

“The Second Most Important Decision of Your Life”

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

In response to our series, *The Second Most Important Decision of Your Life*, the practical outworking of a number of our principles have prompted certain questions that this article intends to answer that have been on your mind. This is my candid though not exhaustive attempt to reply.

1. Is it okay for a Christian to date? *I wish there was another word, a better word than “dating” to describe it, because of how the world does it. As Christians, our values, motives, and goals are totally different. Courtship is not a good word either, because such a thing didn’t exist in Biblical times. And though it values certain ideals that are counter-cultural, it isn’t distinctly Biblical. Throughout our series we have said that there is no one Biblical model! Rather, the Bible gives us guiding principles to lead us into wise decision making. Whatever you want to call it, basically we are talking about spending time with a person of the opposite sex in order to decide whether to pursue marriage.*
2. Is it wrong to want someone with more than a good personality? Can he or she be attractive? *If I read Song of Solomon correctly, both of them are enthralled with one another, not only spiritually, but also physically. To each of them, the other is perfectly without blemish (4:7), though we learn from chapter 1 that the woman has obvious physical inadequacies (1:5-6). Your partner might not be the most attractive person on the planet, but he or she needs to be the most captivating person to you. I believe that God gives each couple the affections and attractions they need to stay fully devoted to one another exclusively (Proverbs 5:18-19)! If you struggle with this in your relationship, you should seek Biblical help and remember one word, “Mirror!” Relationships are built on more than looks (Proverbs 31:30), but delight in and appreciation for looks is Biblical! Remember however, the folly of Samson who criterion was this: “Get her for me, for she looks good to me” (Judges 14:3).*
3. How old do I have to be before I can start dating? *The issue isn’t age but maturity! Remember that in Bible times, people were married as soon as they were child-bearing age. But it must also be understood that young adults in that day seemed to have such a deeper maturity than teens in our day. I mean, look at Mary the mother of Jesus – she was reportedly in her teen years when she bore the sinless Son of God and praised God in her marvelous Magnificat in Luke 1:46-55. Many teens hardly understand one nuance of her Scripture soaked praise. Remember Daniel? When he was*

carted off to Babylon, he and his friends were early teens. They stood up against the brainwashing attempts of the royal educators in Babylon, and the pressure to worship the golden image of Nebuchadnezzar. Trying to get students off of video games seems the challenge of this age! Age isn't the issue – maturity is! They might be 55 and not mature enough to be married. It should also be noted that in the U.S. the legal age for marriage is 18, unless consent is given by parents to marry at 16, for which Romans 13:1-7 becomes precedent.

- 4. Is child or teen dating acceptable? Based on the above answer, I would say no because they are not in a position to test the waters for marriage. Some parents think it's cute for their second grader to have a girlfriend and the child is encouraged to think in those terms. The only problem is the child does not have the maturity to handle such exclusive relational intimacy, nor to comprehend and restrain the emotions that come with dating. Added to that, when the teen becomes aware of other impulses in his or her body after puberty, he or she will naturally desire to gratify them the way a mature married couple does. But since he does not have the ability to fulfill (let alone understand) the passions that are aroused, he or she will likely burn with passion and give into immorality. Perhaps the teen dating phenomenon explains the teen premarital sex and date rape statistics. It would be better, and certainly more Biblical to encourage students to master their personal passions with self-control and relate to members of the opposite sex in all purity (1 Timothy 5:1-2) in the context of the local church as brothers and sisters in Christ. From that, they should learn everything they need to know about serving someone of the opposite sex in a righteous way.*
- 5. Can I look for someone to date online? This is a tougher one. The Bible doesn't affirm or condemn specific dating practices, except those which compromise Biblical principles and personal purity, like "hooking up" does. Or to say it another way, the Bible doesn't deal with processes and methods, but with guidelines for character. Therefore, online dating is not condemned or commended by Scripture. In our technological age, it is perhaps the equivalent to blind dates of the past, where singles who don't know one another are matched by well meaning mutual friends. In this case however, the mutual friend is someone like e-harmony.com.*

