

The Dating Game

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The text is not yet edited for reading.

Anita was a single student living in a small university town. She is one of those young people who had often said to her friends that she would never, I repeat never, marry a non-Christian. Six months later this friend of Alice Freiling, who tells the story, was engaged to Steve, a professed non-Christian.

One year later, against the advice of her Christian friends, Anita and Steve were married. Anita continued to participate in the fellowship of her church and with her friends. And everything, at first, seemed like it was going to work. But within two years the problems began to show up. Next came the separation and finally the divorce.

Now it is true that not every Christian/non-Christian marriage winds up in divorce. But it is true as we see from I Peter, when one who genuinely loves the Lord marries one who does not -- there is a great deal of pain. And the greater their love for the Lord is it seems the greater the pain. That's why the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians chapter seven and the Apostle Peter in I Peter chapter 3 specifically address the issue of a Christian being married to a non-Christian. And how to live in that kind of a painful situation.

How did it happen in the church to which Peter was writing and in the church to which Paul was writing there wound up women married to non-Christians men? And conversely, Christian men who were married to non-Christian women? While it is possible, of course, that they were not Christians when they married and then one of the two of them responded to the gospel--became a Christian and the other did not respond. But it is also possible that others of them were very much like Anita.

What happened to Anita's convictions that she would never, ever marry a non-Christian? Alice Freiling, whom I said has told the story, said that she knew Anita well enough that she was able to ask her that very pointed question. What happened?

Anita's response with the clarity and regret of hindsight, was as follows: "I loved Steve. And I put my love for him ahead of my love for the Lord. Doing what I wanted seemed easier at the

moment and more pleasant. I did not stop to look at the long-term consequences of disobeying God. Soon after my marriage I began to ask myself the question over and over again-- How can I submit to a man who does not love the Lord? And whose values are so different? “

The head of the Marriage and Family Counseling Department of Northern Illinois University who did graduate work in that subject was a former Roman Catholic priest. Through him I was introduced to the Catholic priest in the town Decalb, Illinois and became quite familiar with how the Roman Catholics for years have been involved in giving pre-marital counseling to their parishioners. Called Pre-Cana classes, if I remember correctly. One of the communities not only required the classes but also required that the couple postpone any wedding for a minimum of six months before they could be married.

Protestants likewise have for years been concerned about and have been giving pre-marital counseling before a wedding could take place. They're trying to do that because Catholics and Protestants alike have recognized how many marriages end in divorce and they want to do something to see if they can stem the tide.

But by the time the preacher hears about a wedding it seems like it is really too late. To suggest at that point in time that they call the wedding off is about as effective as blowing into a windstorm. It's just not going to happen.

Ken Wilson, in an article that has been very helpful to me on this subject and from whom I have taken several ideas for this message, has said that when they have fallen deeply in love, when they have already asked this musician friend of theirs to play the guitar at the wedding and when they have sent the announcements to the printer, folks it's like a canoeist in a white water river. Ready or not here they come. Indeed they come.

You can talk until you are blue in the face. At that point it makes no difference at all. What do we do? How do we help? Whatever it is or whenever it is, it has to be earlier rather than later. When they have already fallen head over heels in love and they have set a date, it seems to me it is far too late.

There are young people who do not care about what the Lord thinks. But there are many young people who care deeply about dating in a way that is pleasing to the Lord. And if they marry, to marry in a way that pleases the Lord Jesus.

What do we say to those who are mature enough to ask the question? Can you help me? Can you teach me? Can you show me what ought to take place? Can you show me what ought take place in preparing for a marriage?

The very first thing that I believe that we can do is make the teaching of the Word of God very clear.

I would like for you please to turn to the book of Deuteronomy chapter 7, beginning at the first verse.

When the Lord your God shall bring you into the land where you are entering to possess it. And you shall clear away many nations before you- the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you. And when the Lord your God shall deliver them before you and shall defeat them then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor unto them. Furthermore (verse 3), you shall not intermarry with them. You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons.

Why?

Verse 4: For they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you. And He will quickly destroy you.

Someone might well say that those verses apply to Israel in an old covenant setting many thousands of years ago--they can't possibly apply to us today in the same way. But look at the fourth verse again and it seems to me that the results are timeless. That is, they will turn your daughters or sons away from following me to serve other gods.

