

Choosing for Life

Relationship Choices Without Regrets

By Mike Constantine

INTRODUCTION

Susan sat crying, eyes red, hopes destroyed. John, the guy she was planning to marry, broke her heart. "Why are you so upset?" he had asked her. "Did I promise that you would be the only woman in my life? Besides, it only happened once. Why can't you try to understand?"

Like many couples, they let their feelings of love draw them deeper into a relationship that Susan never did feel right about.

Still, John was nice-- most of the time. And they had had sex. In fact, sometimes Susan felt that sex was the only glue holding their shaky relationship together. At least that was something special that was theirs and theirs alone.

Then John sent a text message, intended for the other woman. He had them both on speed dial, and sent it to Susan by mistake. That's when she found out about the other girl. Susan was crushed. So much for feeling special!

At her honest moments Susan admitted that she had seen troubling signs for at least two years. But she felt so close, so special to John, that she overlooked those warning signals.

She will not marry a man who has cheated on her, before they were even married. But who else would want her? And what if the next guy is just as big a rat as John was?

For all you young singles out there, men or women, there is a better way. Choosing for Life will help you find it.

PREFACE

For 30 years I have talked with young people about dating and marriage. If you live in Malaysia, perhaps I talked to your mom or dad when they were younger. It's a common topic for me when I speak to youth and young adults.

In addition, my wife and I have many conversations with young men and women who want to know how to relate, date, and find a mate. We also do pre-marriage counseling using materials that we developed in the Southeast Asian context.

All of that involvement has given us an undying desire to help young adults make the best possible decisions about dating, sexual practices, and choosing their life partners.

I am not writing theory, in the sense that there are theories in all the sciences, including psychology. By the grace of God, I think I have some sound answers, not just theories.

Often, when we are more interested in theories than in straight answers, we are trying to leave ourselves a way out. While we examine all the theories we continue doing things that we know, in our hearts, are not right.

Perhaps the ideas in this book will help you make wiser decisions and avoid some common mistakes. My purpose is to point you in the right direction, not to answer every possible question about man/woman relationships. To do that would take a book so big that a busy single wouldn't have time to read it. Since I really want you to read this, I'll keep it fairly short. I will give you some simply stated principles, but with years of experience and study woven into that simplicity.

THE ESSENCE OF CHOOSING FOR LIFE

Bottom line: today's young adults want to know if marriage is still important. If it is, how do we choose well and build a lasting, joyful marriage?

Although many trends change, the questions young people ask follow a similar line as always. They want simplicity and clarity, somewhat scarce commodities in these times of social confusion. Complexity and theory may be fine for chemistry or algebra. But in dating and courtship clear, practical, applicable wisdom is what young adults want more than anything.

Choosing for Life provides straight answers that will help you choose a life partner and know what to do before you make that choice. Now may I ask you something? Will you, to the best of your ability, try to be honest with God, with the Word of God, and with yourself? Personal dishonesty is the only condition that absolutely guarantees a messed up life.

I am writing as a Christian, a believer in Jesus, and as a man who has tested the reliability of the Bible. If you do not have the same beliefs, I do not condemn you. Please do continue reading, though. Many of the principles I will share will help you, no matter what your beliefs. And it is always possible that you might find biblical ideas so appealing that you want to know the God behind them.

Also, my primary audience is Asian. Though I am an American, Asia is where I have done most of my work in this field. If you are from another place, everything in here will still help you. So read on.

Remember: you are not choosing for the moment, or even for a brief season. You are choosing for life.

ABOUT THE DESIGN OF THIS BOOK

Choosing for Life is divided into brief chapters. Each chapter has a few sub-sections. At the end of the book you will find some questions for reflection on each chapter. You can use those alone, with a friend, or in a discussion group.

Please note that none of the names used in this book are the actual names of the people in the stories. Also, some stories are combined from several different people.

CHAPTER ONE

Ideas: Important, but Changing

Most young adults are pretty smart. They want clear answers, not just general principles. Instinctively, they know that this is a vitally important topic, something with life-long effects.

They watch and evaluate other marriages, and that creates questions. Do they want a marriage like those? Is there any hope for a really good marriage? As one young Malaysian woman wrote to us in an email:

I'm starting to feel slightly disillusioned about marriages. As it is, I can hardly muster excitement for my friends who are getting married. It's just hard to be where they are when, in my own life and relationship, I feel like a girl trying to wade to the other bank in a river of clay.

Obviously, her ideas, and perhaps her ideals, are taking a beating.

For our discussion, an idea is a bit of information that can be true or false; good or bad; wise or stupid. Some ideas (like which toothpaste is better) have no lasting importance. Let's forget those for now, and concentrate on the ideas that can make a lasting difference in our lives.

Ideas are powerful. They can change our beliefs, our values, our assumptions, and ultimately, our choices. The process happens gradually, often by degrees, like dawn or dusk. But it is no less powerful just because it is gradual

Ideas come to us through messages. We see and hear thousands every day. Some come from media— programs, movies, music, the web, and ads. Other ideas reach us through social networking. Our parents and peers have their ideas, and so do our spiritual leaders.

We also fashion our ideas by observing our world. Combining our observations with other messages we get from other channels, we form opinions about life, including marriage.

We really have no choice. Since we cannot live in a cave, we have to find a way to evaluate messages and the ideas they contain. If you fail to do that you end up leaving some of life's most important decisions to chance— or, just as bad, to flawed ideas.

Changing Assumptions

This avalanche of conflicting messages and ideas may be one reason more young adults are delaying marriage. A generation or two ago young people looked forward to marriage. They actually assumed that they would marry, once for life, sometime in their early to mid twenties. In addition, most couples did not live together before marriage. Now those assumptions have changed:

Today's young adults often leave their parents' home later, or return more often, extend their educations longer, delay marriage, and change jobs more frequently than their parents' generation. The factors affecting these changes range from economic conditions, to changing views and norms, to a changing portrait of this generation . . .

*The Network to Transitions in Adulthood, italics mine
(transad.pop.upenn.edu/about/whatweknow.html)*

The same website continues:

Nowhere do we see such a fundamental shift than in this generation's views on marriage and family. Youth today are delaying marriage and family longer, and often believe it's necessary to have all one's ducks in a row (education completed, career well established, money saved for a house, etc.) before marrying.

They also view potential partners in a much more romantic ideal. They are looking for that soul mate, someone who will be the yin to their yang. They are also less willing to give up their independence. Whereas past generations typically viewed marriage as you + me = us, today's youth see it as you + me = you and me.

Here is more data from the good old USA, the country whose social ideas and concepts spread most widely throughout the world, particularly through media. These quotes come from Albert Mohler:

When Belinda Luscombe (a researcher) argues that marriage is "in purely practical terms just not as necessary as it used to be," she has a rationale to back up her argument. "Neither men nor women need to be married to have sex or companionship or professional success or respect or even children." All that is true — when marriage is viewed on the canvas of American culture.

On the changing attitudes towards sex, here is what Mohler has to say:

Marriage no longer regulates sex. The Sexual Revolution severed sex from marriage in a social sense, and the arrival of The Pill offered a pharmaceutical means of severing sex from reproduction. No-fault divorce arrived as a legal accommodation to marital impermanence, effectively redefining both marital and family law in the process. Social status and professional expectations were liberated from the question of marriage, and many feminists declared that marriage itself was an impediment to the full liberation of women.

— Albert Mohler, Who Needs Marriage: TIME Asked the Question - Do You Have an Answer? Christianity.Com

All of those comments apply to contemporary Asians as well as Americans. For example, consider Singapore (which often reflects the social changes that Malaysia eventually experiences):

Singaporeans are getting married later, and more are staying single . . .

– Stork & Cupid Out to Lunch? - A Sociological Appreciation of Late Marriage and Low Fertility on Singapore Society. Pauline Tay Straughan, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore

Those comments are just a few examples of the shifting assumptions and changing ideas that young adults experience. With that in mind, how much change do you see in your own ideas and assumptions? And how will those changing perceptions affect your future?

Marriage, a Life Sentence

You will spend approximately fifty years, maybe more, in close, intimate relationship with the person you choose to marry. That is, if you make it. Not all do. But if you make it you can look forward to fifty or more years.

That's a life sentence.

Fifty years! That's 18,262 days, including extra days for leap years. How many mornings with smelly breath and messy hair? How many meals at the same table? How many times that he leaves the bathroom a mess or she serves tasteless rice? How many disputes about how you use your money? How many bad moods? How many arguments? How many ordinary, unspectacular days?

Choose well. Marriage can be a dream come true or a nightmare, and a lot depends on how you choose.

“Well, if it doesn't work out, we can just get a divorce,” you're thinking. Without a long discussion let me just say that you want a divorce as much as you want heart surgery without anesthesia. Even when divorce seems like the only option, it still tears people apart and always hurts the children.

In the next chapter we will take a look at a biblical model of marriage. Millions of people testify that the biblical model is the best model. I hope you will join them.

CHAPTER TWO

Marriage by the Book

As I mentioned earlier, ideas bombard us like rain. So we need some standard for comparison, a final authority. Many people find that the Bible is a proven and reliable standard.

Let's take a few moments to understand a biblical model for marriage. Some of the principles that follow are directly stated in the Bible; others are deductions I make from my understanding of the Bible. Together they paint a picture of a beautiful and appealing marriage. In fact, I cannot imagine a more desirable way to view marriage.

Marriage is designed by God. This is the Principle of Origin. You can find it stated in Genesis 2:24:

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

Taking this biblical idea as stated, marriage is much more than a sociological necessity that has developed through an evolutionary process. Marriage was instituted by God when He created the first man and woman. If God is the designer, we should really want to know his thoughts for his design.

Let me pause here to ask a question about a common concern with the verse I just quoted. Are you worried about what leaving father and mother means? Many in Asia are. I can tell you this: it does not mean that you have to abandon your parents or ignore them. The Asian idea of filial devotion and honor is not replaced by the Bible. It is upheld by the Bible.

When a man and woman marry they do not forsake their families, but they do become a unique unit within their extended families. They can stay with their parents or not, depending on their circumstances and what is best for all concerned.

Marriage is designed for covenant intimacy. That is the Principle of Connection. Covenant intimacy is the unique marital intimacy that is protected by the promises we make and keep, no matter what happens.

One rather graphic reference to that is in Genesis 2:25:

And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

Naked! Yeah! Now we're talking! Not so fast, cowboy! The nakedness described in these words is much more than a prelude to sex. It describes a marriage that was so secure that the man and woman could be completely uncovered without embarrassment or fear.