I have to be honest with Scripture though and say that if Ruth could sneak into Boaz' tent in the middle of the night, sleep at his feet, and when he wakes up in the morning, offer him her hand in marriage, I certainly could not reproach online dating. I would however offer two concerns to online dating: 1) the criteria that is used to match soul-mates is not Biblical and

*therefore devalues what Scripture deems most important in this decision; 2) it begins with a questionable goal and motivation – to get married. Now, while the Bible would allow and encourage creative means of finding a mate, the goal of being married should not ever replace the principle of contentment and trust in God’s sovereignty. Let me explain. In the typical online scenario, the applicant comes to the keyboard with a plan to market himself or herself and to go shopping. From there, you match profiles **AND PICTURES** before you decide to take the next step and meet. It seems like the emphasis is wrong from the beginning.*

*Of course, many singles use the excuse that they don’t really have time to spend on this area of their life and with an online service to expedite the process, they can give attention to other more important things – as if this wasn’t the **SECOND MOST IMPORTANT DECISION OF YOUR LIFE!!!** Listen, you don’t have time not to take this decision seriously. But then again, in a low commitment world, if you don’t like what you get, there is no commitment – it is risk free.*

Now I feel the pain of my single friends on this one, and remember, I used to shepherd a singles ministry in California. Marriage is a noble thing to desire; yea rather it is a God-centered desire! But do not let this one fact escape your notice – if God is sovereign, is able to create the world out of nothing, can sustain the entire universe and everything in it by the word of His power, if He never has a lapse in judgment, if He has not only decreed the end from the beginning but also the means to get history there, if He is intimately acquainted with all our ways, and has ordained all of our days before there was one of them, then is it not also true that we will be married exactly when He intends – not a moment sooner or later. We will not miss God’s best for us! He loves us! He has nothing but His glory and our good on His mind! If He is this kind of God, can’t we trust Him to provide us a mate in His timing?

6. *Would it be acceptable for me to start attending other churches with more potential singles to marry? This option has much more potential than the online question. Now we would affirm that you would hopefully find a future mate in church, because that means he or she is likely a Christian, values the same spiritual truths, regularly places themselves under sound Biblical preaching (we assume), serves Christ and the body in the context of ministry, and has a network of friends and leaders who provide counsel and accountability among other things. But this question, like the previous, has similar trappings. The goals and motivations of leaving a church you are committed to, in order to seek a spouse, are potentially flawed. First, it means that will have to disengage from ministry where you serve (assuming*

you are committed to your local church), leaving your Biblical priority to others, also demoting that priority in your own life. Second, it pulls you out of the shepherding and care of your local church and their ability to have consistent input in your life and especially in this decision. Third, it distracts you from why you are even at church. It puts your focus from the time you walk into the foyer on the singles rather than on Christ, where it belongs. By itself it is an illegitimate reason for going to church. The New Testament priority in church is worshipping Christ (Ephesians 3:21), encouraging one another in love and good deeds through Biblical ministry (Ephesians 4:12-16; Hebrews 10:24-25), and strategizing ways to impact the kingdom of God through the evangelization of the lost (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8). Having pastored singles, I know the joy of performing weddings for people in our ministry, but I also know that many godly singles, especially women want to come to church and be involved in ministry where they can feel secure and vulnerable with God and other Christians whose motives are above reproach. The world is a meat-market – not the church. All in all, the emphasis is wrong. However, if a single can account for all of these potential trappings and can still maintain close accountability with his or her local church, he may do this without sinning.

7. *How do I know when I am in love? This question begins with an assumption that may or may not be Biblical. Being in love, as often it is described, is usually passive, meaning someone fell in love, like someone falls in a hole. It just happened. Yet, this is not how love is described in the Bible. Love is the sacrificial commitment of unswerving devotion to sacrifice for the best interests of another, even at the greatest cost of self. Biblical love is active – it is a choice. It is a commitment that doesn't depend on the object loved but on the lover. You are in love when you choose to love, but that requires you to decide in advance whether the person you will love is the right person for you, based on the criteria in our series. You are in love when your name can be inserted into 1 Corinthians 13 in the place of the word "love."*
8. *Does my sinful past hinder me from having a healthy marriage? Potentially your past sin can introduce distortions into an otherwise pure relationship and patterns of sin and selfishness that have carried over. To be sure, the Bible is clear that sin has consequences (Galatians 6:7-9), especially depending on the nature and severity of the sin. But the joy of being in Christ is that His transforming grace is able to forgive our sin and restore patterns of righteousness that replace the sin of the past. If one has sinned where the other has not, the other should work hard to patiently love the partner, and not harbor resentment, realizing that were it not for the grace of God, he or she would be there in a second. If both partners have sinned,*

