



SESSION 4

Dating



EVERY RELATIONSHIP IS A GIFT. WE DON'T EARN THEM OR DESERVE THEM. CHRIST GIVES THEM TO US, LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE IN OUR LIVES, FOR OUR ENJOYMENT AND TO HELP US BECOME MORE LIKE HIM.



I realize you might not be free to date. You might be married, or close to it. Or you might be in a position where dating isn't God's best for you right now. Whatever it may be, this lesson and the principles within it can still be applied to your life.

On the following continuum, mark how you feel about the dating process, whether that was several years ago or right now.

Easy breezy

Like pulling teeth

Why do you think dating is so difficult or easy for you?

From your perspective, what is or what was the most frustrating thing about dating?

TWO-SIDED COIN

Because of your stage in life you may not understand this, but nothing induces fear faster in any father's heart than the thought of his daughter dating. From the first moment he realizes he has a daughter to the moment the first boyfriend shows up at the front door, the father is worried about everything from who will ask her out to what kind of rules he'll have to enforce for her. Whatever else may happen, this dad is slowly beginning to realize he'll never get another good night's sleep in his life.

Of course, his daughter is worried for other reasons. Will the right young man ask her out? What will they do on their first date? Will he want to kiss her on the first date? Should she? And if she does kiss on the first date, what kind of girl does that make her?

But dating doesn't get any easier when you get to college and post-college, does it? Adding to the confusion is a culture that encourages young men and women to become sexually active as soon as they feel they're ready. The movies, songs, and television shows targeting these audiences assume young adults are sexually active. This only complicates the already complex and confused issue of dating.

Where do you see the biggest sexual pull from culture?

Are you protecting yourself from this pull? How well do you filter out culture?

This sex-filled culture isn't the only problem you have to deal with. On the other side of the coin is the teaching some Christians push that says dating among young adults should be abandoned all together. Or, they encourage a return to the idea of "courting." Dating should be kept as a family affair with the young couple spending most of their time with each extended family. Or maybe even picking a location where other friends are present at all times. Both sets of parents and the couple's friend's would be involved in the structure and limits of the couple's dating, with the understanding among everyone concerned that the couple is testing their compatibility for marriage.

From a Christian perspective, list the pros and cons of this kind of dating?

Pros	Cons

In your opinion, what is the best form of dating?

Here is the problem: The Bible gives absolutely no direct instructions about the practice of modern dating. In the days of the Bible, marriages were arranged. Fathers would seek sons and daughters to marry who would bring a certain amount of standing to each family. The father of the bride would have to provide a dowry to help the young family get off to a good start in life (as well as compensating the young man for taking the daughter off of her father's hands). Personal happiness was not part of the equation.

Times have changed, some for the better and some for the worse.

So what are you to do? The first thing is to simply acknowledge you're facing a very difficult and complex issue. You have to approach dating very cautiously, especially with the freedom that naturally comes from being a young adult outside of your parent's care. The understanding that guided you as a sophomore in high school won't work as a sophomore in college. You'll need to continue to grow in the knowledge of who you are as an individual and who you are called to be in Christ. As you do this, you'll build confidence in the tempting situations you find yourself in, and in doing so, you'll be more likely to handle each situation appropriately.

How does one grow in the knowledge of who they are individually and who they are called to be in Christ?

How do you respond to sexual temptation in a dating relationship? Why do you think you respond this way?

DATING FOR MARRIAGE

How you approach the dating process is more important than you can imagine. There is much at stake. What's learned in the dating process will inform our relationships for the rest of our lives.

As you may know, not all dating experiences are a walk in the park. In fact, you might argue that most of your dating experiences have been bad—and they end even worse. But you can't just give up or pray nothing bad happens. Like I said, there's simply too much at stake.

So how do we prevent these bad experiences? We prevent them by being proactive in the dating process. We lessen the chances that bad things will happen in dating by being sure we understand the purpose of our dating and the goals we have for ourselves while dating. I know, you're reading this and thinking I've just taken all of the romance and fun out of dating. Not so. I'm being honest and upfront about the expectations of dating from a Christian perspective.

From an early age, children begin to form their ideas of masculinity and femininity. By watching their fathers, children will form impressions of how a man lives in the world. They watch how he treats his wife, and they know how he responds to her. They watch him go to work and come home again. From those images and more, a daughter will begin to formulate a picture of the man she'll fall in love with and how she will expect to be treated by him. Dads are the first boy-friends of their daughters. Young men grow up watching their fathers, and when they don't know how else to act, they'll act the way they saw their fathers act.

It's the same with mothers. From birth, their children are watching them, taking note of every conversation and gesture. Daughters learn to become women from their mothers, and sons learn to relate to members of the opposite sex in their experience with their mothers. For most young men, opening the door for their mother is the first time they open a door for a woman. This is why a healthy marriage with a healthy and present father and a healthy and present mother is so important for young men and women. Life's lessons are caught more than they are taught, and there's no more powerful education than watching a

husband and wife who love each other interact day in and day out. This is one reason we're dealing with issues of identity and sexuality. Broken homes break more than marriages.

