

# Developing Great Relationships

By Bob La Forge

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## Introduction

Relationships are complex and difficult. They can be the cause of severe depression, terrible self-esteem, addictions, personality disorders, and voluntary isolation. But they can also be our greatest joy, satisfaction, purpose, and source of love.

Thomas Hughes said, “Blessed are they who have the gift of making friends, for it is one of God’s best gifts. It involves many things, but above all, the power of giving out of one’s self, and appreciating whatever is noble and loving in another.”<sup>1</sup>

With computers and the Internet, jobs in cubicles and long work hours, and large, sprawling cities we have become a people who are becoming more and more isolated. More people live and die alone than ever before. People move to wherever their jobs take them and families can live thousands of miles apart. Our parents lived in houses with porches in the front so that they could see their neighbors. Now we build decks in the back so that no one will see us. One of the tragedies of today’s culture is a lack of genuine, committed friendships. The truth is that relationships take time and work and in a culture driven by the momentary and the immediate people can be left behind. Albert Camus, the existentialist and novelist, said, “I have no friends, only accomplices.”

In a society where only accomplishments are considered noteworthy, many strive for friendships that only serve their own goals and ambitions. Therefore oftentimes only the rich, the powerful, the popular and the influential are sought out. Those who have nothing to offer—the unpopular, the unattractive, the struggling—are easily discarded and ignored. We do not care if our heroes are brooding, amoral, or self-centered so long as they are on the top of their game. Friendships that are difficult or too slow in developing are inconvenient. We want our relationships to be like TV dinners—easy and satisfying.

Furthermore, many people stagger from attempted relationship to attempted relationship suffering from deepening anxiety and bitterness each time. They may ask questions such as “What is wrong with me?” or adversely, “What is the problem with everyone?” For these people relationships are not a delight but a struggle. Often the end result is a decision to simply give-up and exist in the predictable and safe cycle of work, dinner, isolated entertainment, and sleep. Time is something to kill rather than to fill.

But God wants us to develop intimate, trusting relationships; first with Himself and then with others. He wants us to experience all of the rich treasures that can come from close relationships. He tells us how we can do this through His commandments and principles, He shows us through His own example, He gives us real people that we can read about in the Bible, and He supplies the power to do it all through the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup>Notes

### Introduction

Ed. Frank S. Mead, 12,000 Religious Quotations (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 156

Proverbs 14:4 says, “Where no oxen are, the manger is clean, but much increase comes by the strength of the ox.” This may seem like an odd verse for a study on relationships, but what it is saying is tremendously important. Consider the manger as being your life and the oxen as relationships. If you want a life that is clean and unencumbered then keep people out of it. Just like a manager without animals, your life will be quite tidy, but you will also be empty and you will not be what God created you for. When you bring people into your life you are going to have to clean up some messes, but much strength comes from having those people there.

God could have done just as well without any of us. He did not need to create us. But He did and for a while He walked among us in innocent and wonderful fellowship. But then we sinned in The Garden of Eden and therefore caused a great separation between God and us. God could have left us to forever struggle in loneliness and pain. Yet His desire for intimate relationships drove Him to be born of a virgin and become a man. But did He receive the adoration and gratitude that He deserved for such a glorious act? He was refused adequate quarters at birth, hunted as a newborn, anonymous throughout His childhood, vilified as a fraud, accused of being aligned with demons, rejected by His family and friends, denied, mocked, spit upon, and tried as a criminal. Was this enough to cause Him to give up on us? His response was to pay the highest cost by suffering on the cross the justice due to a thousand generations of sinful people. Then we killed His disciples and persecuted His church. So what did He do? He opened up His arms in forgiveness and asked each one to come to Him. By doing all of this He gave each one of us the possibility of having a personal relationship with the Creator of the universe. But even here He allows us the choice of either accepting or rejecting that relationship and so He sets Himself up for even more rejection, ridicule, and disdain. The Bible is about a loving God who continually pursues a sinful and self-centered people so that He might embrace us as sons and daughters.

Throughout this book God will be our greatest example of right relationships and will be our greatest motivation for those relationships. We can see two examples of how important God thinks they are. First, God’s very being revolves around a relationship. He is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Before time even came into existence, before there was any universe or any people, there was one God but existing in such a way that He consisted of three beings all of whom could love, commune with, and be intimate with the others.

The second way that we see how God puts such a high premium on relationships is in the words that He uses. He refers to us as brothers and sisters, as sons and daughters. We are the bride of Christ. And what does He ask us to call Him? Is it King, Most Sovereign Creator, Most High and Holy One? He is all of these things, but what He asks us to call Him is “Abba! Father!” (Galatians 4:6—“Abba” is Aramaic for father). Then ultimately, God has created Heaven so that we can enjoy each other forever.

The Bible is not a book of rules; it is a book about relationships. God desperately wants us to first have an intimate relationship with Him and then to have close, wonderful relationships with each other. The goal of this book is to teach us how to become that friend or spouse that God wants us to be, how to recover

from heartbreak and hurt, and how to be wise in avoiding those relationships that will only end in hurt and frustration.

The more that we can become like God in character and in pursuit of right relationships the more we will find our lives satisfied, meaningful, and joyful.

That is all great but how do we learn how to initiate conversations? How can we learn how to be a great friend? And, ultimately, how can we develop relationships that will last and be as wonderful as we could ever hope for? We will never learn these skills from watching movies or TV, which for many is sadly their primary source of social intercourse. We will never become a “people-person” by allowing our fears to push us stumbling away from potential friends. And we will never develop deep relationships if we only seek out people who will frustrate us. This book hopes to answer many of these questions. It will try to file away any rough burrs of ours that other people are constantly catching themselves on. It will help us to avoid making regrettable mistakes. And it will guide us to a better understanding of God’s desires for our lives regarding other people and how they might affect us. This book is practical and very readable. It is not filled with anecdotes about how other people have lived their unusual lives but how you can live yours in the way that God intended for you.

Several concepts, thoughts, or Scriptures are slightly repeated in different sections of this book. That is because to discuss them only once in one section and exclude them from another would leave that other section incomplete and having references pointing all over makes for awkward reading.

## Our Design and Purpose—Why do Relationships Affect Us so Much?

So here it is the day of the big dinner. He is coming over to my place, it will be just the two of us, and I am cooking... the entire meal... from scratch. To say that I want it to go perfectly is too mild. I want to make an impression like an 18-wheeler running over a tomato.

To choose the entrée I decided rather quickly not to make something whose name rhymes. That eliminated Grand Bran Burgers, Jerky Turkey Casserole, and Wikiwiki Yumiyumi. I mean, how could I approach the candle-lit table dressed in my best casual outfit with this tantalizing look on my face and announce, “Our piece d’ Resistance is Beanie-Weanie Casserole”? Unfortunately that also winnowed out Surf ‘n Turf but I must stand on my principles. Then I deleted dishes with descriptive words in them. Nothing “chunky,” “creamy,” “deviled,” or “fantastic.”

I finally settled on Filet Mignon Stefanie Blais. This name works on several levels. For one it is incomprehensible. Is Stefanie Blais the name of the person who created it? Is it the ingredients? Incomprehensible means mysterious. It implies something beyond our feeble, pedestrian experience. It also sounds French. Therefore, it is perfect. Never mind that it involved stuffing Filet Mignon with chopped shrimp and mushrooms and encasing the whole thing in puff pastry. Even someone swinging with their eyes closed at a Nolan Ryan fastball can occasionally hit a homerun—right?

So I worked on the entrée. I watched those chefs on TV whose fingers fly like a pianist as they chop-up the vegetables. My fingers moved like bored turtles. I cut the mushrooms into pieces exactly  $\frac{1}{16}$ <sup>th</sup> of an inch wide. Surgeons would have gasped in envy.

