

The Use and Misuse of the Bible's Teaching on Dating and Courtship

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I. Take dating seriously

“Lovesickness may seem a trifle compared with other maladies, but the one who is sick with love is sick indeed, and the Heavenly Father understands this.” - Elisabeth Elliot¹

A. The challenge

1. Unusual pressures
2. Inadequate support

B. **The argument:** The Bible answers modern dating dilemmas through relational wisdom.

C. **The task:** set a vision for Christian dating while exploring common themes in popular Christian dating advice and offer biblical correctives.

II. Be safe and take risks: the challenge of trust in God

A. Theme: Intentionality becomes impatience

1. Impatience toward process (1 Tim 5:2, Eph 5)²
2. Impatience toward self (Gen 1:28)

B. Corrective: Waiting and acting: the challenge of patience

1. Know your tendency toward over- or underconfidence
2. Move but do not rush

“Teach me to feel that Thou art always nigh; / Teach me the struggles of the soul to bear. / To check the rising doubt, the rebel sigh, / Teach me the patience of unanswered prayer.”³

¹ *Passion and Purity: Bring Your Love Life Under Jesus Christ's Control* (Baker: 1984). p. 70.

² Cf., The core concern for some is the danger of a sexual relationship escalating in the context of dating as an “artificial category of male-female relationship that is not governed by the standards that God has revealed in Scripture.” Gerald Hiestand and Jay Thomas. *Sex, Dating, and Relationships: A Fresh Approach* (Crossway, 2012), 47.

³ George Croly, “Spirit of God,” (1854).

3. Wait but do not prolong

III. Aim for ideal, live in the real: the challenge of faithfulness to God

A. Theme: Marriage as help becomes marriage as hope

1. A help/hope for loneliness (Gen 2:18)
2. A help/hope for lust (1 Cor 7:8-9)⁴

B. Corrective: Marriage and singleness as fallen goods received in faith

1. To be celebrated (Prov 18:22)
2. To be grieved (1 Cor 7:28b, 32-35)
3. To anticipate spiritual marriage and singleness (Rev 19:6-9, Matt 22:30)⁵

IV. Step into independence and dependence: the challenge of personhood under God (Gal 6:1-5)

A. Theme: People as resources become people as retreat

1. Retreating to advisors (Prov 11:14)
2. Retreating to their authority (Prov 6:20-21, and, e.g., Gen 21:21, I Sam 18:17)

B. Corrective: Agency in community

1. Growing through communal dynamics
 - a) Family changes are opportunities for spiritual change
 - b) Family is relativized in the new kingdom (Luke 14:26, Matt 12:48-50)

⁴ Scott Croft, "Should a Couple Marry Soon If One Burns with Passion Q&A" *Boundless*. 2014. <http://www.boundless.org/advice/2014/should-a-couple-marry-soon-if-one-burns-with-passion> Boundless is a ministry of Focus on the Family with many popular-level resources (podcast, blog, etc.) on singleness and dating.

⁵ "Idolatry happens anytime we take something God created more important than God himself....The institution of marriage was never meant to carry this kind of importance. In and of itself, marriage is a temporary good. In heaven, there will be no marriage (Matthew 22:29-33)." He continues, explaining the common narratives, 'Happiness is found in marriage,' 'I won't be satisfied until I find a good guy,' or 'If God loves me, he'll give me a husband.'" Deepak Reju, *She's Got the Wrong Guy: Why Smart Women Settle* (New Growth, 2017), p. 15.

2. Agency: Godly self-stewardship (Gal 6:1-5)

V. How to move forward: dating in 3 stages

A. Connection

1. How it works: informal conversation and (mostly) time together in groups
2. Pitfalls: Prolonging for fun (connecting with multiple people) or for fear of risk⁶
3. Opportunities: wisdom in being friends first

B. Discernment

1. How it works: the DTR
2. Pitfalls: skipping or getting stuck on evaluation
3. Opportunities: wisdom in really knowing the person

C. Commitment

1. How it works: pre-engagement and moving to marriage
2. Pitfalls: prematurely committing or prolonging engagement
3. Opportunities: wisdom in preparing yourself (pre-engagement counseling)

VI. Special concerns

A. High anxiety

⁶ “The book was so convincing in its arguments against casual dating (e.g., “Intimacy without commitment is defrauding”) that many young people who read it are now afraid to pursue relationships at all unless they know they want to marry the person, which leads to a kind of paralysis.” Ruth Graham, “Hello Goodbye: The author of a best-selling abstinence manifesto is reconsidering the lessons he taught to millions.” *Slate*. August 23, 2016. http://www.slate.com/articles/life/faithbased/2016/08/i_kissed_dating_goodbye_author_is_maybe_kind_of_sorry.html Also cf., Susan Olasky, “Christian boy meets Christian girl: Christians are not like the world when it comes to dating and courtship.” *World*. May 20, 2011. https://world.wng.org/2011/05/christian_boy_meets_christian_girl

B. Online dating

C. High risk situations and red flags⁷

VII. Conclusion: bearing a cross in community

Appendix - Scripture texts referenced

(NIV unless otherwise noted)

1 Timothy 5:1-2 Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, 2 older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.

Genesis 1:28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Genesis 2:18 The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” 19 Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. 20 So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. 21 So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. 22 Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

⁷ “Warning signs of potential abusers: 1) Are extremely possessive, jealous, 2) Display smothering, controlling behavior, 3) Have unpredictable, extreme mood changes, 4) Are unable or unwilling to acknowledge any personal fault or responsibility, 5) Are hypocritical, 6) Abuse alcohol, 7) Have unresolved family of origin trauma, 8) Isolate the victims from family and friends, 9) Insult and ridicules victims’ family and friends, 10) Prevent victims from leaving, 11) Employ a rigid model of gender roles, 12) Threaten to harm themselves, 13) Threaten to hurt victims or their families, 14) Insult and degrade victims in private, 15) Ignore or ridicule victims’ feelings and wishes, have a volatile history of broken romantic relationships and friendships, 16) Have a volatile history of broken romantic relationships and friendships, 17) Always posture themselves as victims, 18) Cause victims to fear ever confronting or even disagreeing with them, 19) Blame the victims for their feelings, 20) Have intense, quick development of romantic relationships, 21) Place impossible demands on family members.” Stephen R. Tracy, *Mending the Soul: Understanding and Healing Abuse* (Zondervan, 2005), 213-216.

1 Corinthians 7:8-9 To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Proverbs 18:22 He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the Lord.

1 Cor 7:28b, 32-35 Those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this. . . . I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

Rev 19:6-8a Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. 7 Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. 8 Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear."

Matthew 22:30 At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.

Proverbs 11:14 Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety (ESV)

Proverbs 6:20-21 My son, keep your father's command and do not forsake your mother's teaching. Bind them always on your heart; fasten them around your neck.

Genesis 21:21 While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.

1 Samuel 18:17 Saul said to David, "Here is my older daughter Merab. I will give her to you in marriage; only serve me bravely and fight the battles of the Lord." For Saul said to himself, "I will not raise a hand against him. Let the Philistines do that!"

Luke 14:26 If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.

Matthew 12:48-50 He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” 49 Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. 50 For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

Galatians 6:1-5 Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, for each one should carry their own load.