



Does God care about the way we date?

As a campus pastor and associate professor, I have a front row seat to the lifestyle trends and choices of college students. After observing both Christian and non-Christian students from this same cohort, I've come to notice one startling fact: the two groups aren't very different. In fact, they're almost indistinguishable.

That observation finds its roots in the Christian concern with merely good and bad, right and wrong, light and dark. And while that concern may be best for those new to the faith, I fear that it has become the terminus for many who profess Christ. Sanctification, the process that *begins* after a life has been devoted to God, seems to have slowly leaked out of Christian doctrine like the strength from a shorn Samson.

The apostles were men who preached a gospel of changed lives. This gospel was not one that merely saved men from eternal damnation and gave them a comfy place to rest for all eternity; it was good news that God was actively interested in changing the course of lives starting right at the moment they were ready to change allegiances. In Christ, God initiated a scandalous offer: leave

everything you have done, everything you own, and everything you are, and come be a new person on a new path.

That new path is sanctification; God intends to do something big in us, something much bigger than merely teaching us to distinguish good from bad. He wants to give us big picture vision for his kingdom, for a broken world, and for our powerless lives, and he wants to enable us to *do something about it*. The question of the disciple who undergoes sanctification is not, "what's good and what's bad?" but "what's better, and what's best?" A caveat: I am not suggesting that one can begin at the latter of those two questions. Of course, it is necessary for those who are just coming into the faith to delineate evil from good and to grow in recognizing that distinction. However, it is clear that many of those people who have pledged their lives to God years ago have yet to get *past* the first question.

The primary aim of this short article is far from a theological discussion on sanctification. If we agree that God wants us to live powerful and exemplary lives in Christ, we may proceed. I have included the above discussion for the purpose of relating it to present-day dating on the college campus. I will not try to convince you of the evils of dating; I think dating is necessary in our modern context. Likewise, I won't try to convince you that you *cannot* do a great number of things, for you are able to act and think within the vast arena of God's capacious grace. This article is one primarily

concerned with what is best, not what we can get away with. I will write on a few points, by no means comprehensively, in order to guide you into rethinking dating as you conceive it. My hope is that you will at least leave with questions that send you in prayer to God.

What's "natural" isn't usually best

Many of us have been beguiled by our culture's views on love. Indeed, we can't distinguish between love as described in Scripture and love displayed in culture. Our culture tells us that the way to love is to "fall in love". The word "fall" is indicative of the premium culture places on unplanned, unchosen, romantic love. These words evoke in us the sense that love is "meant to be", that real love can only exist in the state of chance encounters and happy luck.

There is certainly an element of real romantic love that makes those in love feel very strong emotions for one another, but they aren't intended to be a guiding force in any decision. The tail does not wag the dog. What comes naturally to you? Consider a few examples in other areas of life: an overweight individual doesn't naturally eat healthy or accidentally exercise; it is a matter of going against one's natural desires. Likewise, I assume that you, when faced with the choice of studying or spending time with friends, would naturally choose the latter. The point is simple: to treat as best what comes naturally to us would be to forget the fact that we are fallen, broken

people who don't naturally desire to do the things of God, and who have a long history of following our natural inclinations to his dismay. Thus it stands to reason that good dating is going to have to start with the admission that we are messed up folks, and are probably going to have to go against what we want to do, what we feel, and what seems natural in order to please God in the way we date.

Perhaps, though, in order to maintain your purity and chastity you have believed something entirely different. That too, may be in error. The notion that God, or some divine force, has preordained whom we will marry before the creation and order of the cosmos is common among believers and non-believers alike, ironically enough. We might call it soul mate theology. It's strange that so many Christians have acquired this view. To use the promise "...all these things shall be added unto you" as grounds for believing God will find you a spouse is flawed reasoning. "All these things" is most likely referring to the basic needs many people worry about (which is not as common now as it has been throughout history). The persistent misguided belief that God's chief concern is our happiness has also caused numerous problems. Allow me to untangle that.