even in their own premarital relationship, they should work hard to guard their relationship now, trusting that God was sovereign even over the past and intends for us to carry those lessons into the present, in order to be holy (cf. Romans 8:28-29). Forgiveness and repentance must be expressed and new pledges of trust, selflessness, and loyalty must be given.

9. How do you initiate a relationship? *If you are interested in dating someone that you believe has real potential to enter into that period of testing with you, then either the man or the woman may initiate. Nothing in the Bible commands the man to initiate (cf. the example of Ruth), though by divine design, God has made him the leader, and leaders initiate. Sometimes in Scripture, the parents initiated and set the whole thing up! There is no Biblical mandate either way. In this case, if a man or a woman has a clear enough interest in the other, it is more a matter of clear communication and the preferences of the other. For example, nothing in Scripture commands the man to ask the dad before they start spending time together, though it would be wise, since the role of the parents in this decision is highly regarded in Scripture. If however, the girl prefers that the guy ask the dad first, then so be it. The only priority is that they are clear with one another about their desires and intentions.*
10. How do you know if it is time to break up from a relationship? *It is time to break off a relationship if one of the Biblical principles of Scripture is violated and the relationship is outside the will of God, or if it is clear from the period of testing that you or your partner do not meet the Biblical criteria. Sometimes this break-up is temporary, so that either partner can refocus himself or herself on Christ and growth in a particular area, and other times it is permanent, because the couple knows that being together is not best, and as far as they can tell, it never will be.*
11. What is an acceptable age gap between two people who want to date? *The Bible offers no data on this subject. Abraham and Sarah seemed about 10 years apart, but there is no precedent. Obviously people at the same age and station in life have more potential for a better relationship because they can identify with one another better. Added to that, practically speaking, even the unbelieving culture thinks it's odd if a man is 75 marries a 21 year old woman. Each case is different and deserves its own unique evaluation.*
12. Should you date in groups or can you go out with someone one on one? *The Bible says nothing on this and therefore we must maintain a great deal of openness while not throwing caution to the wind. Courtship gurus make a big deal over this, that the couple should be seen in public for a while,*

under the careful protection and watch of other mature believers – their wisdom is well timed. This provides them the opportunity to develop closeness more slowly and with the observation of others, as well as preventing the subtle traps that come with closeness that is hasty, including impurity. However, group dating is by no means mandatory. Again, depending on the maturity of the couple, two believers can spend alone time together and develop a righteous friendship, while they test the waters for marriage. In fact, a healthy relationship will likely have a combination of both!

13. What do you do if someone is clearly interested in you, but you are not? *TELL THEM, in love, quickly and gently!*

14. Is interracial marriage wrong? *No. The only interracial relationships that are forbidden in Scripture are between a believer and a non-believer (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1). Skin color, eye shape, cultural background, and the like are not Biblical criteria for relationships. To be wise though, some thought should be given though to the reality that not everyone (sadly even in the church) shares this perspective and the children of this couple might also suffer as a result – not that this needs to be a deterrent, but the couple should decide how they will handle people’s insensitive comments and attitudes.*

15. How much of the relationship can involve the physical expressions of affection? *If you look at Song of Solomon, you can clearly see obvious, intense, passionate, eager, physical attractions and desires for one another, before the wedding ceremony of chapter 4 and the honeymoon night in chapter 5. But if you study that text carefully, they not only had clear patterns of accountability in place, but also an intensifying focus on those affections the closer they got to the wedding itself. For example, in 1:10 and 15 he concentrates on her physical attractiveness from the neck up, whereas in 2:14 he desires more of her, and in 4:1-7 he is much more specific because he is standing with her at the altar and able to fulfill his desires immediately! Some couples think it is better to abstain from any form of physical intimacy before marriage, but this is not required. It must be remembered that purity is a heart issue, and the couple should strive to do whatever it takes to be holy before God.*

16. What would you say, looking back on your dating relationship, would be the one thing God taught you that you would pass on? *I would say make sure that you have worked through the kinds of issues that really test your relationship together and force you to establish Biblical patterns of godly*

communication. Jana and I had to do this for the sake of our personal spiritual lives and in the context of ministry where we merged our convictions about truth and our “Philosophy of Ministry.” Looking back, it was one of the most essential and foundational times for us then and also for our relationship now.

