts with those feelings, Hollywood love will always win the heart of an immature or weak Christian. Why? Because “falling in love” (lust) is like falling into quicksand - it will pull its captive down with unrelenting passion. All parents have seen this counterfeit love; most have also felt it’s strength. Only by carefully following God’s five fundamental principles of scriptural romance - piety, patriarchy, purity, preparedness and patience - can we protect our children from its powerful grip.

UNDERSTANDING FRIENDSHIP

With the preliminary questions of WHETHER to marry and WHOM to marry now addressed, we are prepared to turn full-face to the exceedingly practical question of HOW to marry, the step-by-step process for bringing about a biblical marriage.

Since a God-honoring Christian walk is achieved by applying biblical principles to the issues of life, let’s inquire how God’s five fundamental principles of scriptural romance - piety, patriarchy, purity, preparedness and patience - should be exercised during each of the four relational stages leading to marriage? This application process involves asking the Who, What, When, Where, Why and How questions about each of the five principles as they apply to the four relational periods, beginning with friendship. Subsequent articles will evaluate biblical courtship, betrothal and the wedding.

Friendship may be defined as “a cordial relationship of mutual esteem.” To understand it’s place in marriage preparation, we need to see it in relation to

the succeeding three stages. It is interesting that there are four different words for love in the Greek language of the New Testament, and each one parallels one of the four relational periods leading to marriage. For example, the Greek *philia*, meaning “brotherly kindness,” corresponds to the friendship stage. Courtship, which is the process of investigating a person with marriage in mind, may be represented by the Greek *storge*, meaning “natural attraction.” Betrothal, defined as a binding commitment to marry, corresponds to the Greek *agape*, God’s word for “selfless devotion.” Finally, the wedding, a ceremony joining a man and woman in marriage, accords with the Greek *eros*, the term of “physical affection.” Friendship, courtship, betrothal and wedding advance a young man and woman through the four sequential stages of love to a gratifying and godly marriage.

FOUR STAGES OF MARRIAGE PREPARATION

1. Friendship - “*philia*” = brotherly kindness
2. Courtship - “*storge*” = natural attraction
3. Betrothal - “*agape*” = selfless devotion
4. Wedding - “*eros*” = physical affection

As we unfold the step-by-step process for constructing a biblical marriage, we cannot miss the underlying truth of Christ’s betrothal to the church as our pattern for scriptural romance (2 Cor. 11:2). If you recall, this was perhaps the most compelling reason for recognizing betrothal as transcultural (article #1). We ought therefore to ask, How was Christ in His youth preparing Himself for His future bride, the church? How did He manage His relationships with God and man. The best summary statement of this is found in Luke 2:51-52 which reports that “Jesus continued in subjection to [His parents]...and kept increasing in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man.” With Christ as our example, let’s now apply God’s five fundamental principles of scriptural romance to the friendship stage of marriage preparation (see article #1 for a fuller description of these five principles). And based on Jesus’ parable of the houses in Matthew 7, we want to build our marriage like we would build a mansion, even a castle!

APPLYING PIETY

Piety in our friendships refers to our general godliness and righteousness in attitudes and conduct founded upon our personal relationship of faith in Jesus Christ, the Rock and Cornerstone of our life. Therefore, piety begins in us with salvation, hopefully at a very young age. As children, we must then learn to desire Christ’s will more than self will. This greater and greater devotion to Christ occurs over time as we grow to understand and appreciate all that He is and all that He has done for us. As we enter the teen years, godly piety calls us to surrender to Jesus Christ this intriguing, new area of relationships with the opposite sex. If Jesus Christ is not Lord over our love life, then He cannot help us build a marriage relationship that will last a lifetime. One author has defined surrender as “an extreme act of trust in God.” But the more we

understand how much God wants to bless us, the easier it is to trust Him with our relationships. If we could somehow take a peek into our Heavenly Father's wise and loving heart, we would readily and completely put our future marriage into His hands.