I have 72 reasons, 65 of them backed up by Scripture verse, as to why I should use a packaged store-bought Bernaise Sauce rather than make it from scratch, but do I listen to myself? –No! “A homemade sauce will taste so much fresher and livelier,” I convinced myself. I did find a recipe for Mock Bernaise Sauce but somehow I took that as being too personal.

The hour was approaching quickly and my preparations were coming slowly. The homemade sauce stuck to the bottom of the pan and will mostly likely taste like burnt books. The puff pastry puffed and then apparently collapsed back in exhaustion. With foresight approaching blindness I put the green beans in a steamer and topped them with my homemade butter/herb sauce only to find the sauce merrily gracing the boiling water beneath the steamer...and the beans.

There was a knock on the door. I did not even have time to leap down the fire escape and get takeout. As he sat at the table I placed the disaster before him. I even doubled up on the



garnish as a distraction. I sat down and forced every muscle in my neck to keep my head from falling into the watery mashed potatoes and weeping.

He cut off a piece of steak. I smiled like a wax figure. He put it into his mouth. I clenched my teeth. He spoke, "This is perfect."

Relationships will affect us in ways that nothing else will: not finances, not our health, not even our career. Sure, these things can create a tremendous yearning and drive in our lives and, if they fail, produce a catastrophe that can send us reeling. But somehow they never seem to cut as deeply and terribly as relationships can. Twenty years after the fact it would be unusual to hear someone say, "I still can't believe that I lost my job back then." But after those same twenty years it would not be so unusual to hear someone say, "I still can't believe that he did that to me." I know someone who, after 60 years, is still mad at an aunt because the aunt did not buy her an ice cream cone when she was little.

Why is this? Why do relationships affect us this way? It is because God created us to have relationships. Genesis 2:18 says, "Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone.'" The very first thing that God said that was not good in what was an otherwise perfect world was that man lacked relationships with other people.

The Bible from Genesis chapter one to Revelation chapter 22 is primarily about one thing and that is about relationships. Everything else is merely a subset of this. In Genesis 1 right after man and woman were created we read an amazing sequence in verses 27 and 28, "... He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them...": creation, blessing, and then immediately personal interaction. Then 1189 chapters later we come to the last quote in the Bible. Revelation 22:20 is from Jesus, "Yes, I am coming soon." We see God's promise of coming to be more intimate with us.

What is the affect of sin in Isaiah 59:2? "But your sins have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear you." Sin breaks that relationship between God and us. What is one of the greatest benefits of salvation? In Ephesians 1:5 it says, "He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will." We are now part of God's family. Why should we strive to make peace with others and between others? Because it says in Matthew 5:9, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." Again we see relationship. God forgives us of our sins so that we might have fellowship with Him (1 John 1:9). God saved us not merely to snatch us from Hell but primarily to draw us to Himself. As you study through the Epistles you can read all of the things that God has done for us and what He has made us into. Yet you cannot escape noticing how it all relates back to His relationship with us.

### ***Our relationship first to God***

Our primary relationship must be first to God and then, out of that, flows our relationship to others. Our relationship to God is not like a dummy to its ventriloquist but, rather, is like a child to her nursing mother. How are we to address God in "The Lord's Prayer"? —"Our Father." We are told to get God's

attention when we pray not by the name of one of His attributes or by some eloquent description of His greatness or majesty, although that has its place. But, rather, we are asked to address God based on His relationship to us. And notice that this relationship is not one of emotional distance such as a worker and his boss or a student and a teacher but, instead, is one of the most intimate and caring relationships that we as humans can fathom: that of a parent and his child.

We are created in the image of God and thus we have been endowed with aspects of God's nature such as wisdom, love, justice, holiness, mercy, and patience. A key aspect of God designing us similar to Himself is that we can have a personal and endless relationship with Him. That we have similar natures draws us to each other. We see this principle throughout creation: Lions form a pride, fish swim in schools, and ants live in colonies. Whereas all the rest of creation has only one type that they are similar to—their own species—we are unique because there are two types that we are similar to and, therefore, can form deep relationships with: other people (individually and in community) and God.

Many times in Scripture God uses the most intimate descriptions possible to describe His affinity of us.

**Isaiah 49:15**, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you.” Here God says that His intimacy for us exceeds even that of a nursing mother for her child.

**Isaiah 49:16**, “Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; your walls are continually before Me.” Into those same hands that nails so brutally pierced were written our names. Even if we forget about God, He only has to look into His hands to be reminded of us.

**1 Corinthians 6:19**, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?” The Holy Spirit does not merely surround us but He dwells within us. We do not have to be satisfied to say, “God is in this place!” We can say, “God is in me!”

**2 Corinthians 6:18**, “‘And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me,’ says the Lord Almighty.” When we get saved we do not become God's slaves; we become His children.

**Revelation 19:7**, “Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.” The church is the bride of Christ.

God does not merely watch over us and take care of our needs like a child might with an ant farm but, rather, He yearns for a depth of intimacy.

When God became a man in the form of Jesus Christ He did not come mysteriously out of the wilderness and then aloofly stand in the marketplace and teach rules and theology. God first became a baby, which had a relationship with His parents.

Luke 2 is the first recorded words of Jesus. His parents had gone to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover when He was twelve and when they left the city they mistakenly thought that Jesus was in the caravan with them. When they realized that He was not, they went back to Jerusalem to search for Him. They finally found Him in the Temple and chided Him for worrying them. Verse 49 says, “And He said to them, ‘Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know that I had to be in My Father's house?’”

Here we see Jesus defining Himself not by sharp and unequivocal dogma but by His relationship to God in Heaven.

A key part of Jesus' ministry was the people that He formed relationships with. He had His three closest disciples: Peter, James, and John. He had His twelve disciples whom He spent a lot of time with. Then He had other friends such as Martha, Mary and Lazarus. All through His ministry He interacted with real individuals and solved real problems.

He did not whoosh into a city, do a blackboard seminar and then whoosh back out into the night by Himself. You did not hear anyone say, "Who was that masked man?" In His 33 years Jesus developed close relationships. People wept when He died. They visited His tomb to pay their respects. And they rejoiced greatly when He came back to life not just because He was proof of some miracle but because their friend, Jesus Christ, was now back amongst them.

The Bible from the beginning to the end is primarily about one thing and that is God bringing us back to Himself.

<b>You respond wrongly to correction or reproof if you:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Refer to anonymous "other" people who agree with you ("Other people also say that you...")</li><li>• Try to defer your own sin by accusing the person of being an instigator or troublemaker or agitator</li><li>• Ignore your wrong by turning the argument around ("You're a sinner, too" or "And you think that you're perfect" or "Look at what you do wrong. Just the other day...")</li><li>• Make a sweeping attack ("A good Christian wouldn't have said what you said" or "You call yourself a Christian?")</li><li>• Deflect responsibility because of some condition ("I'm too old (or sick or have too many other problems) for this nonsense")</li><li>• Interrupt constantly so that the other person cannot properly state their case</li><li>• Drown out the other person by raising your voice or shouting</li><li>• Hang up if it is a phone call or walk away if in person</li><li>• Make threats ("I'm going to take this to the pastor if you keep it up" or "Our friendship is going to be permanently ruined if you don't leave me alone.")</li><li>• Hide the rebuke in a landfill ("I guess that I can't do anything right" or "So why don't you just pile it on.")</li><li>• Call the other person names ("You're just being stupid again" or "You're such a crybaby" or "This just proves how much of a loser you really are.")</li></ul>



### ***Our relationship to others***

Mark 12:28-31 says, "And one of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, 'What commandment is the foremost of all?' Jesus answered, 'The foremost is, "HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH

ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.” The second is this, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.” There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Love consists of two pillars: God and others. We are commanded to stand with one foot on each of these pillars. If we choose to lift one of our feet off of either of these pillars then we are forced to balance on the other pillar on one foot. And, although it is a strain and tiring, we can maintain that position for a while. But eventually we will weaken and topple. We cannot ignore God and expect our other relationships to succeed nor can we despise others and think that our intimacy with God will not suffer. 1 John 4:19 (“We love, because He first loved us”) tells us that the first is true. God’s love is primary and we can only love others when we access His love. 1 John 4:20 tells us that the latter is true, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.” Only when our feet are solidly on both pillars of love are we able to stand with assuredness and confidence.