Was your childhood generally a positive, neutral, or negative experience? Explain your answer.

Name three things you've noticed of your actions in your dating experience—negative or positive—that are a result of your relationship with our mom or dad.

1.

2.

3.

Who have you looked to in the past for dating advice? Parents? Siblings? Friends? Church leaders? Was it usually good advice or bad advice? Explain your answer.

Churches also need to be more open in their discussion of dating. There are at least two very bad results from the church's silence. First, by making dating and sexuality off limits, the silence makes the topics more enticing by inadvertently

making them more attractive. By making sex something you can't talk about in church, sex then becomes the "forbidden fruit" and the very thing we desire the most.

The second problem is there's no alternative view offered in the cultural discussion of masculinity, femininity, sexuality, love, and relationships in general. With no other vision put before us, we begin to believe the cultural lie that "everyone is doing this" because everyone we see on TV is living this way.

I believe following Jesus is the best way to live. I believe the Scriptural teachings on sex and marriage are some of the most beautiful recorded anywhere.

Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord, for the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Savior of the body. Now as the church submits to Christ, so wives are to submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word. He did this to present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless. In the same way, husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own flesh but provides and cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, since we are members of His body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This mystery is profound, but I am talking about Christ and the church. To sum up, each one of you is to love his wife as himself, and the wife is to respect her husband.

Ephesians 5:22-33

Paul telling husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church is an unforgettable image of love. When a wife sees her husband loving her like that, she responds the way the church loves the Lord. The issue of who's in charge, who plays what role, never comes up. Not when the husband and wife are being loved like that.

How is marriage typically depicted in culture?

How is culture's understanding of marriage similar or different to the way we see it described in Scripture?

Similar to Scripture	Different from Scripture

Here's the problem. Having a faulty image of marriage will affect how we date. Christ-followers date for a purpose. The ultimate purpose, of course, is to discover the person appropriate for marriage and life together. But there's more to dating than that. In fact, one of the most obvious but overlooked purposes of dating is practice. That's right *practice*.

For some reason, our culture tells us we're to be born as adults when it comes to our relationships, but nothing could be further from the truth. Human beings are helpless when born and clueless when it comes to a relationship with the opposite sex. Dating is where we learn. It's practice.

Dating is also how we can find out if God wants us to marry someone at all. See, not everyone finds love. Marriage isn't for everyone. There are those who are called to live single. The apostle Paul points this out in his letters to the early church. To be single is to be able to live with a singular focus on the work of the kingdom without having to think about family needs. I've seen this for myself. On several occasions, mission needs have opened up at different places around the world. On these occasions, several single people were able to respond faster than anyone. Furniture was put in storage, apartments were subleased, condos or houses rented out, and suddenly they were off to the ends of the earth. The church should learn to appreciate those brothers and sisters who are called to live a single life rather than trying to fix them up with distant relatives.

There's another important point to remember. You and the person you're dating have a future. You are responsible to Jesus for the future of the person you're dating. Christ-followers are stewards with all that Christ entrusts to us, including and most especially, our relationships. Every person we encounter should be better, more like Christ, more useful to Christ, because of their relationship with us. At no time should anyone be less because they have dated a follower of Christ. At no time should they be wounded because they dated a follower of Christ.

Read the following verses and record how Scripture instructs us to handle our relationships.

1 Corinthians 15:58

1 Thessalonians 5:11

Hebrews 10:25

Now, I'm not naïve. I understand emotions are sometimes fragile things. People get their feelings hurt in dating. Having said that, most of the time people get hurt because of lies, dishonesty, and the varied games we play while we're dating. This is unfortunate and needless. We should be upfront in all of our relationships, especially dating. Remember that dating is practice. You may not meet the love of your life immediately. Therefore it is important to practice well so you're ready for when you do.

FINDING MR. OR MS. RIGHT

Every relationship is a gift. We don't earn them or deserve them. Christ gives them to us, like everything else in our lives, for our enjoyment and to help us become more like Him. This means every relationship teaches us something. By the time we find the person to whom we get married, we've spent our entire lives building a picture of what "Mr. Right" and "Ms. Right" looks like. We take a little bit from our parents (the images can be either positive or negative), or our favorite movie star and local heroes from our childhoods. We take something we like from that person, something else from another, and one last thing from this one to form a composite picture of the person we're looking for. We place this picture in our minds and then compare everybody we meet to that picture. That's why if and when you finally meet Mr. or Ms. Right, you feel like you've known this person all of your life. In some ways, you have. You've been building a picture of them for most of your life.

Everyone you date adds to this picture. There are some things you liked about the other person. Keep those. There are other things you didn't like. Let go of those. In each dating experience, take a little time to think about what you liked, what you didn't like, and why. Understanding the reasons we respond to certain characteristics provides a unique insight as to how we're thinking about ourselves, others, and relationships in the future.