Yet, like little toddlers, we are inclined to cling to our toys, unwilling to allow our tender-hearted Father to take them from us so that He can give us something much more wonderful and lasting. 1 Corinthians 13:11 reminds us that when we grow up, we must "put away childish things," including, says Paul, the childish thinking that our way is better than God's way. Surrendering our relationships to Christ during the friendship stage builds the concrete foundation that will unfailingly support the mansion of our dreams. But such a foundation must be poured early in life for it to "cure" for strength in the later years. How do you know if you have surrendered your relationships to Christ, young people? Answer these questions:

1. Am I willing, if God so chooses, to remain *single*, with Christ alone as my spouse?
2. Am I willing, if God so chooses, to be married and to allow Him to do the *matchmaking*?
3. Am I willing, if God so chooses, to be married and to allow Him to determine the *timetable*?

Only when you can answer "yes" to each of these three questions, can you say that you have surrendered your relationships to Christ. Psalm 37:5 encourages our wholehearted commitment with these words: "Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He will DO IT." Commit yourself to God's five principles of scriptural romance - Dads, Moms, young people - and He...will...DO IT!

APPLYING PATRIARCHY

If surrender to Christ is the concrete foundation for your dream mansion, then a father's patriarchal oversight, protection and provision of a spouse might be symbolized by a mansion's sturdy exterior walls.

Young ladies, are you learning to trust your father to protect you physically, morally and emotionally and to provide a spouse for you with your final approval? This, surely, is one of the most difficult - yet most crucial - of God's principles for marriage preparation. How formidable it can be to entrust this very personal area of life to another human being, even to a loving father. Yet in Scripture we see example after example of godly young men and women trusting their father for oversight, protection and even the provision of a spouse. How did they do this? The key to their trust was in seeing their Heavenly Father working through their earthly father. They believed the principle behind Proverbs 18:22, that "he who finds a wife... obtains favor *from the Lord*." They had a deep and abiding confidence in the sovereignty of

God to lovingly and successfully use imperfect earthly fathers to accomplish His will, just as Bethuel told his daughter Rebekah in regard to Isaac, "This matter comes from the Lord...." So, young people, the secret to trusting your father is trusting your Heavenly Father to work His principles of scriptural romance through your earthly father.

Now, fathers, in no way does this leave you off the hook. God expects you to be faithful even more so than your children, since you are their example. So during this early "friendship" stage of preparation for marriage, are you physically, morally and emotionally protecting and providing for your children in such a way that you earn their trust? This is your primary patriarchal task during the friendship stage of relationships. This is the season when you lay the foundation for later years when your children's deepest trust in you will be essential. What can you do now to build your children's confidence?

You can demonstrate your faithfulness in this area by preparing your daughter to be a "suitable helper" (Gen. 2:18) in the areas of academics, fine arts, life skills and spiritual life, praying for her and with her about her future husband. Further, you must give her patriarchal oversight by never releasing her to an unprotected situation - physically, morally or emotionally (Ps. 36:1; Deut. 22:21). For your sons, you must likewise build trust by preparing them to be godly leaders, both vocationally and spiritually, counseling them against the vices of ungodly women, just as Solomon did in Proverbs chapters 2, 5, 6 and 7. If your children observe you faithfully being a patriarch in their early youth, then it will be only natural for them to trust you in their later youth. What will happen if you don't take time now to build your children's confidence? Of course, they will struggle in trusting you later, and you risk losing their heart as many careless or misguided parents have so painfully learned.

Mothers, during this "friendship" stage, think about practical ways that you can aid your husband in being a trustworthy protector and provider of the family? Consider how you can build up - rather than tear down - your children's trust in their father to provide an excellent spouse for them? Take to heart Solomon's wise counsel: "The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down with her own hands" (Prov. 14:1).

Thus far in building our dream mansion, we've poured the foundation of piety and built sturdy walls of patriarchal protection and provision. Next on our work schedule is something to secure our mansion from invasion - a moat filled with water and a drawbridge reserved only for your future spouse. The moat and drawbridge represent the principle of purity.