17. Is there anything you had to learn the hard way that I can take for my life and begin working on now? *I would have spend more time sorting out the kinds of financial things that couples need to know in the day to day outworking of life. We had a solid couple mentoring us and solid teachers instructing us in everything else. We would recommend that more than anything else!*

18. What are some practical things that you did to stay pure, to work through conflict, to deepen your communication, to make decisions, and to work through hard times? *For the sake of purity, installed lots of accountability, especially with family members. Purity is hard the closer you get to the wedding date – just ask anyone who has ever been engaged. Going places alone is not a good idea, no matter how strong you think you would be. It is also good to have a healthy distrust of yourself, never make up your convictions as you go, but agree together in advance what you will do when you are tempted. Memorizing Scripture on purity was and is also a helpful way to combat lust.*

When it comes to communication – a regular date night, which gets harder with kids. Uninterrupted, focused time to share one another’s hearts and bear one another’s burdens. Pick a time and place to nurture each other consistently – to talk about your time in the Word and how to pray for one another. Talk about your struggles and your triumphs! Learn to be a good listener and a good question asker, which allows your partner to freely share himself or herself.

Making decisions – I never make a decision that affects our family, regardless of how big or small, if my wife and I are not in agreement. We strive for total oneness. I try to never make any of the bigger decisions in ministry without her counsel as well. Genesis 2 tells me that God made her to be my helper and that has been proven over and over again. We talk things through, guard against interrupting or jumping to conclusions, and especially guard against hasty communication on the fly – which gets us into trouble because neither of us really remember what we decided nor do we have enough time to really hear each other. Relationships take time.

When we collide in conflict, the best thing we know to do is stop the conversation, pray either together or separate, run through Galatians 5:22-23 and James 4:1-10 in our minds to filter out ungodly attitudes, come together again, affirm our love for one another, confess specific sins that we have committed in the conflict, and then work through the issue.

19. What would you say is the hardest priority to maintain now that you are married? How have you attempted to grow? *To be sure, taking time together to nurture one another and have good communication and also making sure that we are each spending good time in the Word and prayer. We strive to hold one another accountable for these things, hopefully with grace and patience.*
20. How long did you wait to build your marital foundation before you decided to have kids? *Six years, which gave us a good foundation of relating to one another alone. We really thank God for that because of how it bonded us, but each couple must decide what is best for them. I think God made it at least 9 months for a reason – so that the couple had time to prepare themselves. Also, in the Old Testament, especially Deuteronomy, married men were required to take off a year of active military service when they got married, so they could nurture their homes and start a family. God seems to know that we need this foundational time.*
21. What challenges did you face, having each been raised in a different home with potentially different spiritual environments? *Jana was raised in a godly home; I grew up as an atheist with unbelieving parents. Take about different!!! And yet, it is amazing the transforming power of Christ, who takes two totally different people and through His word knits their hearts together in Biblical conviction, where the Scriptures are the standard, instead of preference or “how I was raised.” Certainly I am the pioneer, establishing new patterns that were utterly unlike what I had, and of course we compare our parenting to what Jana had growing up, since the model was a good and Biblical one. We have to work hard though to differentiate between what is Biblical principle that is binding on all parents or what is application of a principle that works in our home and for our kids.*
22. Would you recommend a shorter or longer engagement? *As long as it takes to get the preacher, the gown, the tuxes, the invitations, and the license. My view is that once you are engaged, you should have already made the necessary decisions about your future and the hardening of your foundation is well under way. From then on, go quickly for the sake of purity, unless extenuating circumstances prevent it.*