

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# RICH IN RELATIONSHIPS (II) COURTING RELATIONSHIPS

→ **Strategy:** The rich single life is prepared and willing to pursue a relationship toward marriage in submission to God's timing, wisdom, and Word.

We turn now to an issue that often preoccupies the attention, imagination, and fears of single adults—attraction to the opposite sex and the inevitable complications produced by that attraction. If you have skipped over the rest of the book to get to this part, hold on, Sport! Navigating the treacherous highway of romance can't be done recklessly. Everything discussed earlier in this book has a direct bearing on our ability to “feel the road.” The vitality of our relationship to Christ, our vision for our maleness or femaleness, our growth in wisdom, our commitment to live for God's glory, and our ability to maintain good friendships are all foundational to building a healthy relationship with that person of the opposite sex with whom we would like to be “more than just a friend.”

In this chapter we will look at the practical aspects of our God-given interest in the opposite sex. First we will examine what a distinctly Christian world-view in this area looks like. Then we'll discuss some of the common questions men and women wrestle with as they view each other with specific intent.

### Revisiting the Rituals of Romance

Here in Philadelphia we have an odd New Year's Day tradition. While most sane folks in the rest of the country are sleeping late or watching bowl games, thousands of people line our downtown streets in freezing weather to watch the 12-hour Mummer's Parade. What's a Mummer? I have no idea. I only know that the parade consists of a bunch of burly guys who look forward to once a year dressing in satin and sequins and spending the entire day strutting to music played by orchestras of marching banjo players. And the whole thing is televised!

Why do mummies mum? Don't ask me, but they've

**For Further Study:**

Read Micah 6:6-8. What pleases God more than our ritual service to him?

been doing it for years. It's a Philadelphia tradition, an annual ritual.

Rituals are things we always do, often for reasons long forgotten. Holidays have a way of spawning rituals, seemingly at random. At Christmas, why do we give fruitcake, of all things? How did bunnies and baskets get tied into Easter? Rituals cause us to do odd things, like renting tuxedos, or paying twice as much for roses, turkeys, or pumpkins than we would at any other time of year. Now, with a little research you *can* find out, for example, where the idea originated for stacking brightly colored boxes under a dying, garishly decorated evergreen, but that basically has nothing to do with why we have Christmas trees today. We do it because...well...because at Christmas that's just what people do! In other words, because it's a ritual.

I believe the great ritual of singleness in America is dating. Why do singles date? The most accurate answer would probably be something profound like, "Because singles are supposed to date." Yet most people throughout history, and even throughout the world today, wouldn't understand dating any more than they would the Mummer's Parade. So why, in this culture and this era, do we promote dating like it's the only possible bridge across the gulf between the sexes?

Granted, men and women are very aware of each other, and they like to find ways to act on that awareness.

“ When I stopped viewing girls as potential girlfriends and started treating them as sisters in Christ, I discovered the richness of true friendship. When I stopped worrying about who I was going to marry and began to trust God's timing, I uncovered the incredible potential for serving God as a single. And when I stopped flirting with temptation in one-on-one dating relationships and started pursuing righteousness, I uncovered the peace and power that come from purity. I kissed dating good-bye because I found out that God has something better in store!<sup>1</sup> ”

— Joshua Harris

There's no denying that.

When I say dating is a ritual, I mean that we have developed an approach to opposite-sex relationships that no one is supposed to question. The ritual of dating essentially transforms male/female interactions into an elaborate game.

The dating game is being played in a bar, Internet site, campus, or church singles group near you. It is a **marketing** game—I posture toward you, you flirt with me. It is a **competitive** game—guys compete among themselves for the

attention of attractive women; women compare their attractiveness with that of other women; men and women

**Meditate on  
Colossians 3:15-17.**

How does this perspective differ from the dating mentality?

**Meditate on  
Philippians 2:1-4.** How would Paul's strategy for relationships in this passage help you in a male/female relationship?

compete with each other for control over the direction of the relationship. It is a **defensive** game—I seek your unwavering commitment even as I explore my options; I want your vulnerability without putting mine at risk.

Skill levels in the dating game are no small matter. How well we play usually dictates our success with the opposite sex. At least in the short term.

