

“Dating in the Family of God”
The Family of God
Downtown
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We’re continuing our series looking at the closest relationships we have and the call for those to be defined by love. We’ve set up some big picture ideas for who God is and how he designed biological and spiritual families to work. Today we are transitioning to look at marriage and the process by which we get married.

One of the beautiful things about the church of God is that all of us are in different places in life and have different backgrounds and stories. So there’s a beauty in the diversity of our lives up at this point and even our current stage of life. So some of us in the room have children at home with us. Some of us in the room do not have children. Some of us have children that have moved out. Some of us are married. Some of us are not married. And there’s a blessing there when we’re willing to learn from each other and make space for each other. But one of the costs for participation in the church of God is that it requires that you and I realize that everything can’t always be tailor-made for us. There will have to be times where the main concept of teaching is geared towards someone other than you. And there should be some give-and-take in that. So today we’re gonna talk about dating, I am well aware that many of you are currently in the stage of life where you are dating. I am also well aware that many of us are not in a place in life where we are dating. Some of us are not dating but we have children who are or will one day. My hope is that for everyone in the room who is currently in a season of life where they are dating that they would handle themselves well. That we would help our children grow up to handle their dating lives well. And in a lot of ways, we need each other and that is a community effort. The dating culture in our church affects our overall health as a church and affects future marriages in our church, future families, future children.

Through the years we have done a class on dating. We have said many things that apply to singleness but I don’t know if we’ve ever done a sermon with dating as the main focus of the teaching. Somewhere around 40 to 50% of our church family are married, and 50 to 60% are single so this is something very relevant and we’re talking about the process by which you determine if you will marry someone and hopefully spend the rest of your entire life with them. So it’s a big deal and well worth some discussion.

It’s also a little tricky. Because the bible does not mention dating. And the reason for that is that until the last 100 years or so, dating was not the process that most human beings used to determine who they would marry. When the bible was written, the primary process was arranged marriage. Parents would work together with other parents to determine who their children would marry. A biblical example would be Abraham finding Isaac’s wife.

I would say a couple of things about that. First, I’m personally grateful that this is not the process our culture uses today. I appreciated the opportunity to determine who I would marry. But second, lest we think we are superior to cultures who practice arranged marriages, the divorce rates in those places throughout history and even today is astronomically better than ours is. That’s for a few reasons, one of them being that their cultural belief is that everyone can learn to love the person they are married to. Whereas our culture falsely believes that romantic love is some magical, mystical thing that happens to you, and you have no control over it.

Dating, as we know it today, is a relatively new idea. In fact, prior to the 1900s, “dating” was a slang term that usually referred to prostitution. A man who was going to pay to be with a woman told his friends that he was “going on a date.” In the early 1900s “calling” was the primary means of marrying. A man would ‘call’ on a woman by going to visit with her in her parents’ home. Her parents were there and among

other things, this protected women from the kind of sexual assault that is way too common today. They would all work together to determine if the man and woman should marry.

The primary thing that changed this system was the invention of the automobile. By the 1930s, many people had cars. Cars gave young people freedoms and mobility they never had previously, resulting in increased opportunities for men and women to go out alone. And slowly the term 'going on a date' shifted from seeing a prostitute to referring to a man and a woman going off together alone. And the entire process by which people determined their spouse shifted. Parents became increasingly excluded. People began to date for intimacy instead of determining a spouse. And the idea that you should simply learn to love the spouse you have shifted towards the belief that love is something that happens to you. So more and more people began to date someone for a while, then move on if they didn't perceive the presence of the expected chemistry.

Dating is a flawed system in a lot of ways. All matchmaking systems have flaws, some more than others. I don't have a better system, I just want for you to be aware of our system's flaws. If you operate inside the dating system unwisely then you recruit immorality and practice divorce. Which, if you care about Jesus, should not sound appealing to you. And if a bunch of people in our church does that, it affects the health of our community in profound ways.

Proverbs 5:21-23:

For a man's ways are before the eyes of the LORD, and he ponders all his paths. The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is held fast in the cords of his sin. He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is led astray.

Gotta love Solomon. Brutal honesty. He just told us that part of the reason we get ourselves into so much trouble is that we tend to err on the side of stupid. Much of dating is a wisdom issue—we apply biblical wisdom to dating. So our aim today is to take what the Bible is clear about and apply it to how we think about and approach dating.

So what I'd like to do is ask a few questions, and answer them with some biblical principles. Again, I won't have specific verses about dating because there aren't any. But we can take specific verses that teach specific biblical principles that absolutely apply to how we think about dating.

Here are the questions to ask about dating:

Why?

Who?

How?

Why are you dating? Who are you dating? How are you dating?

You will answer these questions. Either unthinkingly by how you go about it. Or thoughtfully as a Christian. Our culture answers these questions. Not helpfully.

Why? Why are you dating?

People say things like, you are only ready to date when you don't care if you date or not, when you don't care if you get married or not. That's silly. We love to give stupid dating advice.

The desire to get married is a *good* desire.

