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A line drawing of two hands clasped together, with the fingers interlaced. The drawing is simple and uses cross-hatching for shading. The title text is overlaid on the drawing.

Bible Guidelines for Dating & Courtship

by
Laurence D. Brown

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Written 2005

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Introduction

“Dating” is a phenomenon of modern western culture. In biblical lands and times, normally (but not always) the parents of a young man and the parents of a young woman would negotiate an arrangement for their children, sometimes many years in advance, for their marriage. If the young lady and young man were allowed to spend time together before their wedding day, it was most always in the presence of one or both of the families, or an adult chaperone was present.

It was assumed that love would proceed from the covenant arrangement of the two families: that as the bride and groom took their vows before the Lord and their responsibilities to each other seriously, love would blossom in their relationship.

Dating, as we understand it, evolved from the courtship rituals of the European middle ages, and since then in western society (Europe and North & South America) it has loosened the standards for how young men and young women get to know one another and prepare for marriage.

Our goal is not to allow society to tell us how to behave in dating, but to have God tell us what to do and how, so that in this area, as in all areas of life, we may please Him.

Discussion Questions:

1. *Is dating the only acceptable way for guys and girls to get to know each other?*

2. *What would you think about your parents getting involved in selecting your marriage partner?*
3. *Should you date just because your friends are dating?*
4. *Our ultimate goal in dating – and in life in general – should be what?*

I. What is the Purpose of Dating?

It is important to keep in mind what the ultimate goal of dating is – even of a particular, single date – since that goal will heavily influence the behavior and motivations of a guy and a girl on a date.

1. The number one goal must be: ***To seek God’s will for a marriage partner.*** (Col. 1:9,10 tell us that we need to be filled with the knowledge of God’s will. For most people [but not all] this will include marriage – I Cor. 7:2).
2. The second goal is: To learn social skills in dealing with the opposite gender. For guys, this means learning to put his date first – think of what she wants to do; carry on a meaningful conversation with her; learn to sacrifice for her, and so on. For girls, this means learning to respect your date, even if he is clumsy; learning to be supportive while not being a doormat; learning to draw the best out of him, etc.
3. The third goal is: To have fun.

The first goal is always the most important. If you elevate goal number 3 to the top position, you could be setting yourself up for problems. If you are just looking for a good time, you might at least waste your time and that of your dating partner – at worst, you could fall into sin. If you keep in mind that a date is a test to see if God is leading you to consider marriage with that particular person, it will keep you from a lot of serious mistakes. This is a basic principle: a date is a single step toward a marriage relationship.

Discussion Questions:

1. *Be honest with yourself – when you think about dating, what is most important to you – looking ahead to marriage or just having fun?*
2. *What could possibly be wrong with dating someone that you know you will never marry, just to hang out together?*
3. *If you follow the Bible’s standards for dating, will your dating & social life be boring?*

II. When Should I Begin Dating?

A. There are two answers to this question.

The first one is 1. ***When your parents or those in authority over you say you are ready.*** You may not like it, but God put people over you to tell you what to do (Eph. 6:1-3). If they say you are too young, then you are too young. In fact in Genesis 24, it was Rebekah’s older brother Laban who had the final say over whether or not she could marry (verses 29, 50, 53).

2. The second answer is this: ***Are you prepared to think seriously about marriage?*** Are you ready to decide what qualities you are looking for in the person you will spend the rest of your life with? Are getting ready to take on the duties of renting or buying an apartment or house, paying for a car and insurance, raising kids, getting a job? If you are not ready to be serious about these things, then you are probably not ready for dating, because, remember, dating is just a step toward marriage.

B. But what if you think you are ready to be serious about dating and even thinking ahead to marriage, but your parents or other spiritual people around you think you are too young or not mature enough yet? Or, what if you are grounded in the Word, are thinking seriously about marriage, but you have not yet met that “special” someone who really sparks your interest?