Matthew 5:23-24 punches us with this principle and though many of us know what these verses are saying very few actually understand them enough to apply them. They read, “If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.” Jesus spoke these verses in the Sermon on the Mount. Two spiritual activities are in conflict here. One is our relationship with another Christian and the second is making an offering or sacrifice to God. Guess which one God thinks is more important? It is the relationship. In our minds we may think, “As long as I’m going to church and reading my Bible and praying and giving money to the church that’s all that’s important. I’ll work out that sour relationship in it’s own good time.” But God says, “No! You work out that relationship right now. That’s the most important. Do not think that by doing these other things that you can excuse away that bitterness.” What does this passage tell us? Relationships are premium in God’s mind.

**You have wrong self-esteem or a problem with self-pity or self-contempt if you:**

- Always put yourself down so that the other person won’t “beat you to it”
- Feel that you have nothing to offer to other people
- That you are hopeless and can never improve
- Examine every person to see how they are better than you (and always succeed)
- Never try anything new or daring because you are sure that you will always fail
- Are convinced that people who befriend you only do so because they feel sorry for you
- Constantly talk about yourself
- Always need people to affirm you; you are too vulnerable to people’s opinions of you
- Must try to get to get a laugh out of everything to the point where it is annoying

- Think things such as, “I’m just such a loser that I can’t do anything right.” Or, “There I go again; what is wrong with me?”
- Think of yourself as a total failure so that you can anticipate criticism
- Avoid responsibility by saying; “I’m hopeless” or, “don’t give it to me because I mess everything up.”

## ***God brings us back***

Before the Fall God freely walked in the Garden with Adam and Eve. After the first sin God closed the Garden and drove Adam and Eve out of it and since then all of God’s dealings with us involve restoring us to that intimacy that He so desires.

In fact, the last few verses of the Bible are a yearning from each side to restore that perfect and wonderful relationship once again and forever. In Revelation 22:17 God longs to draw us closer to Himself when He says, “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.” And in Revelation 22:20 we return that same desire by saying, “Amen. Come Lord Jesus.”

God created us with a tremendous need for Himself and for other people. Yes, God can satisfy our every need and desire directly, but He chooses not to. Instead, He prefers to allow others to meet many of those needs. Oftentimes He would rather that we be the conduit of His love and grace and mercy than to pour them out directly. Notice 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” Here we see that God can, and often does, comfort us directly in all of our affliction. But He also wants to use us to comfort others when they are suffering.

When we neglect the fellowship of others we lose that part of God’s blessings that He chooses to pour out to us through others. And when we disdain other people then we lose being a source of God’s blessing to them. A car is used to transport people but if you use it for something else then it is probably going to waste. A watch tells us the time but if you let it wind down and stop then it too has been wasted. In the same way, we were created for relationships and if we do not have them both with God and with others then much of our lives will be wasted. We are only complete when we have those relationships. This is why substitutes for God or for people will never totally satisfy. A craving for power or popularity or alcohol or fame or possessions or lots of time in front of the TV or on the computer will never leave us fulfilled. These are small shapes that will fill some of the smaller gaps in our lives but the bigger hole for people and the biggest hole for God can only be satisfactorily filled by what they were created for. No other substitute will work.

We also have to be careful in our serving at church. No matter how diligently we may serve in how many numbers of ministries, if people are excluded then we have missed the mark. Busyness may give us a temporary sense of fulfillment but eventually we will feel empty and weary.

So why is all of this important? It is because we must realize that God has built our emotions, our needs, our desires, our dignity and value, and all other aspects of what we are to successfully make and sustain good relationships. So when we neglect either God or other people or try to shape ourselves around something else we will be unfulfilled. It is our relationship with God that gives our lives true meaning and worth. That cannot come from a job title, a large bank account, or celebrity status. Oftentimes in our celebrity and sports hero driven society those whom we idolize are living lives out of control on drugs or alcohol. The most empty people will be those who pursue peopleless goals whereas the most satisfied people will be those who pursue God and other people.

<b>You have a correct self-esteem if you:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Can make a mistake and not harshly condemn or belittle yourself</li><li>• Know your weaknesses and can plan on improving them rather than using them to drag yourself down</li><li>• Can brush aside an unjust attack on your character</li><li>• Form your view of yourself by how God sees you</li><li>• Are willing to take on responsibility and challenges</li><li>• Can rejoice when someone does well and grieve when someone fails</li></ul>

## God's Wonderful Blessing—How to Have Great Relationships

I am a spiritual magpie. I steal the spiritual characteristics in other people that get applauded the most. Of course you can reply that it is admirable that I imitate the good that I see in others. But this is not the case. I am not taking these attitudes and making them part of my life as you might take clay and use it to form a nose on a statue. Rather I am merely reflecting what I see but it penetrates no more than a flashlight shining on my chest. I wear these spiritual attributes like a large slogan button.

I acquire these tricks not because I am so enthralled with maturity, discipline, character (although these are all good things) but more because I am enticed by applause, appreciation, and acceptance. Someone just complimented the pastor? —Why, I can be like that too! Over there a praise is being dished out? —I've got that recipe written down. Did I hear a pat on the back? —I can change faster than Clark Kent! I'm a spiritual hypochondriac. If the spiritual vogue were large, round eyes then I would resemble a loris faster than you can peel a banana.

I view every encounter as a report card with me trying to guess the grades. Would they comment that I am well liked and get along with my other classmates? Forget penmanship, arithmetic, and reading. We're talking about popularity, spirituality, and recognizability. Teacher's pet—you would never read that on a real report card, but pastor's pet! —Now if I could pull that one then that would be better than running A+s down the line. That would be a report card suitable for framing or better yet, carrying around in my Bible so that every time I open up the word of God it opens right to where the card is. Then next time that old lady pulls out her grandchildren's pictures I can nudge in and open up my Bible, "Did you happen to notice what the pastor says about me?" I can even now hear the "oooos" and see the admiring glances.

The result is not that I become all things to all men as Paul did but, instead, I act like I think all men want me to act. If twitching were suddenly deemed a spiritual gift then my left eye would look like it was always being electrocuted. I never examine myself; I only watch others. Ask me my five biggest weakness—I could not tell you. What sins am I struggling with? —Don't know. Why did they just make that person an elder? —That I can tell you!

I acquire and shed these traits with the speed of a poker player exchanging cards. To be quite honest, it can quite wear me out. Sometimes I wonder if it might be easier to just be myself.

Relationships can be infinitely varied and vastly different in depth. They can also be hard. Relationships can be hard for those who are terribly shy or fearful. They can be hard for those who lack social skills or who have been isolated for so long that they lack people experience. They can be hard for those who have been hurt a lot and have learned to put up barriers. They can be hard for those who are

constantly around self-centered, inconsiderate people or for those who are in a marriage that is far from communicative.

We must “practice” relationships. For each relationship that we are involved in, no matter how short, there is something to learn about who we are and how we can better understand other people. Even the most bitter and disappointing relationship can teach us valuable lessons that can make our subsequent relationships deeper, stronger, and wiser.

We are going to examine a number of characteristics that form relationships. Some of these are good; some are bad. Some should be developed to improve a relationship and some should be recognized as red flags to possibly get out of a relationship or at least proceed more slowly.