Do you think God's primary concern for you is your happiness? If so, why? Did his actions toward his servants like Joseph, Jeremiah, Jesus, Paul, and others seem to communicate that? Joseph was sold into slavery, Jeremiah was told to proclaim doom and destruction to a people who wouldn't listen, Jesus

had no place to lay his head and ultimately suffered a gruesome cross-death, and Paul became a punching bag for the Jews and Gentiles alike before his ultimate imprisonment. I suggest to you that God's main concern for them was not their happiness, but their holiness. I believe that concern remains the same in our dating. Since God created you, he enjoys the unique privilege of knowing what is best for you, and what is best may not always make you happy. God has not promised you a mate, and he has not promised you a happy life. Furthermore, if you call Christ Lord, you do not belong to yourself. You belong to him. It will do no good for Christians to believe that it is God's prerogative to find them spouses, especially since it's not true. On this point, I invite you to study Scripture with an objective eye. If you do, I don't believe it is possible to end up with such a view.

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Jeremiah 17:9 "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

Questions to consider:

- Does the way you date look any different than the way non-Christians date?
- Take some time to write out the things culture has taught you about dating or finding a mate and talk those things over with some Christian peers and mentors.

Don't trust yourself

Have you ever seen a werewolf movie? It seems that in almost

every one there is someone the werewolf cares deeply for and, for the sake of not hurting that person, the werewolf has someone he trusts bind him with shackles or put him in a cage and lock the gate. That's a surprisingly good example of what wisdom and love looks like in our current dating context. When you are infatuated with someone you are a werewolf. You don't think clearly, objectively, or lovingly. You think like an animal bent on fulfilling its own desires or needs. Love always places the needs of others above itself. Infatuation begs us to do what makes us the happiest. So, wise people have people they trust help them make good decisions in dating. They actually *defer* to trusted people's opinions because they are aware that that person has nothing to gain or lose from the situation and will be able to offer best courses of action in Christ. The disconnect is that we seem to be keen on trusting ourselves. That keenness usually comes from a place of pride. It asks questions like, "why should I listen to them?" and "what makes them think they know me well enough to say that?" These questions show one thing: we misunderstand the nature of the body of Christ. The simple fact of the matter is that if you call yourself a Christian you *belong* to the community of believers, broken messes that we are. After all, aren't you just as much of a mess? That means they have not only the right, but the *duty* to ask you questions about your dating practices, give you advice, and lead you in Christ. I would remind you that you aren't obligated to take every bit of advice you're given, treating it as if it were directly from God's mouth, but you

are obligated in Christ to listen with an open heart and mind, in submissiveness and respect, to those who would ask you questions and give their thoughts about such things. The problem I find, though, is that many college students are not seeking advice from many people, and they don't consider themselves beholden, first, to the community of believers. They treat their dating and their relationships as their own, which is decidedly un-Christ like.

So don't trust yourself. Trust men and women in Christ who you see living Godly lives. Hebrews 13:7 says, "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." Get advice and talk to people before you date, during your dating, and at points in between. If I may add another warning: choose who you ask advice from wisely. Not just anyone will do. Choose people who have Godly, healthy relationships that are bearing fruit. Do not choose people with poor track records and a cadre of bad relationships. I am astonished at how often students will place the advice of their twice-divorced parent, or their inexperienced friend over that of esteemed counselors or advisors. Beware of looking for advice that you want to hear; we will most likely share in the life successes or failures of those we get advice from. Remember that you belong to the body of Christ. You may ask, "what if I'm given bad advice and a relationship is lost because of it?" That is a valid question. First, obviously, only take advice that isn't directly opposed to Christ.

Second, the church isn't perfect; it may occasionally let you down. But I guarantee you'll let yourself down far more often. It never ceases to amaze me the grace we grant ourselves for bad decisions we've made while slandering the church, leaving her, or failing to trust her for the few mistakes she's made.

 Proverbs 14:12 "There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death."

Questions to consider:

- Do you ask for advice in dating? Whom do you go to? If not, why not?
- Do you struggle with trusting others in this way? If so, why?

What's your question?

It is a sad fact that many Christians seem preoccupied with the question, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" But what other question must we ask? And what does this have to do with dating in college?

The answer to that question can be found ringing through the halls of Scripture, through centuries of men and women who have served God, and in countless lives who have fallen in love with the good God. The question they all had in common appears to be, "what pleases you, Lord?" with the implicit follow-up "because whatever it is, I'll do it and be it". This question doesn't come from a place of concern for personal salvation, fear, or even the sincere

desire to do good. It comes from a deep place of love and appreciation for God. It's intensely relational.