APPLYING PURITY

Purity means no physical affection or romantic emotions prior to God's approval in Scripture. As we have learned from the many Bible passages bearing on this subject, neither romantic *touching* nor romantic *emotions* are permitted during the friendship stage of relationships. Young men, "treat the younger women as sisters, in all purity," Paul exhorts in 1 Timothy 5:2. Even

limited romantic emotions are permitted ONLY after the betrothal covenant has been made. Otherwise, we are likely to fall into the sin of “adultery in the heart” that Jesus warns against in Matthew 5:28. For these reasons, relating during the “friendship” stage should be exercised primarily through family-centered gatherings rather than through one-on-one dating or through youth groups.

Paralleling his warning that “bad company corrupts good morals” (1 Cor. 15:33), Paul likewise exhorts in 2 Timothy 2:22: “Now flee from youthful lusts.” But, practically speaking, HOW are young people to flee from youthful lusts? Paul answers in the second half of the same verse: “...by pursuing righteousness, faith, love and peace WITH (or, in the company of) those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.” The Bible has many cautions about the dangers of youthful peers (cf. Prov. 29:25; Gen. 8:21; 2 Ki. 2:23, Hag. 2:13, etc.). We would be wisest, therefore, to have our children and youth pursue friendships primarily in the context of family-centered gatherings where dads and moms are always present to carry out their biblical role of guarding their children’s hearts.

An interesting verse in Proverbs 31 may actually have some application to this principle of purity during the friendship stage. Verse 11 begins, “The heart of her husband trusts in her...” Why does he trust in her? Verse 12 continues, “She does him good and not evil ALL the days of her life.” Wait a minute! ALL the days of her life? You mean she’s thinking about her husband even before she meets him? How can she “do him good” ALL the days of her life when she doesn’t even know who he is?

One way, of course, is by preserving herself for him both physically and emotionally. Assuming that God would have you married, you already know that somewhere out there He has specially created for you a young man or young woman who He is providentially preparing to be your perfect match. He’s preparing her to zig where you zag so that together you will make a perfect team for the three purposes of marriage: a *partnership* in dominion, a *propagation* of a godly offspring and a *portrait* of Christ’s relationship with His own bride, the church. From God’s timeless point of view, the two of you are practically married already.

So young men, don’t you want your bride to be “doing you good and not evil ALL the days of her life” by being morally faithful to you even now? Surely you don’t want some other fellow wrapping his snake-like arms around her shoulders, slithering up close with cologne dripping from his pores, and puckering up his unbridled lips – do you? That fellow would be kissing your wife-to-be, your one-and-only whom God created and prepared especially for you! And if you desire purity in your future wife, then how much more do you think she is desiring right now that same level of purity in you?

Young people, you should live by this purity test. Always imagine that your spouse-to-be is watching you. Then ask yourself, “If she could see me now, how would she feel? Would she be hurt, jealous, disappointed in me?” If so,

then something's not right in the way you are presently relating to the opposite sex. Now take that purity test one step further - imagine that your spouse-to-be can read your thoughts at all times. Will a pure young lady want to be spiritually one with a mind that has been exposed to R-rated movies? Most of us never consider that if our thought life were recorded for our future spouse to read, he or she would be horrified. But from God's timeless point of view, you have a love life with your spouse-to-be even before you ever meet her.

So you must choose now, during the friendship stage, to love her day in and day out, and to cherish and adore her by the way you are living your life today. This is how you can begin showing agape love for your future mate even before you meet, by making choices each day that honor and do what is best for him or her. This is how Christ sacrificially prepared Himself for His bride, the church, when He was growing up as a totally pure youth. And if you have failed already in keeping your self pure - physically, mentally or emotionally - it's not too late for you. Just follow Christ's command to the woman caught in adultery in John 8, "go and sin no more." If you are truly repentant, then you can start afresh today.