None of this is absolute and there will be as many variations and applications as there are people in the world. But there are principles here that can be recognized as being universal. Hopefully, studying these characteristics will make each one of us a better friend and maybe prevent us from making a bad mistake.

Christians who are great friends to each other are not only good for the individuals and for the church, but it is probably the best witness that we can make to those outside of the church. The early church grew tremendously because of Christians who demonstrated sacrificial love. Speaking about the first few centuries, “Personal evangelism was often backed up by outstanding acts of kindness.... During outbreaks of plague at Alexandria, Christians tended the sick and buried the dead when nearly everyone else had fled. In fact, the Christian life-style itself was a very powerful influence in evangelism. In a society where kindness, honesty and personal purity were rare, Christians who lived out these virtues were sure to attract comment and often serious enquiry.”<sup>2</sup>

Though it certainly has its place, most people will not be moved to Christ because of strong apologetics or great evangelism techniques. They do not suddenly come to a realization that they need correct doctrine and so show up at church. What draws people to God is love, forgiveness, mercy, peace, and so on. Jeremiah reiterates this, “The LORD appeared to him from afar, saying, ‘I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness.’” It has been said that there are five Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and yourself and probably the only one that most people will read is the last one.

When we snap at people we bring reproach upon God. Many people’s view of God is the Christian in front of them. Who would want to come to a God whose followers are gossips, impatience, cranky, malicious, or moody? But when Christians love then people will come.

But before we examine these qualities we should define what a relationship is. This is not easy since there are many levels ranging from the person that we meet only once in a while and exchange a few words with to the marriage partner with whom we share our most intimate emotions. So our definition will form the entire next section.

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<sup>2</sup>**How to Have Great Relationships**

Ed. Dr. Tim Dowley, Eerdmans’ Handbook to the History of Christianity (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), p 87



## ***Levels of friendship***

Many books describe different levels of friendship. Some will have as few as three and some as many as six. I have settled on four levels. Maybe that is because I do not like living on the edge and so generally take the middle road. I think that by using this resolution we can adequately describe each level in a practical way. We are going to describe each level and then look at some practical ways of developing and strengthening those friendships at each level.

Why is it important to understand these levels? It is more than an exercise of categorization. It is because all too often a person has never or can not move beyond the first or second level of conversation. They may want to become more intimate or have a deeper or exclusive commitment but because of some fear or because of a lack of social skills they have been frustrated. Understanding practical ways to do this can be very helpful.

Listed below are some questions or concepts associated with each level. Of course, you can add your own questions but part of the idea is to learn what is appropriate to ask and when. For example, you would not want to blurt out a question to someone who is merely an acquaintance a question like, “What is the dumbest thing that you’ve ever done in your life?” That person would probably be taken back and if he did not verbalize it he would surely be thinking, “Why should I tell you that? I hardly know you.” However, it would usually be appropriate to ask, “What type of work do you do?” These sample questions might make developing friendships a little easier.

Also, if you are only willing to give yourself to a relationship at a lower level then you do not have the right to expect deeper intimacy or commitment from the other person. You should both be at the same general level. But if this is not the case then you should be the one who is more willing to be vulnerable and open. Do not expect from that other person what you are unwilling to give yourself.

Realize that getting through these levels takes time and effort. The deeper that you go the harder it will be and the more vulnerable you will become. Sometimes there will be problems that will set things back. That does not necessarily mean that the relationship is doomed and should be forsaken. It just may mean that you will have to work your way back to that same point and then possibly beyond.

Not all relationships must deepen as time goes on. Some relationships are quite comfortable at the casual level, for example, and to force it beyond that would create a strain. As you “practice” relationships you will best be able to discern when to leave things as they are and when to go beyond.

Our relationship with God should be at the fourth and deepest level. We should be willing to trust Him with all that we are and all that we are not. Again, this may take time, but it will grow if we continue to read the Bible every day, pray, attend a good church, remember His good deeds for us, and worship Him.

Four levels of friendships

	Levels of Friendship	Formed by	Distinguishing Characteristics
1	Acquaintance	Occasional contact	Small talk, general questions, clichés, public information. May involve a small superficial interest such as a favorite sport's team or how the children are doing.
2	Casual	Common interests, activities, and concerns	Can talk about ongoing specific circumstances, general personal questions, opinions, ideas, and broad goals. May occasionally get together outside of chance meetings.
3	Close	Mutual ideas and goals	Can discuss life goals, desires, and problems in detail. There is an interest in and sharing of feelings. These are people who know each other well and are familiar with a number of issues in each other's lives. They are freer to open up to each other but with some limitations.
4	Intimate	Commitment to each other	There is a deep trust and vulnerability. Each person feels responsible for the other and is truly concerned about the other. There is honesty, respect, and understanding. There are no or, at least, very few boundaries.

## Acquaintance

This level has practically no risk. This may be the person at the gas station that you most frequent or at a favorite store. It may be someone that you occasionally talk to at work or church. But just because this person is not deeply involved in your life does not mean that you must be unconcerned. Here are some thoughts regarding this type of relationship.

- Learn and remember his or her name. Then use it the next time that you see them.
- Always pleasantly greet them. Do not be friendly at some times and ignore them at others.
- As long as you are not inconsiderate to other people that might be waiting be willing to take a few more seconds than usual to show extra interest in that person.
- If it is at work then look around that person's area to see if there is anything that they have displayed that you can ask about. It might be a family picture or a vacation photo. Or maybe ask them how long they have been working at this place.
- Be alert to the person that you are talking to. Do not look around as though you are trying to find someone more interesting. It was said that John Kennedy gave such undivided attention to whomever he was talking to, that he made that person feel like he was the most important person in the world to him.

- Be a good listener and remember what they say. Then mention that the next time that you see them.
- As you leave, pray silently for that person.

## Casual

For people that you are able to spend more time with than an occasional moment you should be able to move from the acquaintance to the casual level without much difficulty. There is still not much openness and vulnerability here. In some ways these may be the most difficult relationships to maintain because there often is not much to talk about since you both do not know each other very well. Conversation is usually limited to the same topics and issues. But that does not mean that a sincere effort should not be made to encourage this person. All of the points mentioned under “Acquaintance” apply here and then some.

- Listen carefully and ask appropriate specific questions.
- Be open to answering their questions about yourself and be honest.
- If it is appropriate, ask them for some things you can pray for them. This is usually a very good way to learn more about a person.
- If they express a concern then try to support them. This may involve looking up some information and getting back to them or it may simply require praying. At a later time ask how that concern is going.

What are some level two types of questions? Notice that the answers to these questions generally require only facts; feelings are not involved. They are also not “yes” or “no” answers.

- How many brothers and sisters do you have?
- Where have you lived?
- Did you go to college?
- What was your major?
- Where do work?
- Where do you go to church?
- Why did you pick that church?
- Are you involved in any ministries?
- Do you think that the church should be involved in politics or not?
- Is it true that many of your ancestors are missing fingers because they got caught stealing goats? (Use this question gingerly.)

## Close

These are friendships that take time to develop. If two people hit it off as causal friends and they both have the time and availability then they can become close friends. Questions can often aim at discerning the underlying feelings to many of the actions or attitudes of the person. Because of this, many people never

reach this level of friendship, all of their relationships never get deeper than the discussion of facts. In that case, the dominant bond is nothing more than common interests like sports, children, or ministry. But at this level there is a greater degree of vulnerability and a greater chance of disagreement. People who have been hurt frequently may never develop this level of friendship again. But even though this level involves risk it is worth the effort.

- Discover that person's goals and see how you might be able to help.
- Learn each other's struggles and be there to help each other.
- Spend time together whether on the phone or in person.
- Be willing to take the initiative and not just always wait for them to set up getting together.
- Learn what motivates that person, what their interests or hobbies are, and what qualities in people they find the most important.
- Pray together.