For Adam and Eve complete intimacy was easy, until Eve listened to a talking snake, bit for his line, and shared the forbidden fruit with her husband. Up to that time they were sinless, and absolute intimacy was automatic. After that, everything in life became more difficult, and that includes their marriage.

Intimacy is not easy, partially because we have a history of hurt. We have injured others and received wounds from them. Even so, we enter marriage with some hope of developing the

same intimacy Adam and Eve experienced automatically. Sure, it's a struggle, but believe me, it is attainable and worth the effort.

No matter how many stories you've heard of broken marriages you have seen, you can develop a marriage that makes both of you glad you have it, all the time— a marriage where both of you feel safe, secure, and completely close. Diane and I have, for more than forty years. Nothing special about us. You can have a great marriage, too!

One more word about intimacy. Sexual love, within marriage, is a celebration of the unique intimacy that a married couple can have. Your world devalues sexual love by proclaiming that sex outside of marriage is normal, natural, and even necessary. Please do not believe them. I have never met a person who abstained from sex before marriage and regretted it. I have met quite a few who regretted not waiting till marriage. I wonder which choice you will make.

Marriage is designed to make both partners better people. That is the Principle of Development. One place the Bible speaks about that is in I Thessalonians 5:11:

Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

You probably know some married couples who have become bitter, not better, because of their marriages. It does not have to be that way. We really can help each other become better people who have a more positive outlook.

This does not mean that you marry a restoration project: some broken guy or girl who thinks only you can fix them. That usually leads to years of frustration and ultimately marital breakdown. But it does mean that you can both become better people because of your marriage, not in spite of your marriage.

Healthy marriages build healthy people who are more likely to fulfill their God-given purpose. As the Bible says, in Proverbs 27:17, New Living Translation:

As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend.

We often apply that passage to difficult relationships. I wonder why? This verse says nothing about difficult people. It says that two friends help each other keep their edge, just by relating closely to each other. That can happen in marriage.

Marriage is designed for Joy. That is the Principle of Cheerfulness. The Bible has to be one of the most joyful books ever written. Joy isn't always evident, for the Bible is serious and realistic. It tells the whole story, truthfully, even if it has to tell the sad parts. Even so, joy bubbles out everywhere.

Proverbs 15:15, in the Message Translation, expresses that joy as it applies to human relationships:

A miserable heart means a miserable life; a cheerful heart fills the day with song.

Every marriage will face challenges, but in good marriages couples develop a deep joy that is part appreciation, part affection, and part commitment. That joy is like a hidden spring in their marriage. Sometimes it is quiet contentment; sometimes outright laughter.

Joyful marriages keep men and women from looking elsewhere for exhilaration. They have it in their life-long covenant relationship, their marriage. Further, when children come they catch their parents' joy.

Marriage is designed to have a positive effect on the world. That is The Principle of Influence. Look at the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:14-16:

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Some marriages spread darkness. They are like a cold fog that chills everyone around them. Who would want that?

God's design is to fill two people with his light and truth (they always go together) and make that marriage like a lighthouse on a dark and dangerous coast.

Do you think that is just poetic language? Not at all. We know many marriages that have spread light for years.

Marriage is Designed to Last a Lifetime. That is the Principle of Permanence.

Here are the words of Christ from Matthew 19:6:

And He said, "This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." Since they are no longer two but one, let no one split apart what God has joined together.

In virtually all developed and developing countries, divorce is on the rise. It has become so common that some so-called authorities feel the need to make it seem like a reasonable decision, lacking any painful consequences.

Let me clarify. All divorce brings pain. Even couples who have divorced as the last possible option experience pain that lingers for years. As Margaret Atwood said, "A divorce is like an amputation; you survive, but there's less of you."

Now, this is not the place to discuss whether divorce is right or wrong. However, it is the time for you to decide that you will marry for life. If you plan for lifelong success you'll get it. But if you keep the idea of divorce as an option, that may undermine your efforts to succeed.

Marriage is Designed for Child-Bearing. That is the Principle of Reproduction. Here is just one biblical expression of that idea from Psalm 127:3:

Children are a gift from the LORD; they are a real blessing.

It is God's intention that children grow up in a secure family with a mom and a dad. It is the optimum social environment for developing well-adjusted people. So as you plan for marriage, ask yourself if the person you are considering would make a good parent.

Personally, I did not want to be a dad. The idea scared me. But even though I could not see myself as a father, my wife did. In fact, she felt sure I would make a great dad.

It literally took a miracle for Diane to conceive. When our sons were born we both felt a deep sense of thankfulness. I do not know if I have been a great dad, but by God's grace I have joyfully loved my two sons (and now their wives and our grandchildren) all of their lives.

Like us, some couples find they cannot have children for medical reasons. If conditions exist that might make having children impossible, remember this: God can heal you. If he does not,

there are thousands of children who need parents who will adopt them and love them. As an adopted child myself, I would thrill to know that you and your spouse had taken an unwanted child into your heart, as God takes us into his heart.

As you think about the points I have just shared with you, keep in mind that nearly all of them are vigorously opposed by contemporary ideas. As I have said, throughout your life– in your single years, your courtship, and your marriage– you will have to decide which ideas will rule your life. The next section will help you discover a way to find the focus you'll need.

CHAPTER THREE

First Things First

It is always wise to begin at the beginning. If you want to be a successful single and eventually have a successful marriage there is one principle for you to consider first. That principle is complete commitment.

Romans, chapter 12, verses one and two, explains commitment in unmistakable language. Here it is as it appears in the Good News Bible. You may have read this verse a thousand times, but please take time to consider it in the light of courtship and marriage.

*So then, my brothers, because of God's great mercy to us I appeal to you:
Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and
pleasing to him. This is the true worship you should offer.*

Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God, what is good and pleasing to him and is perfect.

God, in his mercy, gave his Son to save us from our sin and make us his very own people. We respond to his mercy by giving ourselves to him. Pleasing God becomes our goal. Because we have that single goal, we can live confidently; knowing that he will help us choose what is best for us.

Therefore, complete commitment creates complete confidence in God about our future decisions. Can you see the difference? No commitment, no confidence. Complete commitment, complete confidence. Before we decide who we are going to marry, God wants us to decide to completely commit our life to him. Then we will choose our partner with the help of God's wisdom.

Partial commitment has caused many unsuccessful marriages. A partially committed Christian will always make some harmful decisions, but a person who really wants God's best seldom has regrets.

Does total commitment to God mean a problem free marriage? Hardly! All marriages are challenging. But when we choose well, and honor God in our choice, we know that he will help us through any and all challenges.

How do we make such a commitment? Just tell God that you put yourself completely in his hands, and that you want only his best for your life.

Learn to understand his will by reading the Bible. It may not give you a specific answer to a specific question, but it will renew your mind. You can then be sensitive to the Holy Spirit as he directs you in the decisions you make.

Remember, Father knows best! He has a better plan for your life than what you would ever choose for yourself. So, if you are dating a really handsome guy or a really cute girl, but you know that either the relationship or the timing is not right, give it up. You will hurt for a while, but you will have a far better future.

Summing up, if God says that something is not good, trust Him. He loves you. An honest desire to please God protects us from a whole lot of needless frustration and emotional pain.

The Enemies inside the Gates

Our world is full of bacteria and viruses. Some cause discomfort; some kill. Thankfully, our bodies are wonderfully designed to combat all infections through our immune system. But with a compromised immune system, even a relatively small attacker could threaten your life. People have died from a pin prick.

You also have a spiritual immune system. It is strengthened through hearing and obeying the truth, and living in the invigorating grace of God.

In normal conditions grace and truth will keep us safe from destructive ideas. However, there are some attitudes that can weaken our defenses, like enemies who sneak into a fortress to let in an invading army. Here they are: rebellion, impatience, and curiosity.

Rebellion is the most dangerous of the three. You see it in your life when you say, “I want my way, no matter what happens.” It is subtle, though. Rebellion can look almost innocent, but if you keep entertaining it, your defenses will weaken. It could even kill you.

Rebellion replaces the will of God with your will. It makes you resist wisdom and leads to regret. Here is how Proverbs puts it:

You will say, “How I hated discipline! If only I had not ignored all the warnings! Oh, why didn’t I listen to my teachers? Why didn’t I pay attention to my instructors? I have come to the brink of utter ruin, and now I must face public disgrace.” – Proverbs 5:12-14, New Living Translation

I can introduce you to young people who have experienced that very condition. You might even meet one in the mirror.

Impatience. Impatience means that you are in such a hurry that you forget to use wisdom. We will look at this more in a later section. For now just know that impatience usually leads to regrets.

Curiosity. Sometimes we just want to know how something would feel. What does it feel like to be in love? What does it feel like to hug, to kiss, to touch and be touched- to have sex? Curiosity is pretty normal, really. But combine it with rebellion and impatience and it can get you into serious trouble, like a fly drawn into a spider’s web. Easy in, but very hard to get out.

Rebellion, Impatience, Curiosity. Any of the three is dangerous. But combine two or more of them and you have a recipe for regret.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dating and Courtship: It's All About Worship. Really.

You're probably surprised by the title of this section. "Dating is all about worship? How?" you ask. "I thought worship is what we do in church."

It sounds crazy, if all we mean by worship is what happens on Sunday morning between ten and noon. But worship is much more than that. Worship is expressed in our entire life, including all our choices and decisions. Therefore, dating and courtship really is all about worship.

Take a look at Romans 12:1, 2 again, this time in the Message Bible Translation:

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life--your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking- around life--and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

Eugene Peterson, the man who translated The Message Bible, really helps us get to the heart of the meaning. We place our whole life before God as an offering. Then, instead of making our important choices according to what our culture is saying at the moment, or what other cultures say through the media, we make our choices based on God's wisdom. That will include if we date, when we date, who we date, and how we date.

Should I Date?

Answering that question requires some definition. What do we mean by dating? For this discussion, here's my definition:

Dating means going out with one member of the opposite sex in order to spend time together, usually with a romantic motive.

There are different types of dating: double dating, group dating, and one-on-one dating. The emphasis here is on the last one, because young adults have a lot of questions about it.

Opinions vary about whether young people should date. Here is a brief roundup and summary of them. I'll give you my personal view after you have read these:

- All dating is evil! Dating is sin! Dating is lust! Don't even think about it! This position is the least common, but you might have encountered it. In my opinion it is far too harsh, judgmental, and general.
- Some kinds of dating are OK, but you have to set and keep good, safe boundaries. Dating, according to this opinion, can help you learn more about yourself and the opposite gender as well. But it has to be well-regulated and age appropriate.