The biggest problem with the dating game is the results. Although most players are in some sense looking for a meaningful long-term relationship, few people ever realize that dating is not about the long term. As Douglas Wilson perceptively puts it, “The modern dating system does not train young people to form *a* relationship. It trains them to form a *series* of relationships.”<sup>2</sup> As indicated by a 50 percent divorce rate, and many other marriages barely surviving, the dating game does not deliver.

Instead, the whole dating ritual is characterized by serial relationships (the “who I’m with right now” syndrome) and a general sense of hopelessness. Secular author and cultural critic Katie Roiphe sums up the frustration that many non-Christians are beginning to feel with the dating game.

It’s hard when you can do whatever you want and no one cares. There’s a feeling of exhaustion in having so many relationships—something a lot of people in their 20s feel when they’ve lived with three different people, dated 100 people, slept with 20 people. I think people are trying to create new meaning and importance, when now...they don’t feel like they have any.<sup>3</sup>

## **Can the Game be Redeemed?**

“But, of course,” you may say, “I’m a Christian. I have Christian aerobics, Christian music, Christian jewelry, Christian video, Christian cruises (Christian books, too). Why can’t I have Christian dating? If two people are Christians, shouldn’t that take the problems out of dating?”

**The lure of romance.** Before you jump to that conclusion, think about the purpose of dating (which is also the reason it is so appealing): ***Dating exists to provide opportunities for turning casual interaction into romantic involvement.*** That’s what dating does when it *works*. Now, romance is a great concept. It has an honorable place in marriage and makes for great poetry, but it’s got serious pitfalls for single Christians.

By its nature, romance is emotional, disorienting, obsessive—and that’s the good part. Romance is like race-car fuel. It burns very fast and hot. It’s also very expensive. Great for stock cars, lousy for your daily commute. Romance is a volatile thing that by its very nature is unable to keep a relationship running smoothly and steadily along the road to lasting commitment. Did you ever wonder why romance stories always end either with a wedding or the tragic death of one of the lovers? Because lasting relationships take work, not just feelings. No one would pay to see the dashing young hero and heroine in a conflict over balancing the checkbook, because that’s not romance. But it is reality.

**For Further Study:**

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8. What are some motivations provided in this passage to help you avoid sexual temptation?

**Sexual temptation.** A second snare of dating for the single Christian is sexual temptation. Dating that is “successful” produces romance, and romance is the fast track to sexual involvement. For Christians desiring purity in their lives and relationships, pursuing romance is like skydiving without a parachute; it just doesn’t matter how nice the free fall is—God’s law of spiritual gravity will not be broken, and soon, my friend, you’re going to hit the ground at a very high rate of speed. Nothing does such

violent damage to our walk with God, or our relationships with the opposite sex, as sexual temptation and sin.

**Weighed in the balance.**

A third snare of dating is its emphasis on performance. Much of the dating ritual involves evaluation—am I

“ We’re in the sexual promised land now...and yet we’re starved for love....The acceptance, even encouragement of pre-marital sex makes it very difficult to sustain the fantasy that we are loved alone.<sup>4</sup> ”

— Jennifer Grossman

attracted to you, are you attracted to me? This places a high priority on first impressions. But what if I put my best foot forward, present myself for approval, offer to pursue a relationship, and am rejected? In effect, I’ve been told “at your best you are unappealing.” That’s the kind of rejection that must be risked in order to play the dating game. For the Christian single who wants to glorify God, a risk like that represents (at best) unwise stewardship of one’s time, attention, and vision; it’s poor discipleship.

**The myth of compatibility.** Occasionally a dating relationship survives the performance stage, only to run smack into another pitfall: the myth of compatibility. Because dating supposedly allows us to find this relational nirvana, our dating turns into a quest for anything we might have in common. We’ll even try to invent common-

**Meditate on**

**1 Timothy 2:9-10.** How does this passage speak to your fashion consciousness?

**Meditate on Matthew 1:18-25.** How might Joseph have reacted differently to Mary's predicament if he had been motivated by compatibility?

alities where they don't exist. "Oh, you like ancient Greek allegorical drama? I've always been curious about that."

Is compatibility really some mysterious, indefinable magnetism that binds people together? I don't think so. What the world calls compatibility is simply a misleading label for those times when two people each find enough wants met in a relationship to make it worth sustaining. Such "compatibility" is very shaky. For it to remain, neither of us can change much. If my wants change in a way that you cannot adapt to, we are no longer compatible. The elusive sprite of compatibility has slipped through our fingers, and all we have left are "irreconcilable differences." Nirvana has gone AWOL.