1. The first thing to do is to ***focus on your own spiritual growth.*** God has already picked out your future mate. (By the way, you don’t need to be afraid that you are missing out on lots of experience by waiting to date: God has already selected your future spouse for you, and He will introduce you to him or her at the right time. Having lots of dates does not increase your chances of finding the right one, and having no dates or just a few

does not decrease your chances. God is in charge of this whole process – see the story of Isaac & Rebekah in Genesis chapter 24. As far as we know, Isaac did not “date” anyone before God provided him with exactly the right girl at exactly the right time).

It may be that God is preparing your life and heart, and that of your future mate, so that you will be an exact match at the right time. The key thing to focus on is getting ready spiritually for when you meet her or him. Imagine what it would be like to meet the guy or girl that God wants you to marry, only to suddenly realize that he or she is a truly godly, committed Christian and you are not! You need to be in the Word of God and be a prayer warrior; be faithful to God in your home, church, and school so that you are prepared for the blessings and opportunities God has for you.

2. While you are waiting to date, you can be involved at church. This is great preparation for dating. You can learn to be friends with other believers your own age, as well as fellowshiping with godly adults. Hang around as much as possible with other Christians at activities, functions and all the church services you can. Doing activities in groups of young people may not qualify as the traditional type of “dating,” but it is a great idea. Incidentally, while you are doing this, you can be mentally working on the list of qualities you would like to find in your future mate.

Discussion Questions:

1. *If my parents tell me I am too young to date, but I know that I am ready, should I do it secretly?*
2. *Everybody else is dating at 14 and 15 years old - won't I feel like a terrible misfit if I am 16, 17 or 18 and I am not dating?*
3. *How can I know if I am ready for dating or not?*

III. Who Should I Date?

This is the single most important question in establishing Bible guidelines for dating.

When you date someone, you are not only taking a step toward marriage, you are forming a relationship with another human being. The Bible speaks very clearly about all relationships in II Corinthians 6:14-18. The “unequal yoke” mentioned in this passage refers specifically to a joining of believers and non-believers. God does not approve of this. It will lead only to sorrow and sin.

A. You should not date an unsaved person. The II Corinthians 6 passage cited above clearly states this.

B. You should not date a Christian who is less spiritually mature and committed than you are. II Thessalonians 3:6,14 speak about staying away from other Christians who are not obeying the Bible fully. If you date and fall in love with a Christian who is lackadaisical about his/her faith and loyalty to Jesus Christ, when do you think he or she will change? If you want to serve in the local church and raise your kids to love God, do you think he/she will accept such guilt-producing behavior (that is, obedience to the Bible!) on your part?

C. You should probably date only persons within your belief system if you have strong convictions. By this I mean, if you are a strong Baptist and you date a Presbyterian with strong beliefs, you will clash. Even if both of you are good, godly Christians, a fundamentalist Baptist and a Presbyterian will have trouble agreeing on some basic things.

D. Seek the advice of wise, godly people. If you have godly, spiritually mature parents, listen to them - they are the best ones to give you advice! They know you and have watched you

develop. Do not hesitate to ask their wisdom and analysis of a potential dating partner. Listen to what they say with an open mind (Proverbs 11:14). If you do not have Christian parents, talk to other mature Christians about someone you would like to date.

E. Make a list of what you are looking for in a marriage partner. First on your list should be spiritual characteristics. Remember, what’s in a person’s heart is far more significant than how she or he looks (I Samuel 15:7). You could list things like godliness, committed to obeying the Bible, involved with church, respects his or her parents, wants to please God, and so on. You might consider having two parts to your list of qualifications: one part that would identify character traits that you consider absolutely necessary, and the second would be things that you could be flexible on (things like hair color, liking certain sports, enjoying certain books, etc.) God might have someone picked out for you who doesn’t like exactly what you do, or whose hair color you thought you would never care for. You should be flexible about these personal preferences. But you should not date someone who does not fit your spiritual qualifications. Why not? Because you should not be married in an unequal yoke to someone who is not committed to Christ, and dating is a step towards marriage.