- Wait to date until you old enough to start looking for your life partner. Do not date just to date, or because everyone else does. Dating is, therefore, a part of courtship, not just a social activity that can lead to premature emotional attachments and physical/ sexual experimentation.

So, where do I stand on the issue? In my opinion the safest, wisest, most God-honoring approach is to choose not to date until you are ready for marriage. There are still many ways to build friendships and get to know guys or girls without one-on-one dating. If you take that path you'll concentrate more on building friendships and establishing strong values.

You'll also keep yourself from falling into the traps that the media has set for you. Virtually all media— whether music, websites, TV, or movies— all media promotes a worldview that is anti-biblical. There's a lot of love talk, but little understanding of what love really means. At the core of their message is this idea:

Believe what you want to believe. Do what you what to do. Don't let anyone tell you how to live your life.

It's an idea as old as the Garden of Eden. God's idea is 180 degrees different. "Believe in God and trust Him with your whole life. Do what He wants you to do. Learn from Him. Then you will know how to live a successful, God-honoring life."

In short, save dating till you are ready to start a courtship, the time when you are developing a relationship that will lead to marriage. Till then concentrate on friendships and healthy self-development.

What about Internet Dating?

Like you, I benefit from social media and networking apps. But as you know, the internet is a dangerous place. So, exercise caution about one-on-one relationships in cyberspace. No one can see you there. You can say or do something that you think will not get out, but it does.

One Malaysian girl told me that she had liked this guy, and then broke up with him. He slammed her on his Facebook page and made her life miserable. That happens all the time, and it can happen to you.

For older singles, what about matchmaking websites? They could help, in some cases, for some people. But you must make sure the site is reputable and has proper safeguards. Even so, do not agree to anything without a lot of thought and counsel.

Never take romantic risks, especially online, just because you feel desperate. Instead, use wisdom and talk to some reliable helpers. They are the ones who can help you avoid dangers you may not see.

Never share your personal contact information with anyone on the internet. Stalkers are everywhere and someone you meet online could be one. Cyberspace is an easy place to lie.

If you do decide to meet someone in person whom you have met online, make sure it is in a public place, and do not go there alone. Take a friend along. Tell someone where you are going and who you are meeting. Make sure that you have your phone with you. And have an escape plan. Know exactly what you will do to get out of there if it doesn't look good.

Take note: the advice about meeting someone only applies to adults, not to teens. If you are a teen, never meet anyone, anywhere, whom you have only known online.

“Should I Date Someone Who Doesn’t Follow Jesus?”

(Note: if you are not a follower of Christ, please read this section anyway. It might help you understand why someone who follows Christ cannot marry someone from another religion.)

I have heard this question, in various forms, many times. It is usually accompanied by other statements, such as, “I know she is not a Christian but she seems to be open to Christianity.”

It is never God’s will for a follower of Jesus to date or marry someone who does not follow Jesus. There are many reasons for this. But as I have already said, it comes down to basic incompatibility on the most fundamental level of life: who, or what, we worship. That is the core issue. Not how handsome or how cute; not how much money or what kind of car he drives. Who, or what, does he or she worship?

If you date a person who worships someone or something other than your God, or someone who worships God with only half a heart, sooner or later you will be pressured to abandon your convictions and make choices that you know are not good for you or honoring to God. You don’t want to do that, do you?

Remember, worship is much more than attending church. Worship is about choosing to honor God in all of your life, because He chose to send Jesus to die for you. That is not always easy, I know. But if that is your life’s core and focus, God will help you live it. And, when you choose someone to enter courtship with, you will choose someone who shares your love for God.

Bait, or Believer?

One university student asked this question: “If we can’t date people who do not share our faith won’t they be disappointed with our attitude? Shouldn’t we date them so that we can win them to Christ?”

Evangelistic dating is a mythical concept with no basis in reality. You are not the bait that the Lord uses to fish for men. You are a witness who has personal experience of Christ.

Besides, the approach that student suggested doesn’t work. It is far more common for the unbeliever to pull the believer into sin and compromise than it is for the believer to pull an unsaved boyfriend or girlfriend into the church. Trust me on this.

As for people of other beliefs being disappointed with us, I seriously doubt that they will disrespect us for standing by our convictions. They may even admire us. Here’s an example from my life.

When I was in my early twenties, I went through a very tough period, caused by some bad personal choices. I dropped out of college and nearly ended up conscripted and sent to fight in Vietnam. During that time I was living in Las Vegas near my sister. (Don’t let all the lights and glitter fool you. Vegas can be a pretty lonesome place.) One day my sister said, “Mike, you look lonely. Go out with a nice girl. Here’s \$50.00.”

Well, there was this one young woman I met at the bank. She seemed nice, so I asked her to go out with me. “Sure,” she said, “let’s meet at this club where my friends play in a band.”

We did meet there, but the place was a dump and I was uncomfortable. Finally, I asked her to come to a quieter corner with me. “Carrie,” I said, “this will not work. I am a believer in Jesus, and I do not belong here.” “Wow, Mike,” Carrie said. “I wish I had a faith like that. I admire you for it.” “You can have this kind of faith,” I told her. “I’ll be praying for you.”

So you see, Carrie did not criticize me. Instead, she respected my convictions. Suppose she hadn’t respected them? I would still know that that place and that young lady were not for me.

Before going on, I should mention one more thing. You may be using this question to justify a relationship which you know, deep in your heart, is neither good for you, nor pleasing to God. Be honest with yourself and with God. Otherwise there's no way he can help you.

Sure, be friendly and caring to those who don't know Christ. But that doesn't mean we should date them and get emotionally involved. You say you won't get emotionally involved? Inevitably you will, just like the Israelites did with foreign women and their scary idols.

It all began with a visit. They went to see what was going on with the people who lived around them. Maybe attended a few parties. "This is pretty cool!" they thought to themselves.

It wasn't long until they were captivated by the charms of those who didn't honor God. Once captivated they compromised their commitment. Not a pretty sight! For them it was a long road back to security in God, and some of them didn't make it.

The Bible has a word for their type of sin: presumption, or willful sin. (Psalm 19:13) It means you know danger lurks, but you plunge in nonetheless, hoping nothing bad will happen. Let me give you my definition of that word:

Presumption means putting yourself in spiritual, emotional, physical or financial danger, outside the will of God.

I say, 'outside the will of God,' because there are times when we are in danger yet in God's will.

In the Bible, Joseph was in the service of Potiphar, in the will of God, yet in potential sexual danger. The lady of the house, Mrs. Potiphar, was a sex-starved woman who wanted to make Joseph her boy toy. Ultimately he had to run to save his reputation. It cost him a prison sentence, innocent though he was, but he did not compromise his convictions. (See Genesis 39:6-18)

Dating someone who does not believe in Jesus is a danger outside God's will, not in it. When you go out with someone who isn't committed to Christ you are committing presumptuous sin. Get out of danger while you can. If you are not in danger now, stay out.

"You don't understand. I know my boyfriend isn't a Christian, but he is really nice. In fact he's more of a gentleman than the last Christian I dated." I agree that is possible. Not every Christian acts like a Christian, and some who say they honor Christ don't behave like they do. And some men, whether Christian or not, are just idiots when it comes to women. Even so, please do not let your need to be desired lead you into a relationship that you may well regret later.

To sum up: you have a basic incompatibility with any unbeliever, and that incompatibility is as wide as an ocean and just as deep. (See 2 Corinthians 6:14-18)

In Asian societies there is another reason to not date or marry someone who is not a follower of Jesus: the extended family.

Sally, a Christian, marries Sam, a Buddhist. He tells her that she is free to go to church and follow God as much as she likes. Then they have a child. Sally leaves her boy with her in-laws while she goes to an all day seminar at her church. She comes back early and sees her boy holding joss and praying in front of an idol. That is a true story, and one that is often repeated, with variations, in Asian life.

When the Bible speaks as clearly as it does about this issue, we must believe that God is serious about it. If the Father says, "Don't do it!" he must know we are in danger if we do.

CHAPTER FIVE

Finding the Right Person

Personally, I think I have the perfect wife, the best! My mother once told me I could have searched the world and not found a better wife than Diane. When your mother talks like that you know you have found someone quite special. Obviously, I agree.

But, is Diane the only woman I could have married? Am I the only man in the world who was “the choice” for her? If so, what would have happened if one of us had resisted God’s will to marry the other? That kind of reasoning leads straight to confusion. There must be a better way to understand the will of the Lord about the person we choose to marry.

I do not think that there is only one perfect person for you to marry. There is, however, a right time and a right type of person to marry. Let me explain.

Before I met Diane, I knew several fine Christian women. I might have married any of them. We would have had a different life than the one Diane and I have had. Still, God would have blessed us if we had seriously sought him and married in his time, with his approval. Either the time wasn’t right, or we discovered that we really were not a good fit.

Diane’s side of the story mirrors mine. The Lord was also repairing and renewing Diane’s life, preparing her for the man she would marry. When Diane and I first met at university neither of us was ready for a commitment, though we could have rushed into the relationship on the basis of our strong attraction for each other. By another year later much had happened that prepared us to think about being life partners.

The question is, “Does God want me to begin seriously looking for a life partner at this time, or are there other things to be done in me first?” You will have peace about the choice that is pleasing to God. If it is the right time you will probably find people you highly respect encouraging you to start looking for a life partner, too.

What is the right type of person? In short, marry someone who loves God as much as you do. Please don’t think that I mean that if you love God only a little you should marry someone who only loves him a little. The best thing a person can do to get the best possible husband or wife is to honor God sincerely.

The Prison of Perfectionism

Some people are so afraid they won’t get the perfect mate that no one seems good enough.

Perfectionism really is a form of fear, and like most fears it makes us blind. We become so aware of the imperfections in the people we meet that we can’t see how special they really are. A perfectionist can be a lonely person living in perpetual frustration.

Let’s settle something. There are no perfect people. We all have bad breath in the morning; we all get moody from time-to-time; we all make mistakes; we all get an occasional pimple. We’re all growing and changing. There are no perfect people.

Are you perfect? No? Do you want to get married? Yes? Then whoever marries you is going to have to accept you and love you, imperfections and all. Of course you will have to do the same. If not, marriage won’t work.

God wants you to marry a person who is pleasing to him and pleasing to you, but searching for perfection will only cause frustration. It’s better to pray, “Lord, help me to find the best possible husband or wife and let me be the best for that person, too.”

How About the Pressure of Waiting?