The payoff of dating is the volatility of romance, the temptation of sexual sin, the superficiality of performance, and the myth of compatibility. No wonder more and more singles—Christian and non-Christian alike—are opting out of the dating scene altogether. It simply doesn't deliver the goods.

## **Liberated from the Game**

Does this mean that anyone who rejects the ritual of the dating game must sit passively in desperate hope that God will somehow dump a sure-thing relationship into his or her path? For Christian singles who desire to explore whether God would bring them into a relationship that could lead to marriage, what's the alternative to dating?

In the previous chapter we looked at friendship, the starting point of any good male/female relationship. In the next chapter we will consider the implications of marriage, the biblical fulfillment of the desire of men and women for each other. What is needed is a link between these two states—a way for two friends of the opposite sex to begin to explore the possibility of a deeper relationship, one that might lead to marriage.

This relationship won't look like other friendships, but it can't look like a marriage, either. It needs to be flexible enough to allow for great diversity in personalities and situations, yet it must be strongly anchored to biblical truth. It must promote the things God values—honesty, respect, and love. It must resist the things the world values—selfishness, lust, and control. And it must allow for our mistakes and inconsistencies, for none of us can manage the ways of our hearts, let alone the heart of another, without some blunders.

**Meditate on Proverbs**

**30:18-19.** What do these four amazing things have in common?

If you are interested in labels, my current favorite for this type of relationship, this link between friendship and marriage, is a “courting relationship.” I like the word courting because it speaks of a formal pursuit and response. I like the word relationship because it involves two people getting to know one another with increasing familiarity. *The distinguishing characteristic of a courting relationship is that it draws people close with the potential for marriage clearly in view.*

**1** Can you come up with another possible label for what this book calls a “courting relationship”? Write it in the space below.

For the remainder of this chapter I will be providing some basic counsel for courting relationships. But first a word about rules.

People who come to our church often ask me, “What are your dating rules here?” They are typically somewhat surprised when I tell them we don’t have any. Rules require referees, and I have no interest in refereeing relationships. As a pastor, I want to

help each person as best I can to follow God throughout his or her life. For many people that means following God into (and sometimes out of) relationships. To me, the character and devotion needed to walk out a courting relationship is really no different than what is needed to walk out a vocation or ministry responsibility. My faith is not in some system of rules, but in God’s ability to lead two obedient disciples along his chosen path.

Below are some of the Frequently Asked Questions regarding male/female relationships. I have tried to answer them with the kind of responses I would give in pastoral ministry. These are not sure-fire, take-it-to-the-bank answers, but principles of wisdom that have proved beneficial to folks over the years. Proverbs talks about the wisdom found in an array of counsel. This can be part of your array. My hope is that these brief answers will help you form a biblical perspective that can serve you in any courting relationship that comes your way.

**How can I prepare myself for a courting relationship?**

Some of the single sisters in my church used to have a little inside joke. When they saw a friend dieting or going to the gym, they would say she was “getting her house in order.” They were gently teasing that she was trying to prepare herself for a potential relationship. Getting your house in order goes beyond getting presentable. It means putting yourself in the best position possible to respond to God’s leading toward marriage.

**For Further Study:**  
**Read Psalm 16:5-11.**  
What blessings of walking with God are described in this passage?

**For Further Study:**

Read 2 Timothy 2:20-22. What are some ways Paul encourages us to prepare for any good work?

For single guys, getting your house in order often can mean identifying a sense of vocational direction. This doesn't mean a guy must be pulling down a six-figure salary to be eligible for marriage. But if he is aimless in his employment or has poor work habits, how can he ask a woman to entrust herself to his provision? Women also need a sense of vocational call, even if they eventually plan to be homemakers, because a directionless life tends to be a slothful life. Things like personal organization, control of debt and spending, consistent spiritual disciplines, and a servant's heart can also prepare a Christian for the potential of marriage. A few basic social graces can't hurt either.