Ask questions that do not just require facts but involve underlying feelings or motives.

- What are your favorite types of movies? Why?
- What do you think your spiritual gift is?
- What are some important things in your life?
- How do you feel when someone treats you that way? (If you are discussing a specific situation.)
- What was the most embarrassing time in your life?
- What are some things that really make you happy?
- Are there any things that really annoy you?
- What are some of your greatest fears or temptations?
- Disregarding money or talent, if you were able to choose any job in the world what would it be?

## Intimate

This is the level of friendship that all marriages should achieve and is certainly possible for two unmarried people. It is a level that is usually restricted to maybe one or two people at a time in a person's life. It is undoubtedly the most rewarding relationship but it is also the most difficult. It requires a lot of honesty, a lot of sharing, and a lot of openness. It is the relationship that all of us should have with God.

- Spend a great deal of time together.
- Be able to rejoice together and mourn together.
- Learn to be a comfort and support through each other's trials.
- Help each other to defeat any sins or temptations.
- Be committed to shaping each other into the character of Christ.
- Work through conflicts.

- Deepen your understanding and trust of each other.
- Understand how previous experiences shaped his or her current thinking.
- Discuss the Bible and pray together

By this point you will know what kind of questions you will be asking each other.

#### **You are jealous if you:**

- Wish that since you cannot have it then they should not have it either
- Despise the person because of what they have and show it in subtle ways such as being unfriendly, sarcastic, or belittling
- Tell yourself or maybe even others that that person does not deserve what they have
- Scheme how you can get that from the other person even if doing so is unrighteous or unfair
- Spend too much time thinking about what you do not have and what someone else does have

### ***First impressions—mistakes that you can make on a date (or in any relationship)***

Going out on a date can be nerve wrecking. You want to do your best so that means that you have the capability of doing the stupidest things that you could ever imagine possible. It is just like when you are in a hurry. That is when you drop everything, when you break your shoelace, and when you keep having to turn around to go back and get something that you forgot.

So if you are aware of what you can do wrong then maybe it will be easier to avoid them rather than blindly stumbling into them. Also, if you are the type of person that habitually does these sorts of things then maybe it is time to consider making a change.

The thing to keep in mind while we are looking at these is that you can apply these same principles to all relationships and that includes your relationship with God. This does not just have to apply to your first date with someone.

### **Do not plan out in your mind exactly how the date should go**

How many times when you are anticipating a date do you think, “Then this will happen and then that will happen and then he’ll say this and it’ll end like this”? And then the date goes well but because it did not go exactly the way that you had hoped you are now a little disappointed?

Though you cannot plan every part of a date as though you are both reading from a script, some people devise conversational expectations and checkpoints that they try to hold to no matter where the actual conversation is going.

Get rid of the script. It is fine to have some topics of conversation tucked away just in case things get slow but do not plan out the evening. Especially do not plan out how the other person will respond to

questions that you may ask and how you will then use those responses to work your way to some greater end. For example, you ask, “Do you like to play miniature golf?” You expect her to answer that she does and then you will lead to asking her if she would like to play a few games next weekend. You have the place scouted out, how long a couple of games would take, and where the nearest coffee shop is. You feel confident that she will be impressed with your planning abilities and with a big smile agree to the date. But then she says, “No, I really don’t like miniature golf.” Your plan just hit the floor, shattered, and was swept away by a large push broom. Suddenly the whole evening becomes tense. Now you do not know what to do about a next date. Your confidence has fallen and you are wondering if this is a sign from God to can the whole thing.

Proverbs 16:9 says, “The mind of man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.” It’s been said, “We plan, God laughs.” On dates its, “We overly plan, we cry.” Having some kind of script will make you tense and, more often than not, you will find yourself missing more checkpoints then you will having things go according to your plot. Dump the “And then she’ll say this and that’ll be the perfect opening for me to say that.” Instead, just be yourself and have fun.

## Hiding the real you so that you can fit into the other person’s expectations

This is where you are being who you think your date wants you to be rather than being who you really are. There is nothing wrong with showing interest in what the other person likes or asking specifics about their hobbies even if it something that you would never be interested in. The problem is trying to become whatever it is that he or she finds interesting. For example, she likes to travel and, even though you’ve never cared to leave your own county, all of sudden you are a budding Jacques Cousteau. Or she likes to collect thimbles and, by George, you have always had a deep yearning to start your own collection and maybe she will be willing to help you.

The question is, “Do you want someone who will ultimately accept and love the real you or the chameleon that you have become?”

God, who is our example of all right relationships, does not present different sides of Himself to different people simply so that He will be more likable. He does not promise untold riches to the greedy but poverty to the ascetics. He does not promise smooth sailing to the easily frightened but challenges galore to the hearty of soul. He does not promise easy comfort to the lazy but unqualified success to the ambitious. God is who He is and we must accept Him for exactly that.

In 1 Corinthians 9:22 Paul does say, “I have become all things to all men” but that was related to seeing people saved. It was not in the context of dating.

Sometimes, though, it is good to suppress some bad or odd habits. If you have a habit of sticking your thumb in your ear and wiggling your fingers vigorously then do not do that. If you think that your date would like to hear her name burped out then think again. If you like to gun your car and then hit the brakes to test the seatbelts then refrain from such activity. There is a difference between being a phony and being an idiot.

Ultimately, we will be more comfortable when we are ourselves and not when we are morphing into whatever we surmise the other person is looking for.

## Lying about yourself

Why would you lie about yourself? Perhaps it is because you are not confident enough with who you are to believe that if you present the real you then you will be liked. What are some things that you might lie about? You may up your job title. Or you may exaggerate the number of dates that you have been on or the number of ministries that you have been in. Or that you are good friends with someone important. Basically you are doing anything to make yourself look more impressive.

A prestigious university hired a coach to run their football team. This was one of the most visible and honorable college coaching jobs in the country. A few days later he was caught having lied on his resume about athletics that he claimed happened decades ago but actually did not. So he was let go. Why did he lie? Because he thought that in the beginning of his career he needed to pad his resume so that he could get a better job. But once that deed was done it was too late to change it. He was forced to carry that lie throughout his career hoping that no one would ever notice. But they did and it cost him dearly.

If in the beginning of your date you feel that you have to make yourself look more impressive than you really are then what happens if things go well and you continue dating? You may be revealed as being a lying weasel and, even if this was your only lie, it will put into doubt everything else that you said. And how can you then say, “But I swear, everything else was the truth” and expect to be believed.

Colossians 3:9 reads, “Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices.” It is easier to tell the truth because there is only one version. Do not try and fake someone out.

## Bragging

Of course one of the primary purposes of going on a date is to hope that we will both be impressed by each other and like each other. However, in trying to put our best foot forward we oftentimes simply put an overbearing, bragging foot forward. This bragging may be straightforward, obnoxious self-aggrandizing such as how you were able to buy that really expensive car because you have such a high paying job and how you got that job because you were tops in your class and so on. It is like pulling out a wad of bills and peeling off a big bill on the top. Instead you are using your accomplishments in place of the wad.

However this bragging may not even appear in the form of gorilla-like chest thumping. It may be subtler, but it is ostentatious bragging all the same. It may entail slipping in proofs of how wonderful you are and then gauging how duly impressed they are.

So what is the difference between bragging and simply telling about some good things that you have done? With bragging, you force your accomplishments into the conversation even when it is inappropriate. With telling, your accomplishments flow into the conversation. With bragging, you are coming out looking better than others. With telling, you have simply done something worthy of mention. With bragging, the attention is on how great or clever or persistence you are. With telling, the attention is on the deed itself.

It has been said that one form of advertising that is a liability instead of an asset is a person blowing his own horn and the fellow who blows his horn the loudest is usually in the biggest fog.