You can rush some things, but do not rush marriage. Many people who rush into marriage eventually want to rush out. If you rush you may complicate your life and another life as well.

How do you deal with the anxiety of waiting in traffic? What if you're going to be late? Do you ignore the traffic lights or do you wait for them to change? Here in Malaysia some people see red lights as suggestions, not commandments. But if you want to avoid an accident you wait for the green light.

Remember. You're not waiting for, or looking for, the perfect person. You are waiting for the right time and looking for the best match for you. People who wait for the right time and person seldom have regrets.

Praying for Your Life Partner

My wife prayed quite specifically for me, but probably not in the way you think. She prayed for me before she ever met me. She prayed that the Lord would work in my life, helping me develop in ways that pleased him and strengthened me.

She did not know who she would marry when she started praying for her future husband. She didn't know if I would be short or tall, with much hair or little (Sigh. It turned out to be little.). She prayed about the things that were most important to her, and she prayed that God would bless her unknown future husband. When she met me she knew her prayers were answered! (It's just great being the answer to someone's prayers.) Praying specifically built her faith, too.

By the way, she does think I'm handsome and I think she's beautiful! Don't think that if you pray for a prince you will get a frog, or that God will force you to marry the Asian equivalent of Shrek, or the Green Witch from Wizard of Oz. God wants you to have the best possible person as your life partner.

Looks aren't everything, though. They change. Life has a way of etching its lines on our bodies. So make sure there's some real quality in that person you feel attracted to. Bodies become boring when there's nothing in the head and heart.

As for myself, I wasn't that specific. The one prayer that I remember praying was that the Lord would keep me from making a mistake! I knew myself, and I knew how easily I could fall in love. I'd already fallen in and out of love several times. (I do not recommend that.) So I prayed that the Lord would keep me from becoming emotionally involved with anyone other than the woman I would marry.

When I met Diane, I really prayed! I was afraid I was falling for someone again when it wasn't the right time. Eventually, though, I saw that this wonderful young woman and I made a great match.

Both of us had, and still have, our imperfections. But none of those imperfections have ever been major problems. Simply put, we are both thankful for the positive things in each other. We are totally committed to God, and in his love we are totally committed to each other.

I'm a happy man. I have a happy wife. We have more than forty years of success in all kinds of trials and situations. We're both glad that we waited on God's timing and that we are making this journey together. What the Lord has done for us he can do for you too.

When Is The Right Time?

Young people often want to know when they should start looking for a boyfriend or girlfriend. There are many variables.

Some rare couples met in form one and were always friends. Then, later, they saw that marriage would be agreeable to both of them. They are the exceptions. Most do not meet their future mate until later in life.

As a general rule you should not begin a relationship until you have finished your schooling. If you meet someone before that, agree to be friends, but no more. Do not allow the relationship to become romantic or exclusive until you have more maturity. Your ideas and identity can change dramatically between your early teen years and your young adult years.

How Long Should Our Courtship Last?

For years we have talked with young Asian couples, but we still wonder why Asian courtships have to last so long. In Malaysia, five years is common. Some are even longer. Worldwide, there is no standard. Some couples have a courtship of only a few months; others take years.

The length of your courtship does not predict the success of your marriage. “You can have a happy marriage after any length courtship,” says Ted Huston, Ph.D., professor of human ecology and psychology at the University of Texas.

Even so, there are a few factors to consider. To begin, why so long? With most Asian couples we have talked with the answer involves money. They may find it necessary to wait so they can afford the wedding and the wedding dinner. Then they hope that somehow they will recoup their investment, or part of it, through the monetary gifts they receive.

Other couples tell us that they really have no choice about waiting and saving money. Their parents expect them to have a big wedding so they, the parents, can invite all the people who invited them to their children’s weddings.

Still others delay marriage so they can start life with all the things they want: nice house, good car, money in the bank. My wife and I believe it is better to start simply, and build together towards your goals through saving and simplifying. That helps a couple develop contentment, character and patience, all qualities you will need in big amounts if you want your marriage to succeed.

There is also the problem of controlling your sexual hunger and curiosity for such a long time. It’s hard to know what is actually happening behind closed doors, but there are dangers.

Increasingly, couples are becoming sexually active before marriage, and it is not a healthy trend. Studies in the USA indicate that many committed Christian couples are having sex before marriage. You could too, even if you do not intend it. Many good promises lie on the on the floor, right next to the discarded clothes, abandoned in moments when passion became stronger than intention.

Some couples do manage to put sex on hold until marriage, even if they have to wait five years. But to do that you must set and maintain strong boundaries. You have to know when you are most vulnerable and how to resist sexual temptation with someone you dearly love.

Remember, too, that your courtship is the time when you develop self-control and mutual trust in sexual matters. You’ll need that later. This following story explains why.

John and Karen, friends of ours, managed to save sex for marriage, though it was not easy. Passions ran strong and resisting them took real effort. But they succeeded.

A few years after they married, John asked Karen if she ever worried that he would cheat on her.

“Never,” Karen calmly said. “John, do you remember our courtship? Do you remember how easy it would have been for us to do more than we knew was right? But you never allowed that

to happen. I learned that you were self-controlled, and that I could trust you. If I could trust you then, I know I can trust you now.”

Make your courtship and engagement long enough to plan and prepare, but do not make it any longer than necessary. One to two years is a good target if you can manage it.

CHAPTER SIX

Saving Sex for Marriage: a Strategy

Remember the discussion, at the beginning of this booklet, about the importance of ideas? I said that ideas can greatly influence our choices and behaviors. That is especially true about sexual behavior.

Quick! Name a movie that promotes sexual abstinence before marriage. How about a TV show? A pop song? Many of you could not think of a single song, show, or movie that promotes sexual abstinence before marriage.

This is not a new trend. There have always been songs that teased about sex outside of marriage. Movies have dealt with the sexual desires and tensions between man and woman for years. The difference is that today, and for many years now, the media has presented sex outside marriage as both inevitable and desirable. Even more, the depictions are much more graphic. In short, you see more, read more, and hear more than any generation before you. The trend is not reversing, either.

Even your education might be misleading you, especially if you are in college or university. Textbook authors rarely have a biblical worldview. Lecturers may or may not have the same values that you want to embrace. You have more freedom. And you're surrounded by peers who want to experiment a little, even if it means ignoring the lessons their parents and leaders taught. They want you to follow them, and wonder what is wrong with you if you don't. It's not an easy time for sexual restraint.

All young people, including Christians, struggle with their sexual urges, and often lose the battle. This is especially true for courting couples. That means that you must have a strategy.

Remember: you can only do something the first time, one time. Obvious, right? You only get one first time. So, do you want your first intimate sexual experiences to be outside marriage or within marriage?

From a Christian perspective, sex is a sacred expression of commitment, not just a physical act. Because sexual experience is sacred, the Lord has wisely prohibited it from any relationship except marriage.

Sex is so powerful, involves so much of the total person, that it needs the strongest covenant to protect it from abuse. That covenant is marriage. In marriage it is safe; outside marriage it never is, no matter what the media tells you.

Physically, we could have sex from the age of eleven or twelve. But we don't marry until we are in our twenties, or even later. That means we have the capacity and the desire a long time before we will have the legitimate right to satisfy our sexual desire in the marriage relationship. That's even more reason to form a strategy for success.

A friend of mine has raised eleven children. He told me he is sure that God made a mistake by designing humans so that hormones activate many years before we get married. If he had done the designing he would have waited until humans were twenty-one before their hormones switched on. On the very next day, he would require them to get married! Good plan, if you ask me.

Of course, he's joking when he says it. Even so, I wonder if there might be a reason why God made us like this. One thing I know: since we have the capacity and the desire long before we get married, we have a great opportunity to develop self-control.

Other things in life are the same. We could do physical harm, using our strength to hurt other people. We don't say that physical strength is bad or that weakness is better. We learn to control our strength and use it in the right way at the right time. Our sexual ability is similar. Control it or it becomes harmful.

Have you ever heard the term, daredevil? It's used to describe someone who takes fantastic risks and exposes himself to extraordinary dangers. The crowds applaud daredevils, and even pay big money to see them take their risks. Good showmanship, but a bad way to live your life.

Two drivers approach a dangerous curve. The first driver attacks the curve aggressively, straining his nerve and his car's stability, and just makes it around with one rear wheel hanging over the edge.

The second driver slows, moves as far away from the edge as he can, and carefully guides his car through the curve. Now I ask you, which is the wise driver? The daredevil, or the careful person? The daredevil thrills us, but the other driver is the better driver.

Why dare the devil? Why place yourself in sexual danger by getting too near the edge? Why put unnecessary strain on your emotions and your will – strain that can easily cause something inside you to snap? Your resistance gives way, and before you know it you are involved in experiences that you swore to yourself you would not have until you were married.

You must decide how you will act before the chance to act comes. That means establishing a code of conduct that you will not violate. It means staying in the light. It means setting limits that you will honor in your relationship. It means not overestimating your ability to stand up to sexual pressure when your resistance is weakened.

At one time the Karak Highway in Malaysia was notorious for the number of accidents. It has many curves, some on fast downhill stretches. Why did so many drivers have accidents on the sharp curves? They were going too fast; they overestimated their driving ability or their car's stability; they were intoxicated; there were slippery conditions; they weren't paying attention.

Those are precisely the same dangers that lead people into sexual accidents. Couples go too fast. They overestimate their ability to resist. They get intoxicated with passionate feelings. They are on slippery ground. They aren't paying attention.

Remember, anything you do with anyone before marriage you cannot do for the first time with the person you will marry. It's worth the wait, so be careful.

If you need more specific guidelines, try these:

- Imagine there is a dotted line tattooed on your neck. Now imagine another one tattooed on your waist in the back. Determine that you will never touch any part of each other's bodies below the neck in front or the waist in back.
- Determine that you will stay vertical and never horizontal. That means sitting up, not lying down. Less can happen that way.
- Never stay together in the same room or the same house with no one else there. That includes taking trips together. If you are alone together, have a plan in place so that either one of you can call a halt to the activities and leave.
- Watch for the vulnerable times, like when you are both tired or when you have been physically separated for some time.
- Be careful that you do not use sex to hold a relationship together that would otherwise die.

Summing up, agree about what you will and will not do, and help each other keep the boundaries you have set. Do not leave this to chance. As someone said, failing to plan is planning to fail.

Living Together: False Commitment and False Intimacy

Living together before marriage (Americans call it, “shacking up”) has become very common. The idea is that a couple can have a live-in relationship without the binding commitment of marriage. Supposedly, it also helps you to know the person better, and decide if you want to marry him or her. That’s the conventional wisdom. But it is not the truth.