We now have a dream mansion with the foundation of piety, the protective walls of patriarchy and the surrounding moat of purity. If we stopped construction now, we'd have a fortress but not a home. To make our mansion comfortable, we must finish the inside. Let's let the kitchen and the chapel represent our need for vocational and spiritual preparation.

APPLYING PREPAREDNESS

"Preparedness" may be the best single word to describe our focus during the friendship stage of relationships. It is the lengthy time of becoming ready for marriage spiritually, vocationally and financially. Before he was married, Adam knew his vocation of horticulture, and he knew God's law spiritually. Likewise, every godly father in Bible times prepared his sons and daughters for marriage through adequate spiritual and vocational training so that they might avoid slavery and debt. This friendship stage was the time period in the teen years when a young man was saving his "bride price" of three years' wages lest he be considered unprepared to support a wife and family. Solomon explained it this way in Proverbs 24:27, "Prepare your work outside, and make it ready for yourself in the field (i.e., vocational preparation); afterwards, then, build your house" (the Hebrew word "house" here means household, that is, marriage and children - Prov. 14:1). Vocational preparation, young men, is not merely a "job" (which can easily be lost) but marketable skills which you must take time now to develop, before even thinking about marriage. And spiritually, it is the season for developing leadership and self-discipline. Leadership in worship, prayer, teaching and witnessing; and self-discipline in spending, eating, orderliness, working and studying.

A young woman must also be spiritually preparing during the friendship stage

by following the examples of Sarah, Mary and the Proverbs 31 woman. Vocationally she must develop her domestic skills as well as the talents God has given her for assisting in her future husband's life purpose. But how do we accomplish this, fathers, without instilling in a daughter an attitude of careerism? The answer is to have your daughter relate to her father in the same manner that God will have her relate to her future husband. For example, in developing our own daughters' musical talents, we have structured our family music business so that I, the father, remain fully responsible while delegating certain work to each of my daughters. Instead of "paying" them, I give them generous gifts each month according to their needs so that they will learn to be fully dependent upon their future husband rather than developing an independent spirit.

Let's conclude the building of our dream mansion by landscaping it with magnificent trees and shrubbery. Large plants take time to grow, so they represent the biblical principle of patience.

APPLYING PATIENCE

Patience is an attitude of "walking by faith, not by sight," trusting our sovereign God to accomplish His perfect plan in His perfect time. Few of us have any sort of understanding about what it means to wait with patience. We have all grown up on a fast-food, fast-fun, fast-technology world of microwaves and super computers. How long should we wait for God to bring our future spouse to us? Until I'm 20, or 25 - and what a horror of horrors if I'm not married until I'm 30! Surrender is hard enough, but then comes waiting, patiently trusting a sovereign God to accomplish His perfect plan in His perfect time through imperfect fathers.

But after we are already prepared both spiritually and vocationally, what do we DO while we are waiting on God? Well, what did Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses do while waiting on God? And what is the church to be doing while waiting for her groom, the Lord Jesus Christ, to begin His wedding march with the blast of a trumpet and the shout of His angels?

In Scripture, waiting is an active word describing energetic expectancy as you continue to serve God while eagerly looking forward to the unfolding of His wonderful plan for you. True waiting involves an active focus. You know what you are heading toward, so you don't let anything distract you. But you must stay focused and avoid the world's temptations by keeping your eyes on God's best.

Patience involves not only watching out for distractions but also praying: "Watch and pray," exhorted Christ in Matthew 26:41, "that you enter not into temptation. For the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." Pray for daily strength to be faithful, pray for your future spouse to be faithful, and pray that God will mold both you and your mate-to-be into one perfect match that will glorify Him. Psalm 40:1 encourages us, "I waited patiently and expectantly for the Lord, and He inclined to me and heard my cry."

The application of God's five fundamental principles of romance requires hard work. But you'll never regret the effort once you receive the reward it brings. Persevero, young men and ladies!

In our next article, Lord willing, we'll investigate the intriguing courtship stage in the step-by-step process that leads to a biblical marriage.

John Thompson is the director of Family Shepherd Ministries.