We watch it happen time and time and time again. And if the result is timeless so is the command. And if you still have trouble with the command as it's recorded in the Old Testament

then turn with me please to II Corinthians chapter 6, the passage that was read earlier this morning.

II Corinthians chapter 6, I want you to hear it again. Beginning at verse 14-

Do not, I repeat, do not be bound together with unbelievers. For what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship has darkness and lightness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial? Or what has the believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God.

What's the logic of these verses? It doesn't take a Ph.D. to understand it. God is holy. And we who by grace through faith have been brought into His family are His children. We belong to Him. We are holy, set apart unto God. Our whole course of life has been changed. We have a whole new set and new value system.

In II Corinthians 5:17, very little earlier in the text, the Apostle Paul said

“Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature. The old things have passed away. (What old things? Old values, old ideals, old goals, old purposes, they have passed away.) Behold new things have come.

What new things? A whole new way of orienting our lives. An orientation that is no longer simply centered on me and mine but is now centered on God and His will for my life. It's a radical transformation. It's called conversion, 180 degrees. Your whole agenda for life has changed. Especially those of you who have become Christians in later teen years and adulthood.

You understand how radical that change is. How you spend your time, how you spend your money, how you will raise your children has all been changed from going this way to going this way. Radically different. You have no more in common with the past (look at the text) than righteousness has with lawlessness, than light has with darkness, than Christ has with Satan, than the temple of God has with idols, than a believer has with an unbeliever. Very different. The contrast is meant to shock us. That's how different.

Do not be bound together with unbelievers.

Now I suspect there are some here who have been to Bible school or seminary and somewhere along the way someone told you that this verse does apply to marriage. I would say to you that if you look at the context you will come to realize that's correct. It applies to far more than marriage. It applies to business relationships. It applies beyond that but certainly if it applies to those kinds of relationships it must apply to the most intimate of relationships. And that is marriage.

Do not be bound together with unbelievers. You know when you decide to get married, whether you are a Christian or a non-Christian, this is one of the things that you end up saying in so many words. You are saying to your marriage partner "I want you to be the most influential person in my life. I want to share your values. I want to share your goals." And whether you say the words or not implied is "Your people now are my people and your God now is my God."

And again I would say whether they are Christians making those statements or non-Christians, if they don't make something akin to those statements it's hardly a marriage at all. That's what the oneness is all about. Look at II Corinthians 6 again. Keep it in mind and consider what happens when a Christian marries a non-Christian. They are saying in effect "Yes, God, I have committed my life to you. I bow down to follow you and to serve you and to pursue my life according to your values and purposes. But just a moment, I'm also choosing to give my life to this other person in marriage. I'm going to pursue them and give my life to pursuing their values and their purposes."

Doesn't it sound like idolatry? It's a harsh word but I think that's what it sounds like. If you take a look at the Old Testament to say we're going to bow down and serve God at one time and to turn around and bow down and serve someone else who is going the opposite direction from God looks like idolatry. Could God be any clearer? Do not marry a non-Christian.

Let me give you one more verse. I Corinthians 7:39. In that text the Apostle Paul is saying "If you marry, marry only (and the three key words) **in the Lord.**"

You know, it's possible for a non-Christian to hear this kind of a message and say, "What is it? Are Christians too good for us?" No, that's not the point at all. There are many non-Christians who are very good people by human standards. It's not that Christians are better in that sense.

The point is that Christians are so different. They are different. From my point of view it seems almost as unfair to the non-Christian to marry a Christian as it does for a Christian to marry a non-Christian. This poor guy or gal has their whole life ahead of them. They know what they want to do. They know what they want to accomplish. They have certain values and goals. And then they get hitched up with this religious type. That's going a whole different direction if they know anything at all about their Lord. It's unfair to both of them.

A real Christian has a whole different master, a whole different reason for life, than the non-Christian. I have to believe that Anita, whom I referred to earlier, knew all of this. And like our young people today, she had heard it. Then why are so many marrying non-Christians? Well, you might comment it's because they're flat out disobedient, that's all. If they would just obey the Word of God it wouldn't happen. Yes, that's true, but very rarely do you sit down with a young person who claims to name the name of Christ who says 'I planned it, I am now determined that I'm going to go out and find someone that is not a Christian so that I may disobey God.' They didn't plan that. They didn't start out that way.