Glenn Stanton, in his book, *The Ring Makes All the Difference: the Hidden Consequences of Cohabitation and the Strong Benefits of Marriage*, provides powerful evidence from behavioral science studies. The evidence clearly shows that living together has few positive benefits and many negative ones.

Consider the following statements from Stanton’s book. They represent just a small part of the research that exists on couples cohabiting.

On the quality of commitment:

“Scientists find that cohabitation cuts down on commitment. The message of living together is, ‘I’d really only like to take part of you. And maybe some time later I’d like to take all of you.’ No wonder so many cohabiting couples break up or fall into unhealthy patterns. The relationship defines itself by holding back commitment.”

“People, especially men, who cohabit are less committed to that relationship but also less committed to future relationships. Again, that’s not a preacher’s line or a moralizer’s line. That’s a scientific line. Cohabiting men who go on to marry are significantly less committed to the marriage itself than men who don’t cohabit.”

On communication:

“Actually, the data say that cohabiting trains couples to fight in an unhealthy way. Because they don’t have the commitment or security, cohabiters tend to be more relationally and emotionally manipulative. The person may not have any idea of leaving, but the other partner has the sense that he or she could leave. So, their interactions are different: the way they negotiate, the way they ask for things from one another.”

Some couples ask if they can stay in the same house before marriage, as long as they do not engage in sexual acts. In my opinion, that is not a good idea. By staying together in the same house, you leave more opportunity for overstepping your sexual boundaries. Better to stay in different places and find other ways to save money.

To sum up, living together before marriage, for whatever reason, is not good for you or your relationship.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mom and Dad: They Really Matter

Kenny played piano on the worship team at his church. Marie played violin on the same team. They met, courted, became engaged and got married.

During their courtship, Kenny did something very wise. He asked his mom and dad to tell him if they had any concerns, about any part of the relationship, at any time. They did have some concerns, but nothing that they felt was serious enough to advise them to break off. Today they are happily married and loving life.

Your parents probably know you better than anyone knows you. That's why their opinion about the person you marry should really matter to you. It also protects you from making a mistake that you will regret for years.

Choosing who you will marry is not the same as choosing a pair of shoes. If the shoes pinch your toes you can throw them away and get another pair. Even choosing a career, as serious as that is, is still changeable. If the one you marry is not a good fit, it is much harder, and more painful, to live with the consequences. That's why it is important to consider your parent's opinion.

Parental Honor or Parental Control?

Gwen, a young Asian woman, wants to marry Jeff. Both love Jesus and try to follow his direction. They are active in their church and well-respected by their pastors. Both of them endeavor to honor God in all their decisions. Sure, they have their issues, but every couple has some issues.

Jeff is not a bad guy in any way. But Gwen's father, also a Christian, hates Jeff. Seriously. He hates him. He absolutely refuses to give his blessing or even his permission to their marriage. He promises to boycott the wedding and forbid the other family members from attending. His bitterness spreads like poison and has influenced the other family members.

Gwen's dad bases his hatred on false assumptions. Even so, no one can appeal to him, though several have tried. Jeff also has tried to talk to Gwen's dad and reason with him, but all he gets are more insults and threats.

Gwen and Jeff want to honor her father, but how exactly do they do that when their father is unloving and unreasonable?

Here is a key question: when does honor become control? As you surely know, Asian societies value filial devotion and honor very highly. In China you can be punished with fines or even prison sentences for neglecting your parents. Singapore is considering similar laws.

Christians, too, place a high value on honoring parents. The idea is enshrined in the Ten Commandments, given directly by God to Moses, and even has a promise of long life attached to it:

Honor your father and mother. Then you will live a long, full life in the land the LORD your God is giving you. – Exodus 20:12, New Living Translation

As Christians, we simply cannot take this matter lightly. But are there ever occasions when we must refuse to do what our parents tell us to do? They are rare, but they do happen.

Obviously we cannot obey our parents if they ask us to do anything that goes against the clear teaching of Scriptures. We are also not under any obligation to obey them if the good of obeying them causes greater negative results in someone else's life.

But what about a situation like Gwen and Jeff's? Her father says that if she marries Jeff they will be in direct disobedience to God, and that there will be no blessing on their marriage because he, as the father, does not give his blessing. Is that true? Does this unreasonable man have the power to withhold blessing?

Here is my opinion. Because Gwen's father is actually irrational in his hatred towards Jeff, Gwen and Jeff can get married in complete confidence that God will bless their marriage. Yes, they will have to count the cost. They will probably have to marry outside their church, since their home church will not perform a wedding if the parents do not approve (a wise principle, usually). Gwen's dad and mom could boycott the wedding. They may face years of extended family tensions. And her father could continue to harass them. God's blessing does not remove all the negative consequences of our decisions.

So much for Gwen and Jeff. If you are in a similar situation what should you do? We have talked to a number of couples in Asia who have faced this dilemma. Some have waited, no matter how long, for the parents to give their blessing, permission, or approval. One couple actually waited nine years!

Others have decided that, though they could have had a good marriage, it was just not worth all the tensions. So they broke up. Still others went ahead with their plans for marriage. Eventually the parents became more accepting of their decision.

Whatever decision you make, here are some important issues to remember:

- Keep your attitude right. Even if, in a rare instance, you have to go against your parent's wishes, do it respectfully, always honoring them.
- Keep the communication channels open from your side. Romans 12:18 tells us, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."
- Do not rush. Wait. Show your parents that you are acting responsibly, not impulsively.
- Try to understand how your parents feel. It will keep you from becoming hard-hearted.
- Finally, make sure that you get good, wise counsel from your spiritual leaders.

CHAPTER EIGHT

How to Choose for Life

We have discussed some of the major issues that young adults must address. Now let's think more about how to actually choose your life partner.

Choosing the person you will marry is just that- a choice. It's true that some men and women get swept off their feet by a rush of romantic love. But beneath all the emotions and all the thrills, you still make a decision.

Others feel that God has directed them to a particular person. It happens, but it does not happen to everyone. Even when it does, you have to use the wisdom God gave you to test your idea.

This section will help you make a wise decision, not just an emotional one.

Choose a happy person, not someone who relies on you for happiness.

Statistics show that people who have learned how to be happy when they are single have a better chance of being happy when they are married. The opposite is also true. An unhappy, depressed person, who marries, thinking marriage will create the happiness they lack, is usually disappointed.

Happiness is part contentment, part optimism, and a whole lot of thankfulness. Happy people are quite free of blaming, accusing attitudes. They find joy in small pleasures, and make even the simplest pleasures seem lavish. They don't live as though they deserve special treatment. Even small kindnesses bring them joy.

Happiness is not always expressed outwardly. Some quiet, serious people are also very happy people. Likewise, some who laugh all the time do it to hide their deep unhappiness. Happiness is more about attitude than outward expression.

Some of us have lived with the stink of selfishness for many years. It pervades our lives like the odor of sour milk. But even sour people can become sweet when the invigorating presence of Jesus fills their lives. As we live with Christ, we learn habits of happiness.

Choose someone who is honest and truthful about himself and others.

All types of dishonesty are dangerous. Outright lies are the easiest to see. Does the person you are thinking about marrying tell you things about the past, or about other people, that you know are not true? If that person will lie about others and about the past, how can you trust him or her with your future?

Self-deception is another dangerous type of dishonesty. The person who lies to himself is trying to cover up his weaknesses and needs. He or she may be wearing a mask that is hiding the real person. But you will marry the real person, not the mask.

Choose someone who knows how to work.

Laziness is a warning signal! According to the Bible, a person who is not industrious is less wise than an ant. The ants instinctively know that anything worth having is achieved through consistent effort. But the lazy person is always looking for a short-cut. Also, a lazy person may continually blame you for his or her failures after marriage. (See Proverbs 6:6-11)

Laziness is a warning, but so is overwork. Be cautious about marrying a workaholic- someone more devoted to career advancement and financial gain than to God or you.

The Tan's marriage is about to die. Mrs. Tan wants to revive it, even though her husband cheated on her. Mr. Tan only wants to make money. For him, enough is really never enough. His devotion to money so controls him that he is willing to sacrifice his marriage to achieve it.

In an American survey of affluent married couples, with both husband and wife were working, only 14% said they considered personal relationships more important than financial gain. A shocking and dangerous statistic! The survey also showed that more than 80% of those affluent couples were not happy, although they had all the possessions, positions, and prestige that their money could buy.

Don't let that happen to you. Choose someone to marry who values relationships and maintains them, not someone who will ignore them. If money consumes you, ask God to change you before your love of money destroys you.

Choose someone who makes you feel comfortable.

How do you feel after you have spent some time with the person you are interested in? Do you feel like an actor in a play? Do you feel a sense of relief when the performance is over and you finally get to be yourself?

If you have to put on an act during courtship, you will probably have to keep the act up during marriage. But you will tire of acting. You could feel disappointed because you married someone who was in love with an image, not in love with you.

A friend of ours decided to dye her hair blond. Her husband loved it. The only problem is she could never again go back to her real color. She will dye until she dies! Make sure you can be yourself and that the person you want to marry is showing his or her true colors, too.

Choose someone who does not expect you to compromise your convictions.

It is always a danger sign when the person you are interested in pressures you to compromise your spiritual and moral convictions. A healthy relationship is built on strong, mutual beliefs.

Can you have differences of opinion? Of course. But a conviction is a bedrock belief, tried and proven from the Word of God. It might make little difference whether you believe that standing or kneeling is the best posture for praying. But it will surely make a big difference if you disagree about the reality of God and your allegiance to him through Christ.

Choose someone who brings out the best in you.

Are you a better person because of your relationship with this guy or gal? Does he or she encourage you to grow? Do you feel refreshed and uplifted when you are together? Or do you feel dragged down? Are you made to feel small, so the other person can feel bigger? Like the song, Wind Beneath My Wings says, it can be cold standing in someone's shadow.

Choose someone you respect, not someone you pity.

You must not marry a project. I counseled a beautiful, capable, young woman whose marriage was in a shambles because of her husband's irresponsibility. He didn't take care of business, of himself, or of her. Out of curiosity I asked her why she married him. She said that she thought she could change him and bring out the best in him. She married a project, not a partner. This project will never be completed, at least not by her efforts.

To help you understand what respect looks like, I devised an acrostic, with the letters in respect standing for the qualities that make a respectable person.

