

RELATIONSHIP RESCUE

Dating Dilemmas

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Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, February 9, 2014

Today, I will be speaking about dating dilemmas. Now, if you are in a dating relationship and you find yourself facing some difficult decisions, I know that you are going to be plugged in to today's message.

But perhaps you are married and you are thinking to yourself—"Oh, great. I came to church and they are talking about dating. I should have just stayed home today." Well, let me remind you that your marriage began with dating, and in some ways, is like extended or "everyday dating." I think you'll find some useful truth here today for your marriage, and some guiding truth for your children or friends who will date. Listen closely.

You may be unmarried and *not* be in a dating relationship, and you don't see any hope of being in a dating relationship any time soon, and you are thinking to yourself—"Great, I'm coming to church and they are talking about dating, and now I feel bad about myself." Take heart, my friend, there is help for you here today, or for someone you know and care about. Listen up.

Faith Match

In all of our relationships, we are going to face problems, and we are going to have to make some difficult decisions. At those times, we need to be able to turn to God and receive His help.

So, let me remind you of the theme verse for this sermon series: Psalm 144:7, which says, "Reach down from Heaven and rescue me. Deliver me from deep waters." You know there are few waters as deep and as confusing, and as full of potential hurt as a dating relationship. Let's see if we can navigate those waters to safety today.

Dating has its dilemmas. From the awkwardness of first dates, to the best way to end a dating relationship that's not moving in a good direction (and everything in between!). You may be trying to decide whether the person you're dating is Miss Right or Mr. Right. That's a BIG decision!

Let me offer you one basic rule from the Bible—call it God's minimal standard—for dating: *Only date if there is a match of faith.*

The Bible says, *“Don’t become partners with those who reject God. How can you make a partnership out of right and wrong. That’s not partnership, that’s war.”* (2 Corinthians 6:14)

God has not said that to be harsh with us. If you are a follower of Jesus, you know that God asks you to put Him first in your life. God’s will becomes your first priority in how you do life—whether that’s how you manage your finances, how you raise your children, how you spend your time, or how you treat other people. Just think about all the areas of life for which God has a plan. For His plan to be effective, you need to be in agreement with those you’re walking with.

You don’t want to end up in a marriage with a spouse who won’t pray with you, won’t go to church with you, won’t help you raise your children to know Jesus, won’t help you grow spiritually, or cannot support you spiritually.

So, set your standards high and make it your priority to date only if there is a match of faith. It’s not that it could not work out, but it is far less likely. If it does work out—trust me—it is the exception, not the rule.

Don’t just jump into a relationship because you are lonely. Being alone is not the same as loneliness. Many people are comfortable, even when they are alone, while others feel lonely, even if they’re in a crowd. If you feel lonely, it is not the lack of a friend or partner that is the cause; it is something missing *inside of you* that turns aloneness into loneliness. If you bring that into a dating or marriage relationship, it will eventually raise its destructive head there, too. You will probably blame the other person for your trouble, but it’s just you again, feeling your loneliness. I must go on, but before I do I will say that Jesus Christ is the only person who can fill—and I do mean *satisfyingly fill*—that gaping hole inside of you. Invite Him in, and He will cure your aching heart.

However, even if the other person you’re thinking about is also a Christian, that doesn’t mean that he or she is the right person for you to date. And that doesn’t guarantee a satisfying relationship. Dating is hard, and marriage is harder. There are other important questions that you need also to consider before you give your heart away.

Guard Your Heart

Look at Proverbs 4:23. Does it say, *“Above all else, guard your pocketbook for it is the well-spring of life”*? It doesn’t say that, does it? Let’s read it together correctly. *“Above all else, guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life.”*

We are going to look at six questions that can help you guard your heart. I have drawn these six questions from 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, which reads, *“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 an-*

gered. It keeps no record of wrong. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with truth. It always protects. It always trusts. Always hopes, always preserves. Love never fails."

If you don't see those traits of love in the person that you are dating early on, you aren't likely to see them in marriage. Why? Because people don't change just because they marry. What the person is like during the dating process will become magnified—for good or for bad—in marriage. So, ask these questions that I present at the beginning of your dating relationship. Ask yourself honestly. Because God wants the very best for you, so there is no need to settle for less.

To the married people in the room today, you may use these questions like a thermometer, to measure the course of your marriage, to show if your marriage is on course, or if it needs a course correction.

These are not just six questions to ask in order to avoid dating dilemmas. To state it positively, these are six questions with which you can build your relationships.

Question #1 – Is This Relationship Progressing Too Quickly?

Are you giving your relationship enough time to progress naturally? Or are you under pressure from your biological clock, or your peers, or your parents, or your emotional pain?

Here's what the Bible says: *"Love is patient."* Just three words. You may have read them in a Hallmark card. Or, perhaps on a cross-stitch that hangs on your grandmother's wall. But they're vital words. They are the first—and perhaps the most important and comprehensive—definition of God's love. Patient.