Proverbs 18:22

He who finds a wife finds a good thing

So, if you want to get married you want something good.

Now, there is a difference between wanting to be married and romance or marriage idolatry, where your hope rests there, where your contentment is attached to it.

Jeremiah 2:13:

For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.

Two sins: Forsaking God. Turning to broken cisterns.

So God satisfies completely. But when we're not completely satisfied in him, we make idols out of relationships. We try to take broken cisterns and pour all our water in them. And the thing is they were never designed to hold that kind of water.

If you are forsaking your relationship with Jesus, your relational needs will drive you to broken cisterns. Dating is a commonplace that people take the brokenness and wounds we talked about last week and try to find healing and wholeness in a boyfriend/girlfriend ... healing and wholeness that only Jesus can give.

So the question is, what is the purpose of dating to you? Why are you dating? Are you dating in an effort to solve your intimacy issues and fill up something that is lacking in your soul? Are you looking for another person to be a cistern for you?

Or, are you dating to get to know someone, enjoy time with them, and potentially discern if God would have you marry this person?

That's a very important question lest we err on the side of foolishness.

Let me tell you some ways you should inspect yourself here:

Are you a serial flirter? A serial dater, bouncing around all the time. Always needing to be on someone's arm or have someone on your arm? Are you needy for attention? Are you a different person around the opposite sex than you are with your friends?

These are potential indicators that you have forsaken God and turned to broken cisterns. If you aren't sure about these answers, ask your closest friends. They'll know.

The purpose of dating is not to be a cistern for you because it would be a broken cistern. It's primarily to give you space to get clarity on their character and if God is leading the two of you towards marriage.

Who? Who are you dating?

This is the question that gets asked all the time. Ready for it? "How do I know if they are "the one.""

My advice to that question would be to encourage you to begin to think like a Christian instead of a pagan mystic. The right "one" is pagan mysticism. That there is this soul partner out there and you've been separated somehow and are journeying through the universe to be united again.

Stop looking for the right "one" and start looking for the right "type". There are two categories. The right type and the wrong type. If you're looking for "the one" I can't help you with that because I'm a Christian. But if you're looking for the right type, then I can help you because that's something the bible does address.

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no

unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.”

Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

This passage isn't specifically about marriage, it's about God's people joining themselves with unbelievers in such a way that God's people are no longer faithful to God. And that absolutely applies to dating.

Yoked. Two oxen pulling a plow. If one is stronger than the other the plow won't go straight. It's a warning about who you attach yourself to.

Earlier to the church in Corinth, Paul is answering some questions that they sent him. People in Corinth apparently had some self-determining freedoms in whom they would marry and notice what Paul says

1 Corinthians 7:39

A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.

Only if this person is in the Lord. Only if this person loves Jesus. That's the type. A Christian.

Now my concern is that I mean more by that than some of you think I mean.

I don't mean he or she claims to be a Christian. Or that they go to church some. Or that they are not hostile to Jesus.

Do not date someone unless there are obvious signs of the presence of God in that person's life. Unless the fruit of repentance is undeniable. I don't care that he or she claims they are a Christian. I watched just a couple of weeks ago as insurrectionist white supremacists claimed to be Christians. And my assumption is that you'd prefer not to date one of those people. So I'd encourage you to delve beneath the surface of a simple claim of being a Christian.

What I am saying is, If they are not overtly, transparently following Jesus apart from you then walk away. Stop justifying it. Stop rationalizing it. Stop explaining it away. Walk away. God does not want you to date that person. Wait on him. Trust him. Obeying him is always better than disobeying him.

If God is at the center of your life but not theirs, then either they or God has to be pushed to the fringe. If you live your life by God's word, by prayer, then with all your decisions your spouse will not understand you and will be unable to relate to the very center of who you are. Or, you will have to stop making God the center and push him out to the fringe so that you have more intimacy with your spouse. I don't care how lonely you think you are. The loneliness of being married to someone who doesn't understand the most important thing to you is incomparably worse than remaining single.

"Well, that's easy for you to say Adam. You are married."

I'd like to introduce a concept to you called logical fallacies. It's where someone, in the midst of an argument or discussion, presents a fallacious rebuttal. Sometimes, even though logically wrong, logical fallacies have persuasive power.

The one presented here is called "ad hominem." against the man. If you say the sky is blue, and I say "well of course you would say that, your favorite color is blue." You would rightly look at me and say "what difference does that make to my argument. Either the sky is blue or it isn't." The person making the claim has no bearing on the truth of the claim itself. Is the sky blue? Doesn't matter if I like blue, hate blue, or am a hamster...the sky is blue or it isn't. Deal with the claim, not the person.

Of course, it is easier for me to say to trust 'God with your dating life.' I did and it turned out in a way I like. I like my wife. And on most days she likes me too. It doesn't always turn out how we'd like. But my

life and who I am isn't relevant information as it pertains to the claim I'm making. If you date someone who isn't following Jesus, you are placing being with someone, anyone, ahead of being faithful to God. Is that true or is that not true? Show me the lie.