Reliable - a person you can trust to be predictable, dependable, faithful, and truthful

Ethical - a person who knows what is good, and does it, no matter what the cost

Sensible - a person who gains wisdom by being teachable

Patient - a person who can wait, and is not moved by every impulse

Economical - a person who knows how to manage money

Caring - a person who is not self-centered, but who shows concern through action and attitude

Tested - a person who has faced challenges and become better because of them

You are not looking for perfection, but if you see serious deficiencies in any of those qualities, take care. You might consider developing those qualities in your life as well.

CHAPTER NINE

Dangerous Attitudes

Some attitudes are so dangerous that you need to take them very seriously, and possibly even break off the relationship. Take an honest look at what follows. Then ask yourself if you see any of those attitudes in the person you are thinking about marrying.

Possessiveness and Jealousy

Jealousy is the tie that binds, and binds, and binds - Helen Rowland

Some people carry serious emotional wounds. They live with deep insecurity that causes them to fear loss. Therefore they become possessive, jealous, and controlling. They check up on you constantly. They become nervous and fearful if you talk to someone else. They may make threats about what they will do to you or themselves. In short, jealousy and possessiveness make the relationship a prison.

If jealousy and possessiveness is a problem for either of you, find some help for it before you go any further in your relationship. Remember that the root is fear, so find the fear and neutralize it with the truth.

Abusiveness

Abusiveness means that someone either threatens to hurt you, or actually does hurt you, in order to control you. The pain inflicted can come from words, like insults, accusations, constant criticism, and threats. It can also come from actions, such as when someone refuses to talk to you, for days on end, in order to punish you.

In the most violent form, abuse is physical. Usually physical abusers blame their victims: "You see what you made me do? If you would only act the way I want you to, I would not be forced to hurt you." Sick, right? Yes, it is.

A surprising number of people, women especially, will stay in an abusive relationship rather than risk feeling alone. It is a bad bargain, for you can never please an abuser. No matter how much you do the abuser can, and eventually will, hurt you. You see, you are not the problem. Abusers carry deep anger and rejection inside, and until they address that they will always be abusive.

Emotional Dependency

In the comic strip Zits, the artist draws one young couple as though they are Siamese twins. They never appear alone. Even their names are joined. They are not Rich and Amy. They are RichandAmy.

That is cute in a cartoon about love-sick teenagers, but a possible danger signal in a real relationship. The man and woman become so emotionally dependent on each other that they lose their personal freedom. They cannot interact with other friends and colleagues in a normal, healthy manner because their relationship consumes them.

Healthy couples have a healthy closeness. But if your relationship is too confining and restricting, that is a danger sign.

Unclear Loyalties

This is especially a problem for guys so tied to their mothers that they are not emotionally free to love their wives. Many Asian men struggle with this issue. Truthfully, their mothers share part of the blame. Here is what a healthy mother/son relationship looks like: a man honors his mother with love and loyalty. His mom releases her son to be a loyal attentive husband to his

wife. Anything less is not fair to the woman he marries. But if the mom and son do what I have described, it is much easier for the son and his wife to develop a healthy relationship with his mom.

Inability to Commit

Ashley and Kevin had already been in a relationship for several years when Ashley came to see us. She was concerned because Kevin could not commit to marriage. My wife and I told her that she needed to press him on the issue- in a kind, firm manner, of course. "Be prepared, whatever happens," we told her. "He may not be able to commit to you or anyone."

She talked with Kevin that week. "Kevin, we have been together for three years now. I need to know if you plan to marry me or not. If yes, we need to plan for that day. If no, I am breaking this off."

Does that sound too harsh to you? It wasn't. It was the only way that Ashley could make the guy wake-up.

You want to know how he responded, right? He told this lovely, capable young woman that he had no intention of marrying her, and that he just wanted the companionship and sexual stimulation they shared.

Ashley came to our house heartbroken, tears flowing. "How could I have been so stupid? How could I give so much of myself to someone who only wanted to use me?"

Diane hugged her and held her like a big sister. We both encouraged her and prayed for her, assuring her that God had something far better for her than that guy.

He did. Not too long after the painful breakup, one of the finest young men from our church came home after a one year fellowship at Oxford University. They met, married, and are still married today. Their lives and their marriage are a testimony of God's goodness to many, many people.

O, the other guy, Kevin? The last time I saw him was in a darkened apartment, living with another young woman. No commitment. No marriage. Just sex and whatever comes with it. What an empty life.

CHAPTER TEN

Special Words for Guys and Ladies

“Diane, what does it mean to be a woman?” “Mike, what is a man? How do I become one.”

Those questions, from people we know, reflect the importance of this section to the young men and women reading this book. Like many other areas of life, gender identity seems to be open to much redefinition and confusion. So, with that in mind, here are a few thoughts, first for the guys, and then for the ladies. And ladies, please do read what I have written to the guys. It might help you clarify your criteria for a good man.

For the Guys

Here is your assignment, guys. Ready? Name the first three words that come to your mind when I say, “What is a man?” Ready? Go.

Now that you have finished, look at your responses. Did any of them describe character? If so, you are on the right track. If not, you are off course.

One of the great results of Jesus’ mission to earth was to help men understand what it really means to be a man. Jesus was all man when he came, but he was really, really different. Other men flexed their muscles and paraded their titles. Jesus served. Other men tried hard to impress or force people to acknowledge their greatness. Jesus taught truth and did miracles with absolute authenticity. And He died for all of us.

Jesus chose men to follow him and learn from him, and what a ride awaited them. Jesus challenged everything, absolutely everything, they understood about life. He still does that today.

You might wonder what that has to do with courtship and marriage. I will tell you. Real women are looking for real men. They are not looking for that strange creature you see in all the beer commercials, or the guy you see in the men’s magazines.

They do not want a mama’s boy, either. One lady we know said she would rather eat cockroaches than marry a mama’s boy. I think she would actually do it. After all, the roaches would only make her sick once; the mama’s boy would make her sick every day.

Today’s Asian women are not looking for a man who will use them, but they do want a man who will protect them. They do not want to be owned, but they do want to be treasured. These women want a man who listens to their concerns without making them feel silly or putting them in their place.

Great news! The Lord, Jesus Christ, makes men into great husbands. Not religion. Not church attendance. Not putting the word “Christian” on your IC. A relationship with Jesus will make you the kind of man who will be a good husband, and someday, a reliable, loving father.

What makes a man, a man? Let me give you three words to consider: a real man is a learner, a lover, and a leader.

A real man is a learner. Learning, in this context, has little to do with school and exams. But it has everything to do with successful living. This kind of learning makes you wise, not just intelligent. Believe me guys, you really need wisdom. The woman you marry will benefit from it, and later your children will too.

Here is what Solomon told his sons:

Get wisdom and insight! Do not forget or ignore what I say. Do not abandon wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will keep you safe. Getting wisdom is the most important thing you can do. Whatever else you get, get insight. Love wisdom, and she will make you great. Embrace her, and she will bring you honor. She will be your crowning glory.

- Proverbs 4:5-9, Good News Translation

When a man treasures wisdom the woman he marries will find it much easier to trust him. Here's why.

The book of Proverbs speaks of three classes of people: the naive, the fools, and the wise.

The naive need wisdom. Because they lack experience, they need someone to tell them what is really important, how to pursue it, and what to avoid along the way. Being naive is not a sin, but does mean that you need to grow up, wake up, and stand up. Women do not want to commit their lives to someone who lives carelessly. Naive guys might be cute, but you cannot depend on them.

The wise, obviously, have gained wisdom. They learned from other wise, successful people, but they also learned from experience. Becoming wise is a lifelong project. In my opinion wisdom is not a goal you achieve; it's a road you walk. You can also wander away from wisdom, following other roads, till you are lost in a jungle of false ideas.

The worst thing you can be is a fool. Fools are people who reject wisdom. That's right. They see wisdom, they hear wisdom, and they reject wisdom. Do not be one! How to avoid it? Stay teachable. Hunger for wisdom. Do what Solomon told his sons to do.

You will not have all the wisdom you will ever need on the day you get married. But if you have made wisdom your goal, you will grow in it. Remember: every woman deserves a husband who loves wisdom. Be one. Start now. And don't ever stop.

A real man is a lover. If there was ever a misunderstood word, lover is that word. In common usage, a lover is someone you are in a sexual relationship with, but probably not married to. That is far from what a lover really is.

The Bible is all about love. Here is one of my favorite passages on the subject:

This is how we know what love is: Christ gave his life for us. We too, then, ought to give our lives for others!

- 1 John 3:16, Today's English Version

Christ loved us so much that he did what only he could do: he gave his life for us. That was the only thing that would help us. So love always looks for ways to help.

You may never have to die for the woman you marry, but you will have thousands of opportunities to lay down your rights, do the extra chores, give her your attention, or just be there for her when she needs a strong arm around her shoulder. Real lovers help.

Lovers do not use other people. They serve other people. Lovers do not allow their sexual urges to make them consume their girlfriends in a fit of lustful passion. Lovers do what helps.

If you will start doing that now, living as a real lover, you will become the kind of man a young woman can entrust herself to with complete confidence.

A real man is a leader. Leadership has very little to do with personality or position. Leadership has to do with positive, pure influence. The bookstores are full of books on leadership, but let's not make this too complicated. Here are just a few thoughts for you to consider:

- Real leaders do not bully. They influence. They protect. They develop those they lead.
- Real leaders care more for the people they lead than the power they hold.
- Real leaders think about their actions and decisions, always considering the safety of the people they lead.
- Real leaders develop into better leaders through experience.
- Real leaders never deceive to gain an advantage. They are men of truth.

Guys, I have one more matter to discuss with you, so let me ask you a question: how do you treat the young women in your church, your Christian Fellowship, and your school or work place? Do you ever make sexual remarks about them to other guys? Do you ever fantasize about them in sexual ways? Do you ever tease them or make fun of them? All of those behaviors are unworthy of a man. Here is what the Bible tells us to do:

Treat older women as you would your mother, and treat younger women with all purity as you would your own sisters.

– 1 Timothy 5:2, New Living Translation

Start treating women well now, and you'll become the kind of man a woman really respects.

A Special Word for the Ladies (Guys, you can read it too.)

Today, young women are caught in a swirl of ideas about who they are and who will influence them. In your lifetime, and even before, Feminism has attempted to redefine women, facet by facet.

Some feminist voices are as shrill as sirens and filled with bitterness. Sometimes it seems that those women actually resent being women. Their attitudes are typified by the well-known quote from Irene Dunn: "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle." Other feminist voices show more moderation, but few help women find a healthy, godly, fulfilling image. Jesus did that.