Discussion Questions:

- 1. What if you really like a guy or girl but he/she is not saved? Can’t you date a person so that he/she will get saved?*
- 2. What would happen if you started dating a person who was a strong Roman Catholic or Jehovah’s Witness? Would you go to their religious services? Would you consider adopting their religion in order to keep dating him/her?*
- 3. What if there are no really solid, godly, eligible girls or guys around you right now? Should you date somebody who is not qualified to be your spouse in a desperate case like this?*

IV. What Should I Do on a Date?

- A. You should begin each date with prayer and reading a few Bible verses. This sets a high spiritual tone for your time together. If either you or your dating partner become uncomfortable with this, it may be an indication that your focus has slipped from godly spiritual goals. This could be a warning sign that your relationship is deteriorating in some way.
- B. Double-dating or dating with your parents around is not a bad idea. Many young people can't stand the thought of their parents being present – but why not? Especially if your parents are godly, wise Christians, having them around is a great idea, especially for the first couple of times of meeting and getting to know the other person.
- C. Don't go to places where there is a high level of temptation or pressure. If you know there is going to be alcohol around, or other couples making out, why go there? Don't go someplace or engage in an activity that will compromise your standards, damage your testimony or put you and your date in a questionable light.
- D. Young men, you should treat your date as though she were the most important lady in the world, because at that time, she is. You are practicing how to treat your future wife: show courtesy, compassion, and treat her with great respect. Young ladies, you should treat your date with honor and poise, even if he doesn't get every social detail just right. After all, you are practicing on the right way to treat your future husband. (This is the second goal we mentioned above in section I.)
- E. Be yourself. Most young people are nervous on dates. But if you are a Christian, and your date is a Christian, and you both want to find out God's will – then you can actually have a lot of fun together while you are seeking God's plan.

Discussion Questions:

1. *What are some really great ideas for fun activities that Christians can do without hesitation on a date?*
2. *If the opportunity arose for you to go to a party where you knew alcohol was going to be available, would you go?*
3. *How do you want to be treated by your partner on a date? How do you plan to treat your date?*

V. What is Appropriate Physical Contact on a Date?

Getting involved sexually is one of the saddest things that can happen to young people before marriage. Don't assume that "it can't happen to me" or that "I'm a strong Christian – I can handle the temptation." Lots of strong Christians have fallen into sexual sin. Once you cross certain boundaries in physical contact with the opposite sex, it can be very difficult to stop.

By the way, this is a very good reason to begin every date with Bible reading and prayer: it will help you to remember that the Lord Jesus is present with you on your date.

- A. Care in clothing. Young ladies, you should be aware that men are stimulated by sight. If you wear tight clothing, low necklines, or midriff-revealing clothes, you can "turn on" your date. Realize that what you are "turning on" is a whole set of responses: a heightened interest in your body, a flow of hormones, a direction of thought-patterns, all of which are the beginning stages of preparation for sexual intercourse. Within marriage, this is a beautiful and God-honoring part of the covenant relationship. God designed sex for marriage as a delightful and wonderful expression of love and unity. Outside of marriage, however, the Bible calls sex "fornication," and it will bring nothing but sorrow, regret, guilt and pain. Pre-marital sex could lead to pregnancy. It could lead to AIDS or other sexually-transmitted diseases.

Picture starting a fire. You get some newspaper, some dry twigs and leaves, some larger kindling and finally some logs. Now you get a match and put it under the newspaper – the fire is going to start slowly, but build up steadily and begin to catch on the logs and soon it will be sending out warmth. If you do this in a woodstove or fireplace, it is a great thing. If you are starting this fire on the living room floor – you could burn your house down! Sex in marriage is great; sex before marriage could wreck your life.

God says that sex before marriage (fornication) is something that He will judge (Hebrews 13:4), and that sexual immorality is something we should run away from (I Corinthians 6:18).

- B. Guys, keep your hands to yourself. Keep your eyes on your date's face and not on other parts of her body (Job 31:1). You, especially, as the leader in the dating relationship, need to set high spiritual standards for your dating. Many young people have found it helpful to make a covenant with the Lord to maintain sexual purity. This is a great idea. Perhaps you would even want to write it out – something like this: *I, (your name) on (today's date) make a promise to God that I will keep my mind and body pure by not having sexual relations with anyone until my wedding day. I do this because my body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 6:19), and because God has called me to be holy (I Peter 1:14-16). I will keep myself pure in what I think about and in what I do with my body because I love God, and because I desire to give my future wife/husband my body in marriage wholeheartedly.*

This covenant can be made by either a guy or a girl, obviously. I would urge you to talk to your parents, pastor, youth leader or another trusted Christian adult if you think you are having trouble in this area.