By the way, when Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac, the servant prayed God would lead him to the right person for his master. What was his criteria? Kindness. He was looking for a woman who would not only offer water to him, but to water his camels as well. Camels, when thirsty, can drink up to a

third of their body weight in water. Watering camels is no small task. Rebecca volunteered to do both.

What strikes me as funny about this is of all the young adults I speak to about the characteristics they're looking for in the person they marry, kindness is never on the list. In fact, saying the word "kindness" will automatically delete someone from the pool of potential mates. Can you imagine the conversation?

"Mike, what's this person like?"

"The best thing I can say," I'll respond, "is to tell you they are one of the kindest people I've ever met."

End of discussion. Interesting, isn't it? One of the first things on God's list isn't even on our list. Seems to me there is something wrong with our expectations.

What's on your list? Make two lists of essentials and non-essentials that you're looking for in someone to marry.

Essential	Non-essential

Dating also teaches us patience. Most of us can't wait to be in love. We watch the movies and the television shows about the moment when we finally meet our soul mate. Fireworks will explode and there will be music in the air.

Sadly, fireworks only last a few minutes. We have a series of moments where, for an instant, we truly believe the person we're currently dating is the "one." Then, after a few more dates, the very things we once thought were cute now become grating. We seem to fall in and out of love overnight. Not really. What we're feeling isn't true love. Authentic love is tougher than that. So we learn to be a little leery of our initial reactions to first introductions. We learn to walk a little slower, watch a little more carefully. Relationships take time. Patience, as in most things, is a virtue in matters of the heart.

Time is essential to dating. It's all about time. It takes time with another person to see if you're compatible for a lifetime together. It takes time to know the person well enough in the present to understand, or at least not be too surprised as to how that person will react in the future. It takes time to figure out if you can trust this person with your true self. It takes time to find out how deep his character is. Does she just talk? Or does his actions back up his words? These are important things to know. After all, this decision, the person whom you decide to marry, is one of the most important decisions you will ever make.

SEX OUTSIDE OF MARRIAGE

You have a future. You won't always be in college. You won't always be in your first job. Sooner or later, if God leads you to marriage, you'll realize you love the person you're dating as you have loved no other. You'll start to see yourself spending the rest of your life with this person. In your imagination, you'll see your future, and this person is always in those pictures. Dating is about your future, and you can't ever forget this.

With your future in mind, I want to move to a subject that always comes up when you talk about dating—premarital sex. Most of the time, the question is couched in different terms. The person will want to know "how far can a Christian can go" on a date. The question isn't about geography. Young adults want to know the rules. Is kissing OK? Hugging? What about touching? Holding hands? And then, we start using baseball analogies.

Let's back up a little as we begin to answer this question. First, I want to remind you that God created sex. God gave sex to His children for the physical expression of love and to have children. The love between husbands and wives can be hard to express in words. What we can't express in words, we express in touch—this powerful gift God gives us. Through the gift of sex, a husband and wife can tell each other “I love you as I love no other.” In the sanctity and sanctuary of a committed marriage, there is nothing more real or pure than the gift of sex. In the act of sex, souls touch and become one. In a committed marriage, the marriage bond is deepened and the relationship is strengthened.

But outside of a committed marriage, sex can be harmful. As I mentioned, in the act of sex, souls touch, but because there's no relationship, the language of sex has nothing to say and worse, the souls of two people touch and then are pulled apart. The souls tear when they're pulled apart. Over time, the tear will heal, but every healing leaves a scar—scars that have no feeling. In our hook-up culture, countless young adults have numbed their souls to the reality of true love because they have been scarred by past relationships. When authentic love presents itself, the young adult can't feel it.

Have you been scarred by a previous relationship? Have you dated someone with a scarred past? If so, how did these scars affect the relationships?

If you haven't experienced these scars yourself, how have you seen the effects in other relationships?

Are you currently in an unhealthy relationship sexually? Whether you are or not, what barriers can you set up now to make sure you remain pure before God?

The world will tell you it doesn't matter. You're a sexual creature; therefore, sex is natural, and you should enjoy whatever kind of sex you desire whenever you want. Anyone who tries to limit your sexual expression is just dealing with their own hang ups.

But it does matter. You matter. You have a future. There will come a time when you will want to tell someone you love them as you have loved no other. In that moment, you will want to offer your best self. You owe it to the one you will marry. You owe it to yourself.

So, how far can you go? Outside of sexual intercourse I don't know if there's a definite answer. But here's what I do know. We are biologically programmed to want to have children in order to ensure the survival of the human race. In the act of foreplay, our bodies are biologically preparing for sex. If we're not careful, we'll cross a line where biology will take over and our bodies will do what it's designed to do—procreate, not to mention a host of other things we don't want or aren't ready for.

For that reason, it's best that you never put yourself in a situation where you might lose control of your reactions. What that line is for you, only you can know. That's why I want you to keep your dating fun. Learn to be with the other person. Learn what makes her laugh. What makes him tick? Don't rush into sex while you're dating. Sex wasn't designed for dating. Trust me; there'll be plenty of time for it once you're married.