This question, the best one we can ask, will draw us to our loving God in Christ. This question, when applied to dating, will completely overhaul the way our culture dates, because our culture dates with a completely different question. The basis for life in Christ is largely based in this question. So why would this question, which holds true as the central question in all other aspects of life, change when applied to finding a mate? Will we ask, "what pleases you, Lord?" in all aspects of life, then, when finding a mate, switch the question to "what pleases me?" or "what feels right to me?" or "what do I desire?" To do so is to build the foundation of your marriage on sand.

 Ephesians 5:8-10 "For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. *Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.*" (emphasis mine).

Questions to consider:

- What question guides the direction of your life?
- Which questions have you carried into dating?

Below are some principles and pieces of advice that may get you starting to think in the right direction. Talk through them with your friends and mentors. Pray about them by yourself and with others. Then after you decide what dating looks like for a follower of Christ, *stick to what you have decided*. My prayer is that you would seek what pleases the Lord in dating and in doing so build up the body of Christ. May the Lord guide you in this important endeavor.

Some principles

Principle #1 - Considering more people than myself (or my significant other) Phil 2:3-4 and Jn 13:14-15

Principle #2 - Not even a hint of sexual immorality. 1 Thess. 4:3-8. Eph 5:3 and 1 Tim 5:1-2

Principle #3 - As I become like God, I'll develop different ideas on what's attractive. 1 Peter 3:3-4 and 1 Timothy 2:8-10, 4:8-9

Principle #4 - Be wise and get advice! Ephesians 5:15-17, Proverbs 12:1 & 15, and Heb 13:7

Principle #5 - We don't belong to ourselves. 1 Cor 6:19-20 and Romans 12:5

Principle #6 - The impact we have on others is a BIG DEAL to God. Matt 25:34-40 and Matt 18:6-7

Some advice:

- *Arrange your own marriage.* In other words, exercise wisdom to choose the best possible mate for yourself rather than deciding based solely on your feelings. Your feelings are real but they aren't always rooted in reality.

- *Write your non-negotiables and negotiables* (or must haves/can't stands) ideally before you find someone you are interested in; give it to a close friend.

- *Determine your boundaries* (individually first, as a couple later, boundaries are an ongoing part of life so learn to respect other people's).

- *Purposefully get to know the other person.* Seek wisdom about what the really important questions are for long-term compatibility as well as helping each other be your best for the Lord.

- *Date more and date more people.* Call it what you want, but use dating to grow, to bless others, to serve, to get to know yourself, to learn about the opposite sex, to let God refine what qualities you are and aren't attracted to, and to have fun.

- *Be careful about exclusively dating when you aren't actually exclusively dating.* We should be self-controlled and truth-tellers.

- *Face-to-face is more authentic than texting.* Don't set weird boundaries; in text and online I can much more easily pretend to be something I'm not. Around people who know you and in person you're more authentic.

- *Get to know people you don't think you're interested in.* Remember your people-picker (your filter for choosing people well) is still in development.

- *Make dates less of a big deal* (cheaper, shorter, less dramatic, more couples). Don't try to compete with TV and movies, you're setting precedents for later in your relationship.

- *Don't get too serious with one person until you are within a year or two of wanting to get married.* It's much harder to maintain purity and purpose in dating if you start dating too early.

- *If your dating relationship looks like a marriage* (i.e. spending all our time together, buying things together, owning a pet together, being sexually intimate, etc.) then your break-up will have the emotional devastation of a divorce.

- *Date exclusively for at least a year* before starting pre-engagement counseling. Experience the seasons and holidays and the ups and downs of life, leave some time for infatuation to wear thin.

- *Get rid of pornography from your life.* Be very careful about romance books and movies and shows. We are a people of the truth, and porn and pop culture are full of lies.

- *Be discerning with "Christian" dating/marriage books.* These are not a substitute for becoming a great disciple. Marriage is an overlay on discipleship, not the other way around. A lot of this literature is full of self-centered ideas overlaid with spiritual language, not a call to deny yourself and follow Jesus.