

## CHAPTER 5. THE ARENA OF LOVE AND DATING

Before I bring you up-to-date with how I'm doing quite a few years after my break-up with Barbara, let me say a few things about love and dating. The following will be a general survey only but hopefully still helpful.

### *Love*

Love is a feeling. Or should I say, some people describe love this way. Love certainly involves feelings, but it involves more. If we define love only as a feeling, then we may never "love" or feel "loved" quite the way we think we should.

Love need not exclude those feelings of utter silliness and sappiness, but it certainly can't be only those things. Feelings are bound to come and go, so marriage must be built on something else.

A biblical understanding will help us think about love and marriage. Genesis 24:67 gives the account of Isaac taking Rebekah as his wife, probably just after they met. The text tells us that Isaac loved her. Genesis 29:18 also says that Jacob loved Rachel, although he had just met her. This text shows that love is a commitment and that it is possible to love someone without knowing him or her very well (e.g., in the cases of arranged marriages).

Let's look at a few New Testament passages on love. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength . . . and love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31). The Bible also says, "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves" (Romans 12:9-10).

The New Testament says plenty about love: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

The Apostle Paul also said, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4).

What is love, then? While there are different types of love discussed in the Bible, essentially love is a commitment to another's well-being over that of our own selves. This describes not just marital love, but Christian love in general. Feelings alone didn't send Christ to the cross; rather it was his righteous character and genuine concern for God's glory; it was his hatred of our sin and his commitment to our well-being that put him there. We want to model this kind of love, not only in marriage, but in all of our Christian lives.

### *Guarding our Hearts*

Proverbs 4:23 says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." Guarding our hearts remains important especially in relationships with the opposite sex (see Heather Paulsen's *Emotional Purity: An Affair of the Heart* and Elisabeth Elliott's *Passion and Purity*).

One of the ways we can guard our heart is to make sure we don't become too exclusive too fast with our date. If possible, we're probably going to be better off spending time with that person in the context of people we already know. It's not always possible, but can be arranged on occasion.

Another way we can guard our heart is to move slowly with the physical aspects. American culture considers kissing, hugging, and hand-holding innocent treats that couples *should* give each other. But there's good reason to move slowly in these areas. The more couples delve into these things early on, the greater chance of emotional confusion. I know of a couple who didn't kiss until their wedding. That probably sounds ridiculous to many, but think of how special their wedding kiss was. And now, they can kiss all they want. Admittedly, there's no biblical rule that says we can't kiss our date. The Bible, however, never says we should either (except maybe those verses on holy kisses!). Our culture takes these physical intimacies too lightly, and while we don't need to become legalistic, we do need to re-examine what role these things should play in our dating life.

Another way we can protect our heart is to guard what emotions and experiences we tell our date. Our culture loves doing "emotional strip teases," as one author called it. Many are tempted to share every detail from their past, both positive and negative. Just as some physical things shouldn't be shared out of wedlock, so it might be with some emotional things, either good or bad. Should our dates know that we struggle with masturbation or that we were sexually active as a teenager? There's more room for caution than what many single adults feel they should share with each other before marriage. While the Bible doesn't tell us exactly how to respond in this situation, it does tell us to speak only that which gives grace to the hearer (Ephesians 4:29). So keep that in mind the next time you're on a date and wanting to recount every little event of your life.

### *Modern Approaches to Dating*

Hank was a seminary student and the guest speaker at a California youth retreat. While there, he noticed Hannah, an adult youth leader attending the retreat. She was attractive, single, and, as best he could tell, godly. All of these factors convinced him that he should pursue her. So he asked her to the beach.

She said yes, but not because she was interested in him. She just wanted to go to the beach. While on that "date" at the beach, he did the unthinkable. He asked her to marry him.

We should keep in mind, he'd only known her a few days, and even at that, he did not know her well. Nor did he even live in the same state.

She was shocked. But wanting to take his proposal seriously, she prayed about it for a month, and then said yes. The wedding took place two months later.

My friend Hank has been married many years now, and he and his wife Hannah have two daughters and a son. Some would say they were crazy to marry without really knowing each other. Others would say that it was of God.

I know couples that have dated for several years before getting married. But I've also met a few people, like Hank and Hannah, who married without knowing each other very well. So which is the best approach, short- or long-term dating?

I'm defining dating as the event or time when two people of the opposite sex are romantically interested in each other and spending time together for the purpose of discovering their compatibility for marriage. I'm defining long-term dating as dating that lasts over a year, and short-term dating as dating that lasts no longer than nine to twelve months. And by dating, I don't mean dating around. I'm talking about romantic interactions moving toward marriage, even if those interactions are in a group setting. With good reason, there are some Christians who object to our modern day approach to dating, the pairing-off method. There are many unhealthy aspects to pairing-off dating. But since pairing-off dating remains the way that most Americans find their mates, let's look at some aspects of short- and long-term dating.

#### Advantages to Long-Term Dating

The long-term approach has the main advantage of giving dating partners a chance to get to know each other and test compatibility. It gives them a chance to see if their dating partners are the kind of people that they want to spend the rest of their lives with.

#### Disadvantages to Long-Term Dating

Although the couple has more time to work through their feelings, this extra time may only confuse their emotions. More time doesn't guarantee that the best decision will be made.

Another major disadvantage to the longer dating process is that it could provide more tempting sexual situations for the couple. This doesn't mean that short-term daters never have this problem, but when two people who care for each other spend a lot of time together, there's bound to be some time when they are tempted to get more physically and emotionally involved.