When you read the Gospel stories you see Jesus treating women with a level of compassion and respect that was simply unheard of in those times. It did not matter how the culture had treated a woman; it did not matter who she was or what she had done; Jesus treated every woman with redeeming honor.

All good men treat women honorably. They value them as God does. They do not use them or abuse them. As a result, the women they love become better women because of their love. Look for that in any guy you are considering.

Submission: it's not a scary word

Some women see submission as a frightening word, equivalent to slavery. Far from it. The Bible does teach us that women need to submit to their husbands. (Ephesians 5:22) But do not let that scare you. Once you understand it you'll probably want to develop it.

Perhaps Asian women have particular fears about submission because of the negative examples they have seen. Ancient Confucian teaching actually mandates three submissions that a woman had to embrace: father, before she was married; husband, after she married;

eldest son if she was a widow. That system protected women from abuse and provided for their safety, but only if the man was a good man.

Trouble came when the man abused his position, becoming selfish, brutish, and unloving. That led in turn to many stories about abusive, insensitive, controlling husbands. And, since the bad always gets repeated more than the good, the picture of a husband gradually darkened, like the statue of a hero in a polluted city.

Ladies, let me say a good word about the men. Many of us, most perhaps, do not want to dominate our wives. We may not know, naturally, how to love a woman, but we do want to learn. To do that, we really need your trust. Let us lead. And please, be patient with us.

Understanding Submission

To understand submission let's look at its opposite, stubbornness. Stubborn people want their own way. They even sacrifice relationships if they have to, just to get what they want. They are rigid and inflexible. As a result, they cause a lot of tension and resentment.

Submissive people have flexibility and adaptability. That leads to peaceful relationships. But submissive people are not doormats. They have opinions and desires, but they express them in a way that makes harmony possible.

Submission, therefore, protects us from making decisions that could damage us and our relationships. That's a good thing.

When you are thinking about marrying a guy, ask yourself if you trust his judgment, values, and character enough to allow him to lead your family. It is worth every moment you spend thinking about it.

A Woman's True Value

Jenny grew up in a home where her mother's boyfriend sexually abused her. Repeatedly. For years. Later, as a young woman, another man abused her- a man she should have been able to trust.

Abuse always distorts our thinking, but not always in the same way. In Jenny's case, the abuse led to feelings of worthlessness. It also made her feel that no man would love her unless she had sex with him. She simply did not know how to value herself.

Michelle's parents wanted a boy, but instead they got Michelle. They had planned to call their baby Michael if it had been a boy. Hence, Michelle. It's a perfectly fine name, but for her parents it served as a reminder that she was not the boy they wanted.

Her parents never treasured her as a young woman, so she grew up feeling that women have no value. It was easy for her to marry a man who controlled and criticized her because she did not feel she deserved anything better.

Young ladies, God has the power and love to free you from abuse and the worthlessness that it often produces. Like one young woman told us, "Papa God has a powerful, healing love." If you have been abused, before you start any relationship, get some good counseling from a reliable person who will help you understand God and his love for you.

Know your true worth and do not date or marry anyone who does not treat you, in every way, as though you are special to him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Breaking Up: It Might be Best

It could be a month, six months, two years, or even longer. Whatever the time, you realize you are in a relationship you must leave. We call it breaking up. Good name, don't you think? The couple break up and, no matter how or why it happens, both the guy and the girl feel broken up.

A breakup is never easy, but sometimes it is necessary. It is always better than continuing a relationship just because you have for so long. Many dating and courting couples have done that. They stay together just because they are together. Perhaps, too, they fear being alone.

In addition, their lives may be intertwined in many ways: common friends, church ministries, cell groups, for instance. They are identified as a couple, so it is hard to think about how people will ever see them as individuals. Their lives are intertwined on Facebook and Twitter, too. In some cases, especially if they have been together for some time, they may have shared bank accounts or investments. Some even live together in the same property.

Staying together when you know you need to break up only causes increasing tension and less peace. As the tensions increase, some couples try using sex to keep the relationship going. Often one of them keeps holding on, hoping that something will change that could make the relationship worth keeping. Meanwhile the months and years tick away.

Let's assume that you have read the rest of this book. As you read, you experienced a growing sense of doubt about your present relationship. Maybe the time is not right. Maybe you realize that the person is not right. Whatever the reason, you realize that you are not being fair to one another. So it's time to breakup. How do you do that?

Keep in mind that a breakup is a decision that someone will have to make. It will not happen on its own. But the following points will help you do it as well as you can and avoid some dangers.

Make a clean break with the person and the past

You can't erase the time you spent together, but you can help by returning any gifts to each other that have special value. If you cannot return them, give them away. If you cannot give them away, put them in a safe place and leave them there.

Do not hug that teddy bear, or that special t-shirt, with her name and yours on it, while crying your eyes out, listening to sad songs. The tears may flow for the first few weeks, but the pain will eventually subside if you stop feeding it.

Concentrate on what God wants you to learn from this relationship and the break-up

Our God is a redeemer. He redeemed our lives through sending Jesus to die for us. And he also redeems our experiences. We have known young people, not too different from you, who found surprising treasures about God after their break-up. For some it was the most profound turning point of their lives.

Though not common, some ex-couples become good friends who attend each other's wedding and celebrate their future with other people. Mature people who part ways don't always have awkward encounters filled with long-term tension.

Watch out for these three enemies: self-pity, resentment, and lies

After talking with us about her relationship and some concerns she had, Joanne decided to break-up. It was the right choice. But after she did it she went through a powerful emotional storm. Some moments she resented her boyfriend for taking so many months of her life. Other times she felt self-pity. “Why can’t I be happy? Other girls find nice guys,” she mused.

And then there were the lies- thoughts that seemed to come from nowhere, whispering in her mind. “You’ll never find a good guy.” “No one will want you.” “You should have given him more time to change.” All of those thoughts were lies, even though they felt so true.

Joanne had to learn to combat those lies with the truth. The truth was that they had been trudging along all those years when they should have been happily planning and moving on into new chapters in their lives together. She couldn’t help those thoughts from entering her mind, but what she did with them was left to her. She could entertain negative thoughts and mope, or look ahead and trust God with her future. It was a battle, but she won it. You can too!

Be careful how you deal with that empty feeling that follows a break-up.

Breaking up leaves a big empty place in your heart. We do not like feeling empty, so the danger of trying to fill the empty place is great. You might hop into another relationship because you crave the feeling of belonging. That is almost always a mistake, and the resulting relationship hardly ever sustains itself.

The best way to fill the empty hours is to invest your life in God’s purposes. Here are some ideas:

- Find some people to help.
- Join a good Bible Study.
- Maybe make some time for the loyal friends who you left out of your life to make room for the boyfriend or girlfriend.
- Use this time to build and strengthen new friendships.
- Use this time to better yourself. Learn new skills, pick up a new language, change your routine, enroll in dance lessons, learn to live again.

All of those are sustainable habits and form a foundation as you rebuild your dependence on Christ. You will still have some lonely moments, but invite God into those moments. He teaches some of the best lessons in the wilderness.

It is understandable to miss your partner deeply for some time. After four years, Jen realized that Ron was not serious about wanting them to marry. He was loyal and loved her very much, but he didn’t see the point of the official commitment. Their different opinions about marriage finally forced them apart.

During their separation they both hurt and pined for one another. But they kept their distance. Ron began to seek God more seriously and allow the Holy Spirit to reach his deepest thoughts. He discovered that he carried a deep-seated unrest. Unresolved, his problem with marriage would find its way into the next relationship, and the next. Later that year, still unable to shake off feelings for Jen, he pursued her again and married her the following year, with blessings from the church, and both families.

This is an unexpected twist that many might hope for. But give yourself time and let God chart His will for your life. During this time, instead of asking God to carve out the happy ending you want, submit to His will. He is always a step ahead.

“But what if I do not want to breakup, and he or she does?”

I know this seems obvious, but you cannot force anyone to stay in a relationship. So you have to let go. You could have a conversation about what you could do that might make the other person reconsider. But if the other person is sure he or she wants to breakup you probably cannot change their mind. You have to let go, so do it as graciously as possible.

After breaking up, give each other some space. No texting. No Facebook messages. No tweets. No messages sent through another person. Just give the guy or girl space. If you don't, you risk creating anger and resentment.

Ending well prepares both of you for a better future

Forgive each other for whatever you did to hurt each other during the relationship. Do not try to pay him or her back for the pain you feel. Keep the breakup off your social media accounts. The people who matter most will learn soon enough. Besides, both parties in the relationship are pretty tender after a breakup, so be as discreet as possible.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Should Everyone Marry?

Marriage is part of God's provision for men and women. He established it and gave us the model of the marriage covenant: a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the two shall be one flesh. (Genesis 2:24). Most of us will marry. But some will not.

We can divide people who do not marry into two groups: those who choose to stay single, and those who would marry if someone showed interest in them.

Of the first class there are many notable examples. These single saints have enriched many lives. The Apostle Paul probably was married once. His wife may have died, or left him when he became a follower of Jesus. He chose to remain unmarried, as he says in I Corinthians 7, because he believed that he could serve God more effectively, in his unique calling, as a single man.

Some, like Paul, have what the Bible calls the gift of singleness. (See I Corinthians 7) Their singleness is God's will for their lives. There have been many, especially women, who have lived as single so they could serve the Lord. Amy Carmichael, the devoted missionary to India; Mary Slessor, who buried herself like a seed in the deadly environment of the West African coast; Mother Teresa, who opened her arms to the diseased and dying of India, and many more.

Whether you marry or not is between you and God. If he has given you the gift of remaining single you will be thoroughly convinced in your heart that doing so is God's best for you and his work. Though you may still face temptations and experience loneliness, you will know that marriage is not God's solution for you. You will walk in a grace that enables you to live as a single man or woman.

The second group presents a more difficult problem. They are the people, in Asia mostly women, who would like to get married and have a family. But no one seems interested in them.

I don't know what answer I can give you that would satisfy in every way, but please remember this: remaining single is better than marrying a non-Christian, or a person who is Christian only in name but not in reality.

One young lady told me that she just knew she couldn't be happy if she didn't get married. I asked her what made her so sure that marriage would make her happy. You see, marriage doesn't make us happy. We make marriage happy. And marrying the wrong type of person is a sure guarantee of unhappiness.

I suppose the best thing I can say, though I know it isn't perfect, is that if you cannot find someone to marry who is pleasing to God, then serve him with your whole heart. Let him, in his own wise and loving ways, fill the places that a spouse and children would have filled. I am sure that he will be better to you than you can imagine.