Maybe you have accomplished some pretty nifty things. Give it time, those gems will come out. If you want to impress your date with some things about yourself then do it in a less irritating way than by bragging. You can always impress her with your thoughtfulness regarding her. Ask her about herself and show interest in her answers. Bring some nice flowers or upgrade to a nicer restaurant. Tell her how much you liked this date and ask her for another. Impressing someone does not always mean self-braggadocio.

If there is anyone who has the right to brag unceasingly it is God. And yet, as you read the Bible you will notice that He does not do it at all. He only tells what is appropriate for the moment. Let that be a lesson to each one of us.

## **Avoid excessive disclosure**

This involves sharing secrets or aspects of your life that are very personal and complicated. Every one of us has deep, complex issues in our lives. These might be emotional or they might regard some family members. They might involve some crisis in your life or some sins that were severe.

You might think that sharing those skeletons in your closet is a great way to bond with your date. Or you may believe that talking about those terrible setbacks in your life will simply show how open and honest a person you are. Or maybe you want the person to feel sorry for you or to want to help or support you. But what you are really doing is creating a false sense of openness and intimacy for the purpose of trying to establish a connection. Or maybe you are just nervous and you do not know what to talk about so you are just saying the first thing that comes to mind. Either way, do not do it. Your goal is to get to know each other. You are not trying to create a juicier book for a ghostwriter.

One reason why this is bad is because, until the person gets to know you, information can be misinterpreted. You may share about something horrible that happened in the past and unless he knows you well enough to realize that you have indeed grown from it and have put it behind you he might become suspicious and leery and wonder what he is getting into.

Also, the other person is not going on a date with you because she is looking for someone to counsel. He or she is there to have fun; not dispense psychiatric advice.

Stick to simpler topics. Those other things can come out in due time as the relationship develops but your goal is not to set up a test to see how much freakiness the other person can endure. This is not a psychological test. Some people may eat Oreo cookies by twisting the cookie apart and eating the inside first, but you are not an Oreo cookie. So do not twist yourself open and reveal all of your guts from the get-go. Intimacy takes time. Part of the fun of getting to know another person is by getting deeper and deeper into their lives and understanding what makes them tick. But this takes a lot of different pieces. It is a lot like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. Each piece gives a clearer picture.



“It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter”—Proverbs 25:2. Sometimes it is better to let some things stay hidden for a while. Eventually as a relationship deepens and grows you should probably disclose more and more of yourself. Be patient.

## Not complimenting

You think that it is great how your date is always so active in church ministries—so tell him that. You think that she is funnier than the donkey in the movie *Shrek* (and prettier, too)—so tell her that. Everyone likes to be noticed and complimented. But too often we are afraid that if we give a compliment that it will appear that we are being a flatterer or charmer. But it will not appear that way if the compliment is well thought through and is sincere.

Just as you are hoping that he or she will like and accept you so are they hoping the same thing. Ease some of that tension by being kind and complimenting honestly. This shows that you are paying attention.

1 Thessalonians 5:11, “Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.”

## Avoid rude behavior

What constitutes rude behavior? Flirting while on a date. Showing up late. Waiting in the car and blowing your horn. Bringing an uninvited guest (your niece that you got stuck babysitting or another couple on an unannounced double date). Mouthing off to other people such as waiters. Being unclean or inappropriately dressed. Conveniently forgetting your money and forcing her to pick up the tab. Long conversations on your cell phone.

Do you want to appear considerate or arrogant? Do you want to appear respectful or belligerent? Then choose manners and sensitivity over trying to appear brash and a show-off.

## Do not talk about your ex

For whatever reason, this tends to be an all-too-easy mistake that a lot of people make. Maybe it is because you are on a date and so your ex is on your mind. Whatever the reason, steer clear of the subject.

Why should this be diligently avoided?

- It is a rare person who relishes hearing the excruciating details of how terribly you were treated and misunderstood by that monster.
- This person is your date; not your therapist.
- Your interest should be on the person in front of you; not on the person left behind. Your purpose is to bond with your current date; not use them to help you sever the bond with your past dates.
- It is boring. Your ex might have meant a lot to you, but probably means nothing to this person.

Philippians 3:13 can help us here—“forgetting what *lies* behind and reaching forward to what *lies* ahead” In His relationship with us, God tells us to take our eyes off of what is behind us and put them on what is ahead of us. This means taking past relationships, learning from them, but then using what we have learned to make the relationship that we are in even that much better.

No one wants to date someone who is dragging the dead corpse or corpses of past relationships into every situation like the chains of a moribund Marley’s Ghost.

## Do not put yourself down

Sometimes, when we have a wrong self-esteem, we expect people to put us down and so we feel that we have to beat them to the punch. The result is that we make self-deprecating remarks. Sometimes those remarks may be extremely clever or funny. But here is the rub: nobody wants to date a loser and if you think that you are a loser then others will think the same thing of you. It is important that you come across confident and assured.

But you may say that you are not confident and assured and so how can you act that way? Well, if you are a Christian, then here you are wrong. God does not save people and leave them useless and withered. You may not be confident in yourself but you can always be confident in who and what God has made you.

Let us just look at one verse and see what we are in God. 1 Peter 2:9, “But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR *God’s* OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” In this one verse alone God has said seven things about you.

- a) You are chosen—God specially picked you.
- b) You are a royal priesthood—you are someone who can approach God at any time in full confidence.
- c) You are holy—you may not practice what you are but God has made you holy.
- d) You are God’s possession—you are not just a creation but you are a child of God.
- e) You have an excellent message—you can talk about the glories and wonders of God because you have experienced them first hand.
- f) You have been taken from the darkness where most of the world lies.
- g) And you have been transferred into God’s marvelous light where there are untold blessings.

There are many more scriptures on what God has done for you. He has made you sufficient to do every good deed. He has made you glorious. He has forgiven you, sanctified you, redeemed you, adopted you, and so on. To belittle yourself is to belittle the work that God has done in you.

So if you have a tendency on putting yourself down then stop it now; even if there is a great laugh involved. And, if you are on a date, then especially do not do it.

## Do not blame mishaps on the other person

Things will go wrong on a date or in any relationship. That is just how life is. However, it does not help to blame the other person. Learn to deal graciously with problem situations.

You go to a restaurant and the food is lousy. Do not say, “We should have went to the restaurant that I wanted to go to.” Instead make little of it and say, “I guess that we can cross this place off of our list.”

You miscommunicate the time to meet and one person is 30 minutes later than the other. Do not argue as to how your understanding was the correct one. Instead, comment as to how at least you are both here now so let us make it a great evening.

You go to a place for a date and then find out that she hates going to those kind of places. Do not insist that she lead you to believe that she liked those places and that she should have been clearer. You should have made certain and asked in the first place but if you are stuck there then try and make the best of it. Maybe focus on each other rather than on what is around you.

Mistakes will happen. Learn to be gracious. That will carry more weight in the long run anyway than trying always to be right. Arguing with your date is one sure way of guaranteeing no next date.

## Do not gossip

You should never maliciously put down another person no matter what the setting, but it is even more dangerous when on a date. Why is that?

- The person that you are gossiping about may be someone that this other person likes.
- The other person may wonder that if you are able to talk about others like this then what prevents you from talking about him or her in the same way.
- It gives a negative feel to the evening.
- It shows the other person that you are small and petty.
- It pulls the conversation off of each other and onto someone else.

There is always the temptation to build yourself up by putting others down and it does not take much to give us the slightest excuse to do this. You will never move up if you are continually running other people down. Ephesians 4:31 is a strong commandment—“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.”

If you want to bond with another person through the sins or mishaps of others then that will not be a relationship that God will honor and bless.

## Do not to confuse attention with love

Frequent phone calls, flowers or gifts, unexpected notes, and so on, these are ways of showing interest, attraction, and sometimes-even love. But do not substitute these displays for love itself. Love will show itself in deeper ways such as sacrifice, faithfulness, acceptance, communication, trust, and encouragement.