I believe, along with Ken Wilson, that there's a present day custom that is trapping many of our young people. And it's the parents of Christian young people who are as much at fault or even more than the young adults that they are responsible for because very few young people or their parents make any decisions about **the purpose for dating**. Nor do we think carefully about the practices of dating. Maybe some of us have sterner standards when we say something like, "Nothing good ever happens after midnight so you have to be home by midnight." Or we set up some other rule that we heard from somebody somewhere along the line and that's about the extent of it. And we let our young people kind of stumble along after the culture. Doing whatever it is the culture does.

There was a time when the culture never heard of dating among young people 16, 17, 18 years of age. And today the culture hears of dating all the time among children 11, 12 and 13 years of age. Christian young people by and large are simply about 3-5 years behind that's all. Something is wrong.

In the last 50 years dating has absolutely changed 180 degrees in its purpose. Have you thought about it before? There was a time not too many decades ago when the purpose of dating was very simply the courtship process. When it was time to get married you then began

to date. But **in the last few decades dating has become a form of teenage recreation.**

Dating has become the main form of teenager's social life. And dating is happening earlier and earlier and it is less and less supervised. In fact, it's even known as recreational dating. It appears so harmless and it appears so cute. I suppose there are even parents among us who would very readily say, "This kind of dating is necessary for our children to grow up, for them to learn to be adults. It's part of the socialization process sociologists talk about." But let me get radical and say to you that I think the form of recreational dating that is prevalent in our culture and practiced by so many of our young people today is far more harmful than it is helpful and it does in fact, need to be radically altered.

Recreational dating, what is it? Well, I'll give you a definition. Recreational dating is very simply that one guy and one gal dating among guys and gals who have no intention and are not ready as yet to proceed towards marriage. They have no intention of getting ready for marriage, it's not part of their plans whatsoever.

Someone might say what about double or triple dating? All that is, is two or three sets of one guy, one girl exclusive dating. It's the same thing.

Many parents view this kind of recreational dating as an appropriate way for their children to grow up, to learn socializing skills. But the problem is that when our young people are at their most vulnerable we allow them to get caught up on the milieu of this kind of exclusive dating and they become emotionally dependent. I see it happen all the time. And if you have your eyes open you see it as well. They call it love but if you have any sense at all you know it for what it is. It's not love--it's an emotional dependence. The need to love and to be loved is very powerful. The need to possess and experiment is very powerful. And so it seems to me that there is a God-given logic. If you don't intend to marry a non-Christian, if you don't intend to become romantically involved with a non-Christian then you do not date a non-Christian.

There are at least three things that seem to me to be very important that are needed if a person is going to be mature enough to seriously consider marriage. I'm going to demonstrate to you in a moment that recreational dating, as we know it in our culture, militates against all three of these needs. They don't support it, they don't nurture it, nor do they bring it along or foster it. They actually work against it.

The three things are:

- 1 **Personal maturity.** There needs to be a certain level of personal maturity for someone to be marriageable.
- 2 There needs to be an ability to **build solid healthy interpersonal relationships.** If you are going to get married you need to know how to build a healthy relationship.
- 3 There needs to be an ability to **handle sexuality in a morally constructive way.**

And it's precisely, as I said a moment ago, for those three reasons that I have such a problem with recreational dating as it carried on in our culture today.

First of all, as to the issue of developing personal maturity. Recreational dating tends to discourage personal maturity not encourage it. The kind of one-on-one exclusive dating that's carried on between people who have no intention of whatsoever of becoming married, especially among those who are younger, causes them to become inwardly focused on themselves. It's mostly about how they look, whether they are attractive enough and how they are perceived by the other person. And this tendency to self-absorption turns them inward on themselves and only exacerbates the very immature attitudes that we would like them to grow out of. Let me suggest some of them:

1. **Self-centeredness.** It's interesting how that one-to-one exclusive relationship early in life simple causes a person to focus inward on themselves and become more self-centered rather than less self-centered. Irresponsibility? Here's one, a willingness to subordinate everything else to this one concern of being liked by them. You see it in the immaturity of those who date too young. Everything else goes by the board; the only thing that counts is this one person and being liked somehow by them and being accepted by them. And it's actually working against the very thing that you want to see them doing as they grow. And that is to expand and know what it means to give instead of to simply take.
2. **Insecurity.** Have you noticed how insecurities are fostered by this kind of dating rather than dissipated? Do I overstate the case? I don't think so. As youth pastor for over ten

years, and I have watched it in our own church, it does not take a Sherlock Holmes to see it happening in young person after young person. It militates against the very thing that we want to see happen. Marriage requires an “others orientation”. Marriage requires a servant mentality. Not a preoccupation with myself. You see the more character strengths a person brings into a marriage the better that marriage can be. Most of our young people grow up in a recreational dating culture. And they think that marriage is simply an extension of that kind of a relationship. It focuses mainly on personal fulfillment. It focuses mainly on personal emotional and sexual satisfaction. It is inward focused rather than being focused on outward to God and to others.