Your greatest danger, as a single person, may well be self-pity. That attitude says God has been unfair with you. It is that attitude that makes bitter old maids and cranky old men, not simply being single.

Surprise!

Then again, you could turn out like our friend, Martha. For nearly forty years she served the Lord as a single woman in Nigeria. A difficult place, but she loved the people. She had no desire

to be married. Then she met Arthur. She was in her early sixties! They married and lived out their lives serving God together and loving each other.

Before Arthur, Martha didn't spend her life regretting her single life. She spent it serving God. Arthur was just a little surprise that God had reserved for her sunset years. Was she happier after she married? No, just happy in a different way.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

How to Make the Right Start: A Relationship Roadmap

This section is here to help you put all you have read in *Choosing for Life* into a plan you can follow. Starting right can make the difference between a successful courtship and one that brings disappointment and confusion to both the guy and the lady. So, how do you do that?

Begin Here

Are you actually ready to be in a relationship that will move towards marriage? If not, do not go any further. If you are not sure, talk it over with your parents or spiritual leaders.

If you feel you are ready, and you are starting a relationship:

- Have both sets of parents met both of you? If so, do you see any problems with the relationship on either side? Problems include differences in beliefs, relationship with the extended family, etc. These problems do not necessarily mean that you should break off, but they do need attention.
- Have you discussed your relationship with one of your spiritual leaders? This is a good step. The leader might be able to help you evaluate your relationship in the early stages and give you some tips on how to proceed.

Have you discussed your goals, your desires, and your spiritual outlook? Your spiritual outlook is the way your beliefs affect the way you see life.

If you are discussing those things, are you developing more compatibility or are you having more disagreements? Too much disagreement about important matters is a warning that you may need to break off.

Have you established healthy boundaries for physical affection?

- If yes, briefly describe those boundaries now:
- If no, do you feel that the physical affection you are sharing is within good boundaries? Remember that the goal during courtship and engagement is to avoid touching or fondling any of your private areas.

Will you be separated by long distances for significant periods of time?

If so, do you know how to deal with long distance separation?

Once you are sure you want to marry one another, what is your timeline?

- How long from now to the day when you will marry? You need to have a good idea about this and not leave it to chance. You can always change your plans as necessary, but you need to have a target date in mind.
- Do your best to keep the time from the beginning of your courtship until marriage reasonable. Not too long or too short. There is no rule for this, but it needs to be long enough for you to make preparations and have some good, solid pre-marriage counseling. Do not rush, but do not drag it out, either.
- Premarriage counseling is like a final tune-up to prepare you for marriage. Start planning for this three to six months from your targeted wedding date.

Some Questions About Choosing the Right Life Partner

Based on *Building a Successful Marriage*, Landis and Landis, 1957

Use these questions as a guide, not as a checklist. If the person you are thinking about is right for you, you will have positive answers to the great majority of them. Try to be as honest as you can. Perhaps even write a statement after the questions that make you unsure.

For example, let's look at the first question:

“Are you comfortable and at ease with him or her? Are you able to be yourself without strain?”

You could answer YES or NO. But you might answer like this: We still feel a little uncomfortable, but we are getting more relaxed. It seems to be moving in the right direction.

1. Are you comfortable and at ease with him or her? Are you able to be yourself without strain?
2. Since you have been in this relationship, are you more inclined to live up to your best conception of yourself and your abilities? In other words, does this relationship help make you a better person?
3. Are you conscious of a continuing stable bond between the two of you, even when you have no romantic feelings? Feelings change like the weather. For a relationship to succeed for a lifetime, it has to endure many different emotional seasons.
4. Do you only love this person because of his or her looks? Would you love this person if their looks changed. They will. Always!
5. Having said that, do you like the way this person looks? Are you proud to be seen together?
6. How well do you agree on the things worth sacrificing for in life? All couples have to agree about this. If you want a career serving the poor and your friend wants to make tons of cash and live in a gorgeous house, you may not agree about sacrifices.
7. Are you finding it easier to talk over points of disagreement and reach an understanding? (Have you known each other long enough and well enough so that you have discovered your inevitable points of disagreement?)
8. Do your disagreements result in a better understanding of each other? (If disagreements result in ignoring the issue, or in the same one always giving in, that is a danger signal.)
9. Do you have confidence in his or her judgment? Do you respect his or her general mental ability?
10. Do you confide in this person freely, with complete confidence that what you say will be understood, judged kindly, and never divulged no matter what the temptation?
11. Are you happy and satisfied with the way he or she shows affection for you?
12. As you look toward the future as realistically as you can, do you feel that the two of you have in your relationship the elements that will enable you to cooperate and if necessary sacrifice for your continuing unity? (Short form: do you think you have what it takes to succeed in marriage?)
13. Does your relationship draw both of you closer to God? Do you both believe that this relationship is good and pleasing to your Heavenly Father?

NOW WHAT?

Thanks for taking time to read and consider the thoughts I have shared in Choosing for Life.

I hope they will help you make the best choice about the most important decision in life: who will you marry?

If you have more questions, email ChoosingForLife@mikediane.com. I would love to hear from you.

A Psalm for Singles

This is a paraphrase of the twenty-third psalm that I wrote with singles in mind. As you read it remember Jesus is your Shepherd. He cares for you. He knows what it means to be single, for he lived as a single man himself. Who better to watch over you and keep you safe?

Jesus is my greatest friend, My Protector,

My Guide:

I shall be contented.

My walk with him provides rest and refreshing. He satisfies my inmost self.

I will face everything that comes with Jesus, my Lord. I will know him as my constant companion.

My fellowship with him will be my greatest delight; I will not let enemies steal it from me.

I have an overflowing cup; I am fully satisfied;

And I will always be at home with him.

REFLECTION

The questions in this section will help you reflect on the ideas I have shared with you in Choosing for Life. You can use them alone, with a friend, or in a discussion with a group.

CHAPTER ONE

Ideas: Important, but Changing

1. Think about some marriages you have observed. Have your observations changed any of your ideas about marriage?
2. Think about your friends and acquaintances. How might you describe their attitudes about marriage?
3. How do you respond to this statement: "Well, if it doesn't work out, we can just get a divorce." Do you know anyone who has that idea about marriage? Do you know anyone who has gone through a divorce? How has that affected them?

CHAPTER TWO

Marriage by the Book

1. Do these ideas about marriage from the Bible make sense to you? Do they describe a marriage you would like to have?
2. Did any of these ideas seem especially attractive to you?
3. Can you think of some additional ideas from the Bible that you would add to the ones in this chapter?

CHAPTER THREE

First Things First

1. Do you think personal commitment to God is the most important issue in life?
2. Do you know anybody who has gotten into a relationship without checking with God about it? How did that work out?
3. Of the three enemies inside the gates, rebellion, impatience, and curiosity, which do you think is most dangerous?

CHAPTER FOUR

Dating and Courtship: It's All About Worship. Really.

1. Do you understand worship the way it is described in this chapter?
2. What would keep you from applying the worship test to a person who wanted to date you?

On Dating

3. Mike gave some guidelines for dating. Which of those do you feel is most important? Which ones do you think are unrealistic?
4. Do you know anyone who has gotten burned through internet relationships? If so, how could that person have avoided that bad experience?
5. Do you agree that a follower of Jesus should never date a person who does not follow Jesus? Do you know anyone who has done that and regretted the decision?
6. What would you say to a seventeen year old friend who told you she had fallen in love with a guy?

CHAPTER FIVE

Finding the Right Person

1. Do you believe that there is only one right person for each person to marry? Can you defend that idea from the Bible?
2. Do people tell you that you are a perfectionist? Do you think you are? If so, how could you become less of a perfectionist?
3. How important is it to you to pray for the person you will one day marry?
4. After reading this section how do you feel about very long courtships?
5. What could a couple do to make their courtship as efficient as possible?

CHAPTER SIX

Saving Sex for Marriage: a Strategy

1. "All young people, including Christians, struggle with their sexual urges." How do you feel about that statement? Is it true or false? Consider this quote from chapter six before answering the next question: "From a Christian perspective, sex is a sacred expression of commitment, not just a physical act. Because sexual experience is sacred, the Lord has wisely prohibited it from any relationship except marriage."
2. How does that idea differ from the common ideas in your culture and among your friends?
3. How do your personal beliefs line up with the statement that sex is a sacred expression of commitment?
4. If all choices have consequences, what would be the consequences of engaging in sexual acts outside of marriage (besides unwanted pregnancy)?
5. "You must decide how you will act before the chance to act comes." What
6. decisions have you made about sexual involvement before marriage? What are your strategies for keeping to those decisions?
7. Do you think that couples living together before marriage is becoming more common in your culture? Why do you think that is happening?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mom and Dad: They Really Matter

1. How important is your parent's opinion to you? Would you risk your future happiness to marry someone if they did not approve?
2. What can you do to show your parents that you are responsible?

CHAPTER EIGHT

How to Choose for Life

1. Go back and look at each of the characteristics in someone you might consider marrying. Can you think about how important each of those qualities is to you?
2. Are you, with God's help, developing those qualities in your own life? Which ones are your strengths? Which are less developed? Can you make a determined decision to develop those areas? God will help you.

CHAPTER NINE

Dangerous Attitudes

1. Is it possible to get so emotionally entwined with someone that you overlook some of the dangerous attitudes Mike discussed in this chapter?
2. If your friend told you, in confidence, that he was in a relationship with someone who had some of these very dangerous attitudes, what would you advise your friend to do?

CHAPTER TEN

Special Words for Guys and Ladies

For Guys

1. How important is it to you to be the kind of man a woman can trust? Is it important enough to ask God to change you?
2. What are you doing, right now, to develop the kind of qualities a woman wants in a man whom she will marry? (The reason for this question is that practice leads to proficiency.)

For Ladies

1. Would you consider yourself a feminist? If so, how will that work out in marriage?
2. How was your relationship with your dad? Is he someone you respected, and did you know that he loved you?
3. Are there any qualities in your dad that you want to see in the man you marry? What about some qualities that your dad is lacking- qualities that you hope to see in your future husband.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Breaking Up

1. Have you ever known someone who needed to break up but did not? What happened in that person's life?
2. What makes the difference in a clean break-up and one that leaves both people in the relationship deeply damaged.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Should Everyone Marry?

1. Do you know some people who have remained single because they know God has called them to singleness?
2. Do you have any friends who are very worried about being single? What help could you give them?