#### Advantages to Short-Term Dating

There are at least two advantages to the short-term approach. First, it quickly calls the couple to commitment. There's no time for games and fickleness. Second, it allows the couple to quickly be united sexually and emotionally in marriage. Although not every couple thinks about sex as often as others do, sex is a significant issue for many couples.

#### Disadvantages to Short-Term Dating

However, a couple's decision to marry could be based on hormonal impulse rather than because the two really want to spend the rest of their lives with each other. Although this could be true of the long-term view, the short-term approach more easily lends itself to haste.

Not that there is anything wrong with marrying to satisfy sexual urges (1 Corinthians 7:2, 9), but if one is only wanting to sleep with this other person, he should take into account that most of their married lives will be spent outside of the bed.

### *The Bible and Dating*

The Bible doesn't tell us anything about dating per se. The Bible mentions the concept of betrothal, but that's not like our system of dating or our idea of engagement. If dating took place in biblical times, it wasn't recorded.

The marriages that Scripture tells us about were arranged by someone other than those getting married (Genesis 24, 29-30, Exodus 2:21, Judges 14:1-10). In the cases where the male made a request to marry a certain woman, it was still someone else, like his parents or a parent's servant who arranged the marriage. If there were cases in Scripture where a man picked a wife without input from his or her own family, then we don't have details about it. Moses' Cushite wife and Hosea's adulterous wife could have been such cases, but we don't have enough information to know (Numbers 12:1, Hosea 1:2-3). We know only that they took wives. And Hosea followed the direct command of God by marrying a prostitute (Hosea 1:2), but this sort of choice isn't something that most godly pastors would recommend.

Since the biblical record has such a radically different cultural situation, how does it help us think about dating today in our Western world? The Bible seems to speak to us via at least two principles--love and community.

#### The Believing Community

Since I've discussed love already, let's move to the biblical concept of community. In the Bible, the community of believers (family and friends) passively or actively gave their approval of marriages. The most famous case would probably be in Genesis 24 when Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac. Not just any bride would do; she needed to be from Abraham's own people, from his native land. As far as we know, Abraham never asked Isaac what he wanted. He just sent his servant and gave him permission to use his own discretion in picking a worthy wife. God, of course, led in the whole process, but it's still different from what we're used to.

As we move on, we come across Jacob. He picked Rachel, but he did so only with the approval of her father Laban (Genesis 29-30). He actually had to accept an extra wife whom he didn't want.

In Exodus 2, Jethro gave his daughter Zipporah to be Moses' wife (v. 22). And in Samson's case (Judges 14), he saw a pretty woman and asked his parents if he could marry her. Samson's parents tried to persuade him to marry someone from his own people, but he rejected their advice. Still, his parents gave their approval, although she wasn't their first choice for a daughter-in-law.

In the case of Ruth and Boaz, we also see the influence of community. They were both acting on the counsel of others (Ruth 3:1-5, 4:11).

Community approval seems to be one of the most applicable principles that we can draw from Scripture regarding romantic relationships. The believing community's blessing on a couple can still play an important role today in finding a good mate.

The church will hopefully be more objective than the couple. Christians need to avoid the maverick mentality--a couple acting with no regard to anyone else's counsel. Even Hank, who proposed on the first date, had approval from his and her family before marriage.

Of course, the believing community's approval or disapproval has problems, too. Just because a group claims to be Christian doesn't make them Christian or wise. There

are those who claim to be Christian and give their approval to same-sex marriages, which certainly doesn't make homosexual relationships legitimate.

Yet, at the risk of being too general, I want to stress a point here. One's family, church, and Christian friends play an important role in the decision-making process of dating and marriage. This doesn't mean that they should cast a vote. But their opinions matter.

If the parents highly object to a marriage, even if the parents aren't Christians, then their opinions should be seriously considered. If Christian friends and the church body as a whole don't approve of someone, then it may be foolish to go against their better judgment. True, sometimes these groups are carnal and unwise, and such must be factored in, but one must be careful not to write off what so many people are saying regarding such an important issue. Obviously, the couple will make the final decision. They shouldn't be bullied into, or out of, marriage. But too often believers overlook the importance of the family of faith in helping them choose a mate.

### *A Few Things to Keep in Mind*

Although we've yet to uncover pre-packed answers to all the queries couples ask, there are some things to consider.

- Do you and your family and friends agree that your dating partner is socially mature enough for marriage, growing in his or her walk with the Lord, and a person of integrity?
- Based on what Scripture says, will your potential mate as he or she is now, make a godly spouse?
- Would such a union be right before the Lord and his people?
- Is your potential mate a hard worker, grateful, and supportive?
- Are you committed to staying married until death? Do you really want to live with this person for 50 years?
- If the woman gets pregnant on the wedding night, are you two ready to be parents?

With all of these questions answered in the affirmative, marriage still involves risk. Marriage requires faith.

Neither the short nor the long-term approach sparkles with perfection. But the good thing is, we don't have to make those decisions by ourselves. Biblical counseling can be of great value for the questions couples have. Yes, we will have to make the final decision to marry this person or not. But we can glean wisdom from God's word and his people.

The duration of the dating period depends upon each couple's situation. There is no hard and fast rule that I can find. But whichever path a couple takes, they should be walking by faith, acting as best they can in the spirit of love toward each other, and listening closely to a Christ-centered Bible-believing church.

There are so many issues that don't have clear answers. These situations call us out of ourselves and into the hands of God. In short, they call us to relinquish our own sinful desire to control matters and to trust God with them. Our own unknowing in the matter of when and whom to marry are opportunities to kneel humbly before the cross of a holy God and confess our need for his mercy and wisdom.

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