The second problem that I have with recreational dating the way that it's carried on in our culture is that it not only tends to discourage personal maturity. I think it also tends to discourage the **building of healthy interpersonal relationships**. The kind of recreational dating of which I speak focuses on the one to one relationship with the opposite sex and it tends to exclude the one to one relationship with same sex.

The relationship starts to become exclusive. No one will date him because he's her boyfriend. No one will date her because it's his girlfriend. They become very exclusive. You don't even call them for fear that you are somehow going to alienate one of your friends or one of your acquaintances. And instead of seeing same sex acquaintances as brothers and sisters in Christ to be served, we begin to see them as potential romantic competitors.

Flirting abounds, jealousies tear at the youth group. Do young people know what I'm talking about? They may not agree with all that I'm saying but they know about this. And they know what it does to friendships and acquaintances in youth groups. They know about it and they hate it and they wish there was something they could do about it. And what young people need in adolescence especially is a safe place, a safe place to work on building those kinds of relationships. How do you work out conflicts? How do you know when to assert and when to defer? How do you learn how to express genuine esteem and love? How do you learn how to correct and be corrected?

We should know that the skills needed in marriage are not all that unique. They are the very same skills that we have to learn in working with any other people. But, for our young people,

they need to be worked out and they need to be honed without competition and over-stimulated sexuality. That's the problem with recreational dating.

Mature same-sex relationships are needed and opposite sex relationships need to be worked out in a safe environment without the pressures to pair up and put out. Which is what happens so often.

A third requirement for a healthy marriage which is threatened by recreational dating is the way young people learn **how to handle sexuality in a morally constructive way**. Guys and gals who are involved in recreational, one boy / one girl, dating where they spend a lot of time together unchaperoned, sooner or later are going to run into sexual temptation. And very possibly run into very serious sin.

Well, the Bible's teaching regarding sex is very clear. That is that the sexual relationship is reserved exclusively for marriage. I know that it's fashionable to say that sins of sex are no worse than any other sins. Why don't preachers preach about them as well? Well, if you've been around very long you know this preacher does. But it's also true in the scriptures that God gives a special warning because of the special dangers attached to sexual sin. The ramifications of that kind of sin are different than other kinds of sin. Just as unholy certainly and not more unholy, but the ramifications are so much deeper and so much more widespread. The Bible's teaching is clear. It is not only that sexual intercourse outside of marriage is wrong but that the whole package of sexual conduct is wrong outside of the marriage context. It is not only a matter of refraining from the act, it is a matter our Lord Jesus said of refraining from even thinking it in our hearts.

You see, it doesn't make much sense to sit in the driver's seat, start the engine, take the car out of drive, and release the brake if you don't intend to go anywhere and don't have a license. The nature of sexuality is that it's progressive. God made us that way. One thing is supposed to follow another. That's the point of it all. And recreational dating with one boy / one girl puts young people in the driver's seat with the engine running and with the brake off.

And what do we expect? We expect exactly what we get. A lot of parents and a lot of young people who are working through a whole lot of guilt and are picking up the pieces of a whole lot of broken relationships and feeling extremely insecure about whether they even know how to

build a healthy one. And we deal with them all the time. Do young people know what I'm talking about? You bet they do. They may not like the solution I'm going to suggest but they know what I'm talking about. What have we done? What have we done when we as Christian parents have simply stumbled along behind the culture encouraging, or at least not discouraging, the same kind of recreational dating patterns as the culture at large?

We have put our kids smack dab in the middle of a Pizza Hut and said don't you dare taste. And this is not just a problem for others. A Louis Harris poll was taken in which 57% of the nation's 17-year-olds were sexually experienced. We go "At least it was them, not us." You know all of those people out there who don't know the Lord and don't go to church. It just so happens that very recently a survey was taken of several thousand young people from seven evangelical conservative denominations. 43 percent of those young people admitted to sexual intercourse before the age of 18.