We all want to be flaunted over and treated like royalty and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. But do not be swept away and blinded by that.

Also, be careful not to assume that just because you are both attracted to each other that, therefore, it was meant to be. It may just lead to a great friendship and nothing beyond that.

Proverbs 31:30 gives us a word of caution—“Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.” Do not be swept away by charm and the outer trappings. Ultimately, it is godliness and depth of character that matters.

## Giving the person another chance

Disappointments are par for the dating game. The normally reliable restaurant served up a clunker this time. The weather ruined that great walk along the beach. You said the one thing that you were trying so hard not to say all evening.

Things will never go perfectly. You say and do stupid things in life; that will happen. If it was harmless then laugh it off. If it was not then quickly apologize.

Let other people make mistakes also. Be careful about making instant judgments.

You will both probably be nervous on that first date and more relaxed and natural on the subsequent ones. So, unless, it was clear that it was a no-go, then think about giving a second possibility a chance.

### **You will have problems in relationships if you:**

- Are competitive in your relationships; you must always come out on top
- Wave your emotions like a flag in everyone's face
- Need to always be right
- Gossip, slander, or are critical of other people
- Monopolize nearly every conversation
- Rarely follow the topic that the other person brings up but, instead, talks about only what interests you
- Are available only when you want to be
- Share confidential information or secrets that you were entrusted with
- Borrow money and do not pay it back or borrow possessions and do not return them

## ***Keys to good friendships***

Some friendships just come naturally; some need work. Some friendships last forever; some require a lot of maintenance. Some people seem to be able to make friends without any effort at all; some people struggle to make even one friend.

The desired result of this section is to take good friendships and make them better and to take those who have no friendships and turn them into people who have some.

I went out to find a friend,

but could not find one there.  
I went out to be a friend,  
And friends were everywhere.

Here we will look at some characteristics that will make you a better friend.

## Be willing to be the first to open up

In boxing there is a situation where the two fighters just circle each and never throw any punches. Neither one of them wants to take the initiative because they are afraid that the other boxer will get in a good counter punch. This is called “posing.” There may be an occasional flick of a jab but it is usually a soft punch that carries no weight or desire behind it. When this happens frequently it is a dull fight.

Sadly, in relationships this same thing can happen. We can have a relationship that is going nowhere because neither person is willing to take the initiative. Neither one is willing to put themselves into a vulnerable position. So you have a relationship that is dull and shallow.

God wants us to be a people who are willing to be open with our lives. We see this in the Apostle Paul. He said in 2 Corinthians 6:11-13, “Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide. You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections. Now in a like exchange—I speak as to children—open wide to us also.”

Usually when we want to make an important point to someone we will use their name to ensure their attention. There are only three places in Paul’s letters where he addresses the church’s congregation by name within the text of the letter: 1) Philippians 4:15 where Paul commends the Philippians for sticking with him and supporting him, 2) Galatians 3:1 where Paul chides the Galatians for living by the law rather than by grace, and 3) here in 2 Corinthians where Paul is pleading with the Corinthians to open up to him. This was an important issue to Paul.

The term “opened wide” in the Greek meant that his heart was enlarged; i.e. Paul chose to expand his heart wide enough to give his affections to all of the Corinthians. He was willing to take them all inside; to love them, to care for them, and to share his life with them.

Then he indicts them by saying that the reason why they are restrained around him is not because he has given them any excuse to be tight-lipped. But, rather, the problem is because they are deliberately holding back their affections. And so, he asks them to be as open to him as he is to them.

What is the key here? On what basis was Paul able to ask them to open up to him? It was because he was first open to them. He was not expecting them to do something that he had not done first. So he was able to say, “Now in a like exchange...”

In the same way, in order to develop friendships you must be the one willing to take the initiative. Do not expect everyone to come to you.

I got saved when I was going to college at Kansas State University. The first 7.5 years of my Christianity was spent in the church where I got saved. Eventually, the national leaders of the movement

declared themselves to be apostles. Me, not being shy about defending what I think to be Biblical truth, typed a 27 page letter explaining why I did not think apostles were for today. The leaders told me that if I did not like it then I should just leave. Then because of other issues like the associated churches becoming a Shepherding movement I convinced a bunch of people to leave that group and go to other churches. The result of this was that even after I had left the church they excommunicated me (years later they confessed that this excommunication was an error). However, their concept of excommunication was that nobody in the church could ever talk to me again. They could not even acknowledge my existence. They were even told that if they saw me coming down the street that they were to cross over to the other side to avoid me. So here were people whom I spent 7.5 years praying with, worshiping God with, evangelizing with, eating with and now they would not even acknowledge my presence. I felt that this demonstrated that their friendships were all show and insincere. They were friends to me only because they had to be. So I decided that from then on people would have to first approach me and initiate the conversation because then that would prove that they were sincere. Well, for the next several years I did not make one new friend. Finally I saw that this was not going to work and decided to take the initiative again and, as a result, I have made a lot of friends.

The key is that you must determine to be the one who takes the first shot. And if it does not work out then you shrug your shoulders, you move on, and you try again. Like most other things in life, developing good friendships takes practice and patience.

How do you do this? What does this mean?

- It means being the one who walks up to other people first.
- It means looking for people who are alone and talking to them.
- It means learning how to ask questions or say things that will get a conversation going.
- It means learning the skill of being friendly.
- It means being the first one willing to share something personal.
- It means responding with interest to the other person.
- It means that the more that you do it the better you will become at it.

What does this not mean?

- It does not mean using this as an opportunity to talk incessantly about yourself. Have you ever been with someone where 90% of every conversation is about them?
- It does not mean laying your whole life on the table to someone that you just met. That means that you do not walk up to someone and say, “Hi, my name is Bob and I just got out of an institution and my entire life is in a shambles. Do you want to hear why?”
- It does not mean giving up because it is not going as well as you had hoped.

God is our ultimate example of this. He did not wait for us to come to Him. Instead, He came down and did all that He had to in order to forge a relationship with each one of us.

So ask yourself.

- Do you have a heart that is clenched as tight as a fist or do you have a heart that grows in response to people?
- Do you build a stone fortress around your affections or are you willing to be unrestrained in your affections?
- Are you willing to settle for a life that is safe but empty or are you willing to put up with some discomfort for the sake of the strength that friendships bring?

## Understand that not every situation will work out the way that you might have hoped

Sometimes the two of you just do not click. Or that person may not be looking for a new friend at that time. Or that person may be struggling with their own battles and does not really need or want a new friendship. Or sometimes, some people are just a cold fish or are bitter. That does not mean that you are unlovable. It does not necessarily mean that you are a poor friend or a bad person. You cannot take every interaction personally as though everything that someone else says and does is a reflection of you. It is not always all about you. People do have other things going on in their lives and that may affect their ability to get along with someone else; no matter who that person is.

If something is not working out then just let it go and move on. If you want to communicate your displeasure at how things are drifting apart, then fine, go ahead. But do not cling to people like a leech. Move on. Learn from the situation and make new friends.

If you and one other person are the only survivors of a nuclear war and you cannot get along then that is a problem. But until that is the case, there are plenty of other people around. Do not become fixated on one person. You will drive yourself crazy if you think that every relationship has to work out and last forever. You will also drive yourself crazy if you think that every failed relationship is a reflection of you.

What does Jesus say in Matthew 10:14 to His disciples? “And whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake off the dust of your feet.” Shake off the dust; i.e. let go of it. Leave it behind and move on. Not everyone got along with Jesus Christ and He was perfect.

But just because a relationship does not turn out the way that you might want, that does not mean that the whole thing must be chucked. Maybe you can settle very nicely into being casual or close friends and that may be the one of the most secure friendships that you have.