“ Biblical preparation for marriage is nothing more than learning to follow Jesus Christ and to love one's neighbor. In other words, preparation for Christian marriage is basically the same as preparation for Christian living.<sup>5</sup>

”

— Douglas Wilson

**How do I evaluate whether someone I am interested in would make a good marriage partner?** Basically, if someone is following Jesus Christ and demonstrating mature love toward others, he or she probably has the makings of a good marriage partner. More specifically, there are two basic qualities

I recommend for evaluation, based on my observation of successful and unsuccessful relationships.

A woman should evaluate a man's *respect for authority*. In our society, the godly man is most distinct from the worldly man in the way he has put away prideful independence and pursued humble submissiveness. A man who is independent in his faith and does not seek the counsel and oversight of pastors and other mature men, will be a failure as a leader (and therefore as a husband) as defined by Scripture. See the story of Abigail and Nabal for a sad example of an arrogant man not worthy of his virtuous wife (1Sa 25).

A man should evaluate a woman's *submission to Scripture* as her ultimate authority in life. Women live among a multitude of competing authorities—domineering males, feminist rhetoric, deep emotions, worldly temptations. A godly woman will be a woman of the Word. She will know it, love it, and allow it to be the ruling authority in her life. As much as most women desire marriage and family, married women must embrace changes of identity and personal autonomy of a kind that men can't comprehend. If a woman trusts the teaching of God's Word regarding her identity and worth, she will enter the new

**Meditate on: 1 Peter 5:5-7.** In what ways can you develop the humility of a submissive attitude to authority?

### **THEY SAY...**

Most of the basic challenges in communicating with the opposite sex come from a two-way lack of understanding of our differences. As a public service, the following clues are offered to the confused, courtesy of that mysterious group of experts known only as “They.” No one knows who “They” really are or how “They” come about their profound wisdom, but that doesn’t stop us from quoting “Them” at every chance. So, the next time you hear anyone start a sentence with “They say...” you’ll have your own group of They-isms to toss knowingly into the conversation.

#### **Lost in Space**

Next time you’re at a gathering of singles, see if you can spot these tendencies. “They” say that men generally find security in open space, while women are more comfortable in close contact with others. So when women enter a room, they tend to sense the environment and find a comfortable place in it. Men go into a room, stake out a position, and then try to figure out what is going on around them.

What it means to be alone is also radically different for men and women. “They” describe aloneness for a woman as having no one *who understands you* nearby. For a man, aloneness is not having *anyone* standing nearby. Does this explain how men can bond on a golf course without saying a word, while women consider going to the bathroom a communal opportunity?

#### **The Trouble with Talk**

Why don’t men and women understand each other? “They” say it’s because we have different goals in conversation. To men, words are tools, things that are needed to get points across. The goal is to find the right tool for the right problem. Women use words to paint pictures, to reveal themselves, and to encourage others to reveal themselves. A man listens to gather ideas. A woman listens to share in an experience. Men are more comfortable talking in groups; women thrive in one-on-one situations. “They” also say women tend to be more successful than men at reading people’s emotions, but men are stronger at spotting deceptions.

#### **Biological Trivia That May-or-May-Not-Say-a-Lot Department**

Women have more sensory nerve endings in their skin. Men compensate by having more sweat glands.

#### **The Final Word**

“The ugly truth about beauty: Women seek perfection. Men seek socks that match.” (Dave Barry)

**Meditate on Psalm**

**119:105.** What has more impact in your life — what you feel or what the Bible says?

**Meditate on Psalm**

**27:13-14.** When it comes to trusting God for a spouse, how can you be strong, take heart, and wait?

world of marriage roles and responsibilities with abiding faith.

**Should single adults actively pursue a mate, or passively wait for someone to just sort of appear?** A single brother once asked me a great question: “I’ve always thought my future wife would be in this church, but there is no one here I’m interested in. Is it wrong to look elsewhere? Is it ‘seek and ye shall find’ or ‘wait on the Lord’?”

Christian dating services, Internet chat rooms, and social clubs have proliferated largely due to the awareness that one’s future mate may not be in the present geographic location or relational network. In many churches the pool of eligible singles is shallow. If it’s fine to look for a job outside our circle of church contacts, why not do the same with relationships? Isn’t the search for a potential mate far more important? (After all, you can always change jobs.)

There is nothing in the Bible that comes anywhere close to suggesting that you shouldn’t seek a mate outside your local church. The issue you must focus on, however, is the heart issue of patience, not the practical issue of geography. Are you patient to wait for God’s provision, or is unbelief driving you to undertake a desperate hunt?