That's us, folks. That's us. What are we doing, as we stumble blindly behind the culture? What are we doing? What can we do? I'd like to suggest in closing three things to you.

First of all, I believe that we as parents and youth leaders need to teach a foundation for marriage that includes personal maturity and mutual submission. Not just romantic attraction. Oh, we need to go after that. We need to teach guys that girls are not just something to be conquered. And girls something to be caught. We need to teach that Christian marriage is not simply about mutual admiration or mutual satisfaction. It is a union of purpose and it's to be God's people serving His kingdom better as two than as one. And to somehow keep saying that message, modeling that message, repeating that message until the word gets through.

Marriage is not something that happens when you fall in love. Marriage is something that ought to happen when you act out of the intentions of your heart and your mind to serve the King of Kings better as two, as I said, than as one. We have to keep repeating it and keep saying it. Instead, too many of us teach something like this "Well, will he make you happy?" "Will she meet your needs?" "Well, you know all that really matters is that you love one another."

What nonsense. We know better. Are we telling our young people? We need parents and church leaders who model and teach what marriage really is.

Secondly, we need parents and church leaders who will teach the elements of personal maturity. Young people are not resistant to that. They would not only love to see it modeled, they would love to see it taught. Personal maturity has to do with self-sacrifice and discipline. They would love to see healthy interpersonal relationships (patience and forgiveness among others virtues) taught . How to be the friend of someone not just how to be their lover. They would love to see models and hear those kinds of things taught. They are asking those questions.

Others of you in this room have been responsible for teaching our young people and leading them in youth groups and so forth. Teach these things. We must continue.

And the third suggestion, and here's the radical one, **we need to persuade our young people of the advantages of deferring recreational one-on-one exclusive dating until they are ready to marry.** Can you imagine what would happen if we could take the pressure off? What would happen if we could free our kids to be able to relate one to another guys to gals, gals to gals and guys to guys without the kind of pressure that accompanies the typical recreational one on one exclusive relationship that starts today at 10 and 11 years old? They need personal maturity to a far greater extent than they have at that age. They need to have interpersonal relationship skills far more than they have at that age. Can't somebody free them? Can't somebody tell them it's ok. They don't have to have those kinds of exclusive relationships. They can get to know others.

What would happen if our young people began to gather together in smaller groups, not just the large group? But from time to time on a Friday or Saturday night they got together in groups of 5,6, 7 or 8 kids. Not paired up, not exclusive, not this guy invite this gal and this gal invite this guy, but a group of them together, spending time together. You want your kids to know how to get along with guys. I'd love to have them know how to get along with guys. Take the heat off and let them learn how to do it in a safe environment.

I suggested the whole approach a couple of years ago to my oldest daughter. She was a freshman in college at the time and she had some experiences that were not all that pleasant. We talked about this and I sent her some articles about it and spoke by phone as well as in person and she began to do it. And she found as she told me one of the most freeing things she

has ever done. She talked to others kids at her college campus about it. You see she was in no way ready at that time to think about getting married.

And it took the heat off, it took the pressure off. She got together with some friends and there was a group of guys and gals on that college campus that began to do things together and it didn't require one of the guys working up enough nerve to call one of the gals to have a date and to be the exclusive friend of that girl hence forth and forever more, because he took her out once.

It didn't fall to the girls, because the guys didn't have the guts to do it, for them to get on the phone and call the guy. They were a group of guys and gals who understood what they were trying to accomplish. They were not paring off and were able to grow in their relationships to each other. Later when they are ready to consider marriage, they can allow the relationship to become more exclusive. We need parents who will agree together to change the system. And you know it's not impossible to be counter culture when you have support.

This a church large enough and there are enough parents in here of younger children as well as pre-teens and teens that if parents and kids got together talked about this, and if after looking at these scriptures they came to the kinds of convictions, I believe it would be possible to change it.

What if most of us agreed to "no paired exclusive relationships until graduation from high school"? And agreed that exclusive dating after high school, was only if they are seriously interested in moving toward a marriage relationship. I think the Bible is abundantly clear, we are to be married only in the Lord. I think that has very obvious implications in regard to dating. "Do not," it says in the Word, "be bound together with unbelievers. For we are the temple of the living God."