Of course it could be true that it was totally your fault that the relationship fell apart. You must be honest with yourself and not try to cast blame everywhere but inward. Listen to what your friends have to say. Tell them to be honest with you no matter how much it may hurt. Then, if you see how it was your fault, you have a good basis to change.

## Learn to listen

People know when you sincerely care about them and one of the surest ways of proving this is by carefully listening to what they are saying. Many people hear what others say but they are not really paying

attention. We need to learn to listen to people and then ask appropriate questions based on what they just said. This is a skill that must be developed.

We learn to ask appropriate questions by asking details about what was just said or, if you know the person very well, asking about their feelings. Usually this is not difficult, in fact, most of the time it is extremely simple. The problem is not being able to come up with a follow-up question; it is caring enough to make the effort. For example:

“I just got a new job in Freehold.”

“What are you going to be doing?”

“I’m going to be setting up new computers and networking them together.”

“Have you done a lot of this before? Did you go to school to learn this?”

“I’ve taken some classes and did some of it at my previous job.”

“Is this something that you enjoy doing?”

See how easy that is? However, much of the time the conversation would go more like this.

“I just got a new job in Freehold.”

“That’s great. I hope it works out for you.”

End of that topic.

It is our nature to want to talk about what is on our minds, to voice our opinions, to express our ideas. Proverbs 18:2 says, “A fool does not delight in understanding, but only in revealing his own mind.” A fool does not care about what the other person is saying; he is only waiting for an opportunity to talk. In contrast Proverbs 20:5 says, “A plan in the heart of a man is like deep water, but a man of understanding draws it out.” Notice the distinction between these two verses. The fool only cares about what he has to say and so he lacks in understanding. But a man who learns how to draw out other people will gain understanding.

Then we should go even one step beyond listening and that is remembering. When someone tells you something significant try to remember it. Then the next time you see them ask them about it. One good way to remember this is to pray about it as you are parting company and then pray about it again later.

Who is our best example here? It is God, of course. God loves to listen to our prayers every second of every day. Psalm 116:2 is a good verse for how much God desires our prayers, “Because He has inclined His ear to me, therefore I shall call upon Him as long as I live.” That word “inclined” in the Hebrew means to “bend over.” It is like we start to pray to God and He bends over and cups His hand to His ear so as to not miss a single word. How often when someone is talking to us do we look past them to see if there is anything interesting going on behind them? How often does our mind drift and wonder when he is going to stop? God bends over and gives us His full, undivided attention.

This means not interrupting unless it is immediately pertinent to what is being said. This means being willing to give them the lion’s share of the conversation. This means letting them talk even if it seems vastly less important than what you want to say.

Of course, if your goal is to be more of a listener that does not mean never talking. Being a good listener means listening to the other person. That is very different from not talking. The quietest person may



never listen to anything that another person is saying. The goal is not to let the other person talk more but to listen to what the other person is saying.

Also, there is a point where someone may simply be yammering only because they like the sound of their own voice. To be a good listener does not necessarily mean having to stand and listen endlessly to a self-absorbed person. There is a point of discernment where you know when to end a conversation.

Other people are not microphones for us to talk in to. They are people with goals and desires and opinions and struggles just like us. Each one of us must be careful not to turn a friend into nothing more than a tape recorder. If you want to be a good friend then learn to listen, learn to remember, and learn to ask.

## Be available

This is necessary for two different aspects: 1) in order to get into relationships, and 2) to maintain and improve already existing relationships.

You will never meet people sitting home. God is probably not going to have some wonderful person break down in front of your house and come knocking on your door looking for help. You need to put yourself out where people are. The saying for the lottery goes for finding friends also: “You’ve gotta be in it to win it.”

Proverbs 18:22 says, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD.” To be “found” you have to be in a place where people look. Of course you can always cite some story where a woman was ministering by herself to mountain goats in the Himalayas when some lost hiker stumbled by, they fell in love and got married. But any story like that gets circulated because it is so uncommon.

You need to put yourself in a position to be able to talk to that person you might be interested in or to be seen by that person. I personally put a lot of value in whether or not a person came to things that I was involved in. If she knew that I was running the Singles Ministry but she never came to any of the events then I would assume that she was not interested. I knew one woman who was interested in a guy at her church and when she found out that he ran the church bowling club she joined that club just to increase her odds of meeting him. She did and they eventually got married. In a case closer to home (literally), one woman came to a lot of the events and outreaches that I was running, we started to date, and we got married. The key was that she (Toni) put herself into a position to be noticed and was available for a friendship.

One woman told me that she was not looking because she expected God to drop a husband down in front of her. Unless she wants to marry an impersonator and goes to a show with parachuting Elvis’s I doubt that will ever happen. God does not reward a lack of effort in other areas so why should He do it in the area of marriage? Notice Proverbs 16:9, “The mind of man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.” God expects us to be moving; not standing still. If we are doing nothing then God cannot direct our steps to any desirable place or goal. In order to get to anything you have to move. God is not going to move everything to you just because you have put your feet, or maybe in this case your heart, in cement.

But what happens when you find yourself interested in someone? Oftentimes you will go out of your way to do what? —Ignore that person. Why do you do that? Probably because you are afraid that if he or she realizes that you are interested and they do not want that then you will feel rejected. So you do the opposite. You basically try and beat them to the rejection punch. But think about how that tactic usually works out. Let us say that I am interested in some woman but she does not know it. Now let us say that she is getting interested in me also. So now she starts to ignore me. What will I think? I will think that she picked up from me that I am interested in her and that she is not at all interested in me so she is ignoring me to discourage any initiation on my part in asking her out. So instead of attempting to get to know her better I will back off and any possible relationship has been lost.

What do you think would happen? A woman will start to ignore me so I will think, “Wow, she treating me like I’m dirt. She must really like me.” No, I do not think so.

So the first way of being available is by being around people. It will increase your chance to make new friends, it will increase your opportunities to minister to others and to allow others to minister to you.

You can do this by going to church on a regular basis, by getting involved in ministries at your church such as singles or outreach ministries, or by participating in ministries that are outside of churches such as food pantries. You can join clubs, go with groups to concerts or other events, or join one of your church’s home groups if they have them. You may be very shy but the more that people see you the more you will get used to each other and the easier it will be to strike up conversations. Do not be scared away just because it does not go well the first time you go to some meeting or event. The first time there everything is new and different: the people, the surroundings, the agenda, and so on. Sometimes it takes a couple of meetings before you start to feel comfortable with everything.

The second way of being available is with those people who already are your friends. If they call you because they need to talk or they need advice then turn off the TV or put down that magazine. Do not just let the answering machine pick up because you do not want to miss the end of the show. It is for people that Christ came; people must always be our priority right behind God.

If someone sits alone in church then go over and sit with them and then possibly invite them out to lunch afterwards. Have them over to dinner sometime. And even beyond that, call them up and ask them how they are doing. Take the initiative. Ask them what are some things that you can pray about for them. Pray with them although it does not have to be as dramatic as stopping them in the church foyer and putting your hand on them and praying right then and there.

If you force people to always be the ones to carry the relationship then soon they will tire and give up. Just as you like to be asked how you are doing so do they. Just as you like to be invited to things so do they. Being a friend means being available. If you put up a wall and make people hammer through it then you are not a friend, you are a project.

However, being available does not mean being in that person's face all of the time either. This is covered under the section "Do not be a pest."

It also does not mean giving up quickly. Just because you are interested in someone do not assume that he or she must be on the same page as you are. The other person may have things going on in his life and may not want to get into a new relationship right at that moment. You need to allow people to make that decision. The key is being patient and being content to just be friends for a while if that is what is necessary.

Do not put the burden of making friends on everyone else. You must be available.

All throughout the scriptures we can see how God seeks us out and makes Himself available to us.

Psalm 139:7-10

Where can I go