- C. So where is the “line” that should not be crossed in physical contact? Certainly any removal of clothing is wrong. Any intimate touching or petting is also wrong. Either of these actions is actually preparation for sexual intercourse, and is fine in marriage and wrong outside of marriage (I Thessalonians 4:3-5). Prolonged kissing is also probably a

really bad idea. When a couple becomes very serious about one another (as in talking about engagement and marriage, or actually engaged), holding hands is fine. Sitting next to one another is great, as long as you are not on one another's laps. (Young ladies should be aware that just brushing up against a young man can cause strong physical responses.) A good-night kiss (as long as it remains in control) is probably also fine for very serious or engaged couples. Situations that involve a lot of body contact, or lying on the floor in contact with each other, or sitting on one another, should be avoided. It is fine for a serious couple to be seated in church or elsewhere with the young man's arm across his fiancé's shoulders. Other physical contact is probably asking for trouble.

Discussion Questions:

1. *Isn't it okay to flirt just a little?*
2. *What about “deep kissing” or “French kissing”?*
3. *What boundary line of physical contact are you unwilling to go beyond in dating?*
4. *Do you see this as an issue that is serious enough to deserve you making a vow or covenant to the Lord about remaining pure?*

VI. So What's the Big Deal About Marriage?

In this whole study we have been emphasizing that dating is just a step toward marriage. We have said that you should not date someone you would not marry. We have stated that you should keep yourself pure for marriage, and that you should be preparing spiritually for your future spouse. So what's the big deal about marriage? Why is it so important?

- A. Marriage was the very first human relationship or institution that God made. Genesis 2:18-25 records the creation of Eve and the first marriage ceremony, the one between Adam and Eve. All human society and inter-relationships spring from the basic design of the home: one man and one woman bound together in a covenant bond. This chapter in Genesis also teaches us that marriage was designed to meet the very deepest

needs of human companionship. Marriage cannot replace the need of the human soul for a connection to God, but it does meet the human needs for friendship, communication, loyalty, and love.

- B. Marriage was planned by God from eternity past to be a clear picture of the incredible love of Jesus Christ for His bride, the Church. Read Ephesians 5:22-33. The marriage bond is supposed to display to everyone who sees the relationship that Jesus Christ willingly sacrificed Himself, and continues to cherish, protect and devote Himself to the Church. The Church, meanwhile, is supposed to obey, love and honor the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ.
- C. God has not designed every human being for marriage (I Corinthians 7:7,8), but from the model of Adam and Eve and from God's words to them (Gen. 1:28) and to Noah and his family (Gen. 9:1), it is clear that God wants most humans to marry. Marriage should be for life – God does not see divorce as an option (Malachi 2:16). Marriage is both a lot of hard work and one of the most fulfilling experiences of life. If God blesses you and your future spouse with children, you will have the responsibility and privilege of molding and training new human lives for the glory of God. That is an awesome thought!
- D. Since marriage is designed by God to be so wonderful and so serious a responsibility, you should be preparing for it **now**. Why not put on your daily prayer list: "Pray for my future wife/husband"? Also, as we mentioned before, you should be spiritually growing in the Lord so that you are ready for when God introduces you to the right person.

Discussion Questions:

1. *Slightly more than half of all marriages in the U.S. end in divorce. Is this okay with you? Why or why not? What do you speculate are some of the chief causes of divorce?*
2. *For several years there has been a growing trend for people to live together rather than to get married. Is this okay with you? Why or why not?*
3. *Summarize in your own words why you think marriage is important.*

4. *What are you doing to prepare for marriage right now?*

Additional Scripture Reading:

Proverbs chapter 5
Proverbs chapter 7
Ephesians 5:22-33
Proverbs 31:10-31
Malachi 3:14-16
Psalm 127
Psalm 128
I Peter 3:1-9

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