In the long run, placing anything above being faithful to God is not going to turn out well.

As a Christian you've gotta have a category for unmet desires. All Christians have to deal with that category in lots of different ways. Part of the difficulty is that we live in a culture that idolizes romance... so this unmet desire feels unbearable. It feels like too much to handle... and like God can't be good if He doesn't meet that desire. But it actually isn't unbearable and God remains faithful and good whether any of us have our desires met.

Partly we know because Jesus was single His entire human life and He was the most satisfied, joy-filled, relationally-connected, loved, and loving person who ever walked the face of the planet.

You can disagree with me. You can trash me at brunch after this. But I'm right and you're wrong. And I'm just telling you, I'm batting 1000 on couples where one of them is a Christian and the other may or may not be and I tell them they need to break up and instead they get married. They are all divorced. Literally. One day I'm sure that will change and my average will go down. But right now I've got a perfect record in premarital counseling. I tell people I don't think they should move forward with marriage. They do. They are now divorced. I grow weary of watching people hurt themselves and bring suffering into their lives because they didn't listen to God.

You need to look for the right type. And the right type is a Jesus loving, neighbor serving, faith sharing, repentance normalizing, deep friendship having, church family committed, growing Christian. Don't settle for less.

In the words of my friend Nicole: "Debatable ain't dateable"

Last thing I'll say here. How much should physical attraction matter?

The older you get, the less their appearance will matter. Looks are overrated. Older people in the room know this. Your spouse's appearance will matter a little bit less to you every year. It doesn't matter how they look right now, time and gravity are undefeated. And what you will be drawn to and find attractive as time goes by is their character and their friendship and their relationship with God. The more beautiful their character, the more over time you will find them attractive. Or what will bring you the most pain and frustration will be their lack of character and emptiness in their spiritual life. Their physical appearance is not going to sustain a lifetime of marriage. One of my favorite Proverbs says "like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion." (Proverbs 11:12)

Physical appearance cannot substitute a lack of character and depth. Put physical attraction in its proper place. It's not that it doesn't matter at all, it's that it doesn't matter as much as you probably think it does. And if you're unwilling to listen to me or Jesus then surely you are willing to believe this and learn from the 2001 cinema classic Shallow Hal starring Jack Black.

How?

If you take care of why and who then the how becomes way easier and way more simple. Let me give you 3 things.

1-Seek Counsel

Proverbs 12:15

The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.

Anybody ever had a friend go after someone you just knew was wrong for them? Are they not convinced that they're right? Yeah. Because we tend to err on the side of stupid. But a wise person listens to advice. Be a wise person.

If you're nervous and would rather not talk to your friends about it for fear that they'll say no or ask questions, that's probably not a good sign. I would even suggest you commit to listening to your friends beforehand. I would suggest finding older couples to get insight and feedback from as well. Use the resources available in the Family of God.

Proverbs reiterates this same idea over and over:

Proverbs 15:22

Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.

Proverbs 19:20

Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise.

I mean the people who will tell you the truth. I know you have a few friends that you know will tell you yes, no matter what. That's actually not a true friend. A true friend will tell you the truth even if it's not what you want to hear.

Proverbs 27:6

Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

“Lean hard on the people who know you best, love you most, and will tell you when you're wrong.” - Author Marshall Segal, discussing dating...

Parents. I would encourage you to have a role in your child's dating life. Not overbearing and not absent. For those of us with younger kids, this is part of the work we are doing now. Is cultivating a relationship and a trust and a closeness with our kids so that one day if they are dating someone, they want for you to meet them and give them honest feedback. We want to be a trusted source of discernment and wisdom.

2-Communicate clearly.

Proverbs 24:26

An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips.

Men, please do not make her wonder about your intentions for months on end while you text her and comment on her social media and give her a bit of extra attention. What are we doing here? Just be bold and honest and clear. And if that goes badly then deal with it. That's part of being a man. Sometimes we put ourselves out there bravely and we get hurt. And we take that to Jesus to be reminded of who we are in Him, and we move forward in life.

Women. Be honest with us. We can handle it. If you are not interested then say you are not interested. Don't try to soften the blow because it becomes mixed signals. Don't say things like “I just don't think the timing is right, at this point.” Instead, say “I am honored that you would ask me. Thank you. But I am not interested.”

3- Treat each other like family, because in Christ, you are

Jesus has saved us to be family with each other. This must guide how we think about and treat our brothers and sisters. If you don't date in a way that acknowledges we are family, then you are dating as though the gospel isn't true.

1 Timothy 5:5

Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity. (NIV)

If she's not your mom or your wife, then she's your sister. If he's not your dad or your husband, then he's your brother.

If and until you both say I do, she is your sister. He is your brother. Your role in your brother or sister's life is to be a source of encouragement and growth so that if you eventually break up, the next person they date is glad he or she dated you. We date like we love people. Like we are recipients of the divine, others-oriented Trinitarian love and we are learning to extend it to others. We date like life is not about us. We date like we know that our lives are about bringing God glory and being a blessing to others.