I want to suggest three ways to evaluate whether or not you are relating patiently.

The first one is this: *Love is patient relationally.* When you're just beginning to get acquainted with someone is not the right time to ask such things as, "How many kids do you want to have?" Or, "Do you want to honeymoon in Tahiti or Tahoe?" Slow down! Don't make marriage your aim at the start. Make friendship your aim, and see where that leads you.

Second: *Love is patient emotionally.* Ever since we reached puberty, our heart has responded differently when we feel attraction to someone. Isn't that right? Your heart goes from bump-bump, bump-bump, to (faster) bump-bump-bump-bump, bump-bump-bump-bump. If you're

not patient emotionally, you may be inclined to think you're in love before you really are (you may *want* to be in love before your time).

Third: *Love is patient physically.* The Bible says, “Run away from sexual sin. No other sin so clearly affects the body as this one does. For sexual immorality, it’s a sin against your own body” (1 Corinthians 6:). That verse does *not* say, “Run away from sex.” It says, “Run away from sexual *sin*.”

Why does God want you to limit your sexual experiences? Because He wants to preserve your future.

Let’s draw an imaginary “sexual question line.” On one end, is a kiss; on the other end, is sexual intercourse. Now, let’s define “kiss,” because there’s a whole world of kisserdom. There’s the simple kiss (appropriate with Grandma). And then there’s a prolonged kiss, which might make Grandma a little uncomfortable. Or a French kiss, which might make Grandma recoil in horror. For Grandma, we’ll stick with the simple kiss.

As we look at our imaginary “sexual question line,” for now, we’ll leave intercourse out of the equation. Just imagine though, progressive markers from 1 to 10. If you are dating someone, and you’ve been hanging out in the 1 to 2 area, when you get back together, the 1-2 area isn’t so exciting as it was, and you’ll probably want to pick up instead at 3, and be thinking about moving on to 4 and 5. Or if you’re a guy, you’ll be thinking about moving on to 7, or 9, or 15!

This is even true for married couples, too. And as you move down the line in your physical relationship, a lot of times, the caring part gets pushed aside. The physical connection becomes the focus, and a couple talks less, or about less interesting things. In fact, you can use this as a tool. Let’s call it the “talking test.” Ask, “As our relationship progresses physically, are we talking less?” Or, is your physical intimacy growing because of your increasing emotional transparency?

Question #2 – Is This Person Kind?

I don’t mean does the person have good manners, but what is going inside his or her heart? Here’s a good way to gauge this: we’ll call it the “out in public test.” She may be whispering beautiful things in your ear, or stroking your arm, but if she is also yelling at the waiter to bring her “a Diet Coke instead of a Coke!”, take note.

Kindness is thoughtfulness—measuring your actions according to the other person’s comfort level or need. Try to look at each situation through the other person’s eyes, or to hear each conversation through their ears.

Kindness defers, esteeming the other person as someone to please. We often joke about being cut off in traffic by another driver (which, for some, is no joking matter). But what about deferring to other drivers by thoughtfully applying your brakes so they can merge into your lane, instead of speeding up to close the gap?

Have you heard about the couple who came for marriage counseling, and the wife, in tears, said, “My husband never tells me that he loves me.” Her husband responded by shaking his head in disbelief and rolling his eyes. Then he said, “That’s ridiculous! I told her I loved her the day I married her. If I change my mind, I’ll let her know.”

Kindness continues. Don’t think you’re kind just because you were kind last July. This is not a check off list. That was kind... now I’m done. We have to *continue* to show, to reveal, these characteristics in our relationship. Flip it around for a moment and ask yourself, “Where am I? Am I this sort of person? Am I the person who is kind?” As often as you want to be treated kindly—that’s how often you need to be kind.

Question #3 – Is This Person a Teammate?

“Love does not envy, does not boast. It is not proud. It is not rude. It is not self seeking. It is not easily angered. Love keeps no record of wrong.” That’s a long passage, but all the elements are connected—they either make or break a team. Focus with me on that last phrase; it sort of sums it all up.

On the other hand, being right seems to lend authority to my case, and I want to keep some leverage in my back pocket for those times when I need to manipulate the situation. I can just pull out my list and start scrolling through all the times I was right and did right—and you were wrong.

That attitude is not a healthy sign for a relationship. That is the opposite of being a teammate; that’s being a competitor. “You’re wrong.” “I’m right again.” That’s not being a teammate. That destroys a team. Chip, chip, chip away—at your own peril.

If you are wired to view life as a competition, then instead of competing *against the person* with whom you are building a relationship, why don’t the two of you together compete *against the issue*. It’s us against this problem, this disagreement, this conflict.

For this one, I offer the “pronoun test.” Are you using the word “you” all the time when you argue? “You always...” “Why don’t you...?” “If only you would...” Is it the word “you” or the word “we”? “You know what, we need to...” “Why don’t we...?” “We can get through this.”

Which word are you using? Competitors fight one another for personal gain. But teammates work together for the success of the team.

Question #4 – Is This a Person of Integrity?

Verse 6 reminds us that “love does not delight in evil, but it rejoices with the truth.” Take the “refund test.” You know... if you are out and you purchase an item with a \$10 bill and the cashier gives you too much change as if you had handed him a \$20 bill... Well, if your dating partner’s first response is, “The Lord has provided!” that’s not a good thing.

You wouldn’t want someone else to take advantage of your innocent oversight, would you? You don’t want to end up short-changed at the end of the day, do you? So, don’t do it to others, and don’t run with those who do.

Question #5 – Is This Person a Quitter?

Is this a person who would give up on your relationship, when the going gets tough? And I didn’t say “if” but “when” the going gets tough. Is this a person who would quit on you if things didn’t go exactly as they wanted them to go? Verse 7 says, “*Love always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*”

Underline that last word, “*perseveres.*” Love works *through* the tough times. Love does not give up.

God Himself models this kind of love for us. God never, ever stops loving us. He never turns His back on us. God never quits on us. In fact, this entire description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 illustrates how God loves us. That’s why He can ask and expect this from us, because He pours His love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, whom He has given to us.

Does your dating partner have a forever view of marriage? If you were to marry this person, would they understand that divorce is not an available option? Someone who wouldn’t stick with you through the thick and thin of your relationship, cannot be trusted and should not be engaged.

That’s why living and sleeping together before getting married doesn’t work well. It’s just a way of playing at marriage—trying it out without any commitment. It’s a way of saying, “I want the sex, I want those things that I want right now from the relationship, but I’m going to keep my foot in the door so that if something goes wrong, if I don’t like it, if it’s not what I thought it was, I have an escape clause.”

Before you give your heart away, find out if the person is a quitter. Make sure that they have that forever view of marriage before you make the commitment.

If you are here today and you are married, here's a challenge for you. Take time this week to reaffirm, to reconfirm your commitment to your spouse. Just set aside a time and let your spouse know that you are in this relationship forever. Let him or her know—no matter what happens in your relationship, no matter what you are going through right now—that you are not going to quit on them. Love stands firm. Hey! Friday is Valentine's Day—this is the perfect week to do it!

Now, this last question is targeted directly at you.

Question #6 – Is God The First Love Of My Life?

When you think about all the loves of your life, is God the *first* love of your life? Verse 8 says, "*Love never fails.*" But that's true only if you have made God the first love in your life. If He is Number One in your life.

When you give Jesus Christ the first part of your heart, and the best part of your thoughts, and the last ounce of your strength, God promises that He will bring into your life everything that you need. He will bless the other parts of your life because you have said, "God, You get first place." (It's the principle of the tithe applied to every area of your life!)

Jesus said, "*Your Heavenly Father already knows all of your needs and He will give you all you need from day to day if you live for Him and make the Kingdom of God your primary concern*" (Matthew 6). I want you to fix your attention on that word, "*primary.*" If you put another person in front of God in your life, if you give him or her the priority that belongs to God—it doesn't matter if he's a wonderful person, it doesn't matter if she's the most Godly person you have ever known—if you put that person above God in your life, if you need that person more than God, if you make that person your "god," the Lord will not, indeed cannot bless that relationship. He will begin to *remove* His blessings from that relationship.

We don't know what true love really is until we first experience God's unconditional and un-failing love for us. And we can't really love another person the way that they really deserve or need to be loved until we have first been loved by God with His faithful, everlasting love.

You can't love until you have first been loved, and then you can only love to the extent to which you have been loved.

Have you received the love of Jesus Christ? I'm not asking if you believe in the love of Jesus, but have you received it? Embraced it? Relied upon it? Been embraced by it?

Maybe your parents didn't show you the kind of love that you needed. Maybe your parents didn't show love to each other, didn't model this kind of love before you.

The ultimate love is the love that God has for us. If you open your heart and allow the Holy Spirit to come in—you can do it today—you will receive the most amazing, boundless, faithful love that you can experience in this world.

We mess up. We try to run away. We disappoint God. We disobey God. Nevertheless, His love for us is unending and it conquers all. It can't be taken away from us.

And that is the kind of love that God wants us to give to the significant others in our lives. That is the kind of love that God wants us to receive in our relationships with other people.

Get started today! All you have to do is ask God for it. You could say a simple prayer like this:

"God, I want to experience Your unending love for me. So today, for the first time, I am asking You to come into my life and love me. Thank You for laying down Your life for me. Now, pour Your love into me and help me stand up and live for You."

If you pray such a prayer, not only will you experience God's amazing love for you, but you can begin, perhaps for the first time, loving other people the way that God wants you to love them, the way that *He* loves them.

Remember, the Bible says, "*We love because He first loved us*" (1 John 4:19).