God brought Rebekah to Isaac from another land. He gave Ruth a husband when she was a virtual outcast in a foreign land. God can bring a mate to you in the fellowship hall or in the mall. Just this past year I performed the wedding ceremony of a couple who had been childhood friends. They moved apart, and eventually both became Christians. They ran into each other one year while Christmas shopping back in their home town, renewed a friendship, and are now husband and wife.

Let me note, however, the significant courtship benefits that can flow from two singles having a common church experience. Similar values and vision, a supportive church-family environment, and consistent pastoral care can be very valuable to a couple in a courtship relationship. Also, some methods available for seeking a mate in the Christian community at large aren’t always wise options, or ought to be approached with discernment, prayerfulness, and accountability. It’s best to get mature Christian counsel regarding the range of options available to you.

The most important thing to remember in all this, however, is that whatever we leave in God’s hands to accomplish will always work for our good. Until then the outer work of getting your house in order and the inner work of persevering prayer should keep you busy and focused.

**How do two Christian friends start to develop a courting relationship?** If two people have an ongoing friendship among a larger group of friends, it is usually not too hard to bump things up to a more intentional level. If you don't travel in the same social circles, a man should probably demonstrate his willingness to assume responsibility by making his intentions known. Perhaps a cup of coffee at a restaurant after a meeting is a good, safe way to begin.

It's always a good idea, however, to take advantage of group contexts whenever possible. Group interaction minimizes romantic pressures and allows friendships to

develop naturally over time. Good communication is also important—not delving deeply into your personal lives, or discussing where you always wanted to go on a honeymoon, but regular interaction about where the

“ I have found that a man will usually be as much of a gentleman as a lady requires, and probably no more.<sup>6</sup> ”

— Elisabeth Elliot

relationship is and how each person is handling it. When feelings try to lead us in any number of directions, this kind of communication can keep reality and focus in the relationship.

A healthy relationship breathes freely. It can move forward, slow down, or even back up without great gnashing of teeth by either person. If both parties purpose to be known for modesty, integrity, and dignity in the relationship, it will mature with time, avoiding emotional catastrophes or the ruin of a strong brother/sister friendship.

**How do I invest in a relationship without getting hurt?** When venturing into a courting relationship, we must face two realities. First, no formula can guarantee success. Male/female relationships defy scripting. They always have. Second, the process will inevitably involve some degree of emotional trial or pain. If you want a pain-free relationship, get a goldfish. Investing in a higher life-form, like a fellow sinner of the opposite sex, will always involve the potential for conflict and hurt. (As Christians, the difference is how we handle it: see Chapter Six.)

### Meditate on Proverbs

**22:3.** What are some danger signs in a relationship indicating that, if we keep going, we are likely to suffer?

**2** Before reading the next paragraph, write three ways you can guard your heart in a courting relationship.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

*Guard your heart.* “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life” (Pr 4:23). Guarding your heart means recognizing that your heart first belongs to God. You guard it because it is his property, not your own! Affection for another should never overtake our affection for God. God has given us a heart to be a wellspring, a place where his Spirit should have free reign. Guard your heart by resisting and rejecting infatuation and fantasy. Don’t reorder your life and relational network around a new relationship. Let convictions rule your behavior.

*Relate with purity.* While the heart is the wellspring of life, it can also be deceitful and strongly inclined to sin (Jer 17:9). So be sure to apply the advice Paul offered his younger friend Timothy, and relate to the opposite sex with “absolute purity” (1Ti 5:2). This means that, as we relate to each other across gender lines, we must never be satisfied with the standards of our innocence. Purity starts in the heart and works its way out into our actions, attitudes, and words. We must continually ask God to convict us of impure motives and actions, for purity is absolutely vital to a healthy courting relationship.

*Avoid exclusivity.* When I see a man and woman pair off to the exclusion of other relationships—either spending a great deal of time together alone, or turning away from other friends toward each other—I know we are about to witness either an explosion or a meltdown. *No courting*

*relationship should so warp our existing lifestyle that, if it were to end, we wouldn’t have anything or anybody to go back to.*

If we guard our hearts, relate with purity, and avoid exclusivity, we won’t eliminate the potential for pain,

but we can prepare ourselves to experience growth toward God through it.

**How do the roles of leadership and submission work in a courtship relationship?** A single woman once said to me, “I really believe my relationship can work, but he won’t lead. What can I do?” My advice was, “If he won’t lead, don’t try to follow.” This woman eventually came to realize that she was seeking leadership from a brother who was not ready for the responsibility. No amount of propping up or encouraging was going to make things work in such a situation.

Please understand this: The biblical roles of leadership

### **Meditate on Proverbs**

**25:28.** How does self-control come into play in protecting both yourself and the other person in a relationship?

““ The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.”

— C. S. Lewis

and submission in a relationship are covenantal. That is, they require a covenant of marriage in order to work. There is no ultimate biblical responsibility for a man to lead a woman, or a woman to submit to a man, in any personal relationship outside the covenant of marriage. This doesn't mean that a man shouldn't express a tendency to accept responsibility and leadership initiative, or that a woman shouldn't incline to be responsive to the man's direction and tone in a relationship. But single men and women stand in single status before the Lord and will therefore answer for their *personal godliness*, not their leadership or submission in a courting relationship.

**For Further Study:**

Read 1 John 2:12-14. What kind of example is John affirming in the young men?

Let me offer some practical advice. Brothers, I think good leadership initiative means you will be the one to assume responsibility for where a relationship is at any given time. Don't require a woman to show her cards for you to take the next step. Be willing to play your cards first and let her respond. Ask the Lord for grace to govern the relationship with wisdom and vision.

Sisters, don't *ever* abdicate your responsibility to hear from God for yourself regarding a relationship. No matter what a man says or does, you have to answer to God for your own decisions, and God will give you the grace to make them. Christian women who have been hurt in a relationship often realize that they brought some of the pain on themselves by assuming that God's will would be dictated through a man's actions. They realize too late that they foolishly avoided their personal responsibility in the relationship. If a single man is not earning the respect of a single woman by his character and conduct, it is simply unwise to assume that his behavior is an indication of God's will. Save yourself the heartache, and accept your responsibility to be obedient to God in any relationship you enter into.

**How much physical affection is appropriate in a courtship relationship?** A pastor I know recommends a simple and highly effective formula. We should ask for as much physical affection from someone we are courting as we would allow someone to have with our future spouse. There is great truth to this formula. Until we have uttered the great "I do" and been duly wed before God and man, we have no right to indulge any sexual desires or to draw any sexual desires out of another person.

**For Further Study:**

Read 1 Corinthians 6:18-20. When we give in to sexual temptation, whom do we sin against?

So how much is too much? Just remember the absolute-purity standard that Paul gave to Timothy. Any physical expression that compromises either person's purity violates this biblical standard. Just because I'm

comfortable with some “innocent” behavior doesn’t give me a right to tempt someone else. Is this strict? Yes. Is it wise? Extremely.

Activities that fail to honor the purity standards of Scripture will compromise the godliness of a relationship.

““ When have I gone too far in a physical relationship before marriage? When my heart is pounding like a jackhammer and my hormones are flowing like water through a firehose, it’s a pretty strong clue that I have gone too far already! At such times, my body neither knows nor cares about my Christian convictions. Instead of trying to figure out how to derail a fifty-ton locomotive traveling at high speed, wisdom suggests we would do better to stay off the train and avoid the crisis in the first place.<sup>8</sup>

— Randy Alcorn

Physical affection tends to squelch communication—it’s easier to touch than talk. It also opens the door to deception, selfishness, and manipulation by redirecting the focus from what’s best for the other to what feels good to me.

Most of all, opening the door to a physical relationship tampers with God’s blessing. Paul advises us, “Flee from sexual immorality...Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from

God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1Co 6:18-20). Set your standard of purity high, and your tolerance for physical compromise low. Honor God with your relationship.

**3** Many Christians advocate dating rules for handling courtship situations. Some of these rules are biblically wise and some are not. Put a check by each of the following rules that are scripturally supportable.

- Relate to each other with purity
- Never get involved in ministry with someone you find attractive
- Anything you do is OK as long as you pray before or after it
- Don’t lead each other on
- Never interact outside of a group context with someone you are interested in
- As you pursue a relationship, have someone hold you accountable

**How do I know if our relationship should lead to marriage?**

This is the million-dollar question. Sorry—no simple answers here. Marriage is one of the few for-life decisions a person will ever make. No one ever made a mistake trusting in Christ, but we can really mess up a marriage decision.

Does that feel heavy? It should. But my confidence is that in matters of such gravity, God will not leave Christians hanging. God definitely knows what he’s doing (even if you don’t just yet). He has been bringing men and women together ever since the garden of Eden. He prepares each of his children for a high calling, and for many that calling includes marriage. If you are called to marriage, trust God for the timing and submit to

“ Let the whole of your life be seen to be controlled by your concern for the glory of God. The kind of partner that will be suitable for you will be the kind of partner that recognizes and appreciates someone who is seeking first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. Aim to be a man or woman of prayer, one who delights to walk closely with God, one who delights to walk in the ways of God. Let your whole life reflect the reality that you are a son or daughter of the King.<sup>9</sup> ”

— Andrew Swanson

**For Further Study:**

Read Matthew 6:25-34. What should be our focus as we wait for God's will concerning a life partner?

**For Further Study:**

Read Philippians 4:10-13. What is Paul's secret in handling the difficult situations of life?

his training, and you will stand with the spouse of his choosing in the time of his blessing.

From the moment I met my future wife, I felt we were supposed to be married. There were only two small problems: we lived in different parts of the country, and I was an immature Christian with no job. My bright idea was to take a foolish step of presumption (at the time I preferred to call it “a bold step of faith”) and just get married. By

God's grace, I had a wise pastor who helped me keep my immaturity in check. It took three years of Jill and I being apart before God brought us together to be married. I needed every bit of that time to get ready—any sooner, and I would have been unprepared. God took care of Jill and me. He'll take care of you, too.

**What happens if I am in a courtship and I realize it is not meant to result in marriage?** Courtship is not a science, it's a relationship. Two people can do everything right, carry on an exemplary courtship, get along great, resolve any disagreements and conflicts that might pop up along the way—but none of this *necessarily* means that God wants them to be married. Sometimes, one or both of the people involved realizes the relationship is not meant to progress any farther. What to do then?

If two people have purposed from the beginning to walk humbly, submit themselves to God's timing and plan, and love as brothers and sisters until God defines them as more than that, the end of a courtship need not be traumatic. This is because true courtship is founded on friendship. To move from courtship back to friendship is therefore not a “break-up,” just a re-definition. (The whole concept of breaking up derives from the world's hopelessly flawed dating rituals.) In a healthy courtship, the fundamental brother/sister friendship doesn't change. Therefore, when such a courtship does not end in marriage, there may be awkwardness and sadness, but there is still a good place for the relationship to go, and godly, responsible new roles to be played by each person.

Ultimately, it takes faith to open the door to a potential

courting relationship. Not all such relationships will end in marriage. Those that do we will celebrate. Those that do not we can celebrate as well, because the same faith in God's guidance and will is required to move a courting relationship toward marriage or return it to godly friend-

“ Because all believers are united to Christ and are members of His body, breaking off a [courting] relationship only changes the direction of that relationship, not its status.<sup>10</sup>

— Jeffery S. Forrey

ship. In either case, the result is a testimony to the marvelous grace of God at work in his people.

Several years ago I was involved in the singles group of a small church. In that group were a man and woman who had at one time been engaged to one another.

Since we were a small group, these two were constantly having to interact. But because they had walked out the relationship with integrity and ended it with respect, they had begun to see the shoots of a new friendship emerging from what had been the remains of a long courtship.

When the woman subsequently married another man in the group, my friend had to welcome that relationship into his life as well. It wasn't easy, but he knew he had walked in a way that pleased the Lord, so he had no regrets and was able to extend grace and love toward this new couple. In a world of bitterness and broken hearts, this kind of love makes a difference. It did for me, for it profoundly shaped my view of the potential of Christian courtship.

### **But Can It Work for Me?**

This past year I have been honored to perform a number of weddings of people in our singles group. Included among the couples were two never-married single parents, a widowed single mother, a woman who had been abandoned in her first marriage, and several folks who had written off any hope of marriage. Nancy and Doug were one of those couples. Both in their late thirties, they had been stalwarts in our singles ministry for years. Both had been in courting relationships in the past, but those relationships had not worked out. Let me close with their story of God's leading, in Nancy's words.

*“Doug and I met nearly ten years ago at a Bible study. We both remember going out for coffee one night after the study and talking for hours. I remember that Doug ‘scared the life out of me.’ It was as though he could see*

*right through me, and I did not like that idea. So, for the next nine years as our friendship grew, I was always making sure we never got too close. The times we talked were wonderful, but afterward I would intentionally hide from him by keeping myself busy with other friends. If you were to ask my roommates, they'd tell you my favorite saying was, 'I just don't want him to like me!'*

*"From Doug's perspective, there wasn't any reason for me to hide. He was just being himself. His wonderful, friendly, inquisitive self, I might add...and of course, he was always a gentleman. About two years ago, I had a dream about Doug and was awakened with this overwhelming feeling of being totally loved, accepted, and known. It was beautiful, not scary. As I began to pray, I realized I had closed my heart years earlier to the idea of Doug and I ever being more than friends. God gave me the desire and the ability to stop hiding and to really become a good friend to Doug. The more I knew him, the more I loved him.*

*"However, it wasn't all easy. Doug did not have the same feelings for me. He regularly told me how much he respected and admired me, but there were no 'romantic feelings.' By the grace of God, we were able to grow in our friendship without any expectation of being more than friends. (I must admit I had lots of prayer partners, though.) And unbeknownst to me, the Lord was working in Doug's heart, too. I'll never forget the night last September when he told me, 'The seat next to you on the roller coaster isn't empty any longer' and asked me to walk out a courting relationship. These past eleven months have definitely been a roller coaster for both of us, but we know in our hearts there is no one else we'd rather ride next to than each other. 'The Lord is good to those who wait for Him.'"*

A little postscript to the story. You might think that after all those years Doug and Nancy would be tempted to sprint into marriage without as much as a backward glance at their single friends. Not so. They remembered how hard it had been to be single and be guests and even attendants at the weddings of friends over the years, wondering if they would ever get the chance to wear the bride and groom clothes. In their joy, they did not forget the wait. At the end of their wedding service, each single woman received a rose, along with a note from Nancy that read:

Dear Single Sister,

Please receive this flower as an expression of God's love for you and his faithfulness to you. So many times I've gone to weddings and after the bouquet toss felt very lonely and sad. I promised myself that if I ever got married I would give each single woman a flower to honor her. I hope that our wedding has been a testimony to you of God's goodness and his perfect timing. Be encouraged...his way is perfect!

Brothers and sisters, even the big question of who you are to marry and how that will come about is not a perplexity to God. Prepare for the future, and love with purity and wisdom. Be encouraged. His way is perfect. ■

**GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. Is flirting OK for Christians? Why or why not?
2. At what point in a courting relationship is romance appropriate?
3. In what ways do men and women differ in their perspective on courting relationships?
4. What are some of the pitfalls of allowing first impressions to determine your perception of another person?
5. How can the unwise pursuit of a relationship have a negative effect on your Christian life?
6. How can you get to know someone well enough to determine whether you should pursue a deeper relationship with him or her, *without* spending lots of time alone together?
7. How important is it to keep the potential for marriage in mind when developing a deeper relationship with someone?
8. Whose responsibility is it to keep a relationship morally pure?
9. How can you know when you are ready to pursue a courting relationship?
10. What are some convictions you hold regarding how you will conduct yourself in courtship?

**RECOMMENDED READING** *Passion and Purity* by Elisabeth Elliot (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1984)

*I Kissed Dating Goodbye* by Joshua Harris (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1997)

*Boy Meets Girl* by Joshua Harris (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 2000)

#### NOTES

1. Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1997), p. 24.
2. Douglas J. Wilson, *Her Hand in Marriage* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1997), p. 10.
3. *Swing*, May 1997, p. 85.
4. *U.S. News & World Report*, 5/19/97, p. 58.
5. Douglas J. Wilson, *Her Hand in Marriage*, p. 85.
6. Elisabeth Elliot, *Quest for Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), p. 203.
7. Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root, eds., *The Quotable Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1989), p. 403.
8. Randy C. Alcorn, *Christians in the Wake of the Sexual Revolution* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1985), p. 221.
9. Andrew Swanson, *Whom Shall I Marry?* (Carlisle, PA; Banner of Truth, 1995), p. 29.
10. Jeffery S. Forrey, "Biblical Counsel for Concerned Singles," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Spring 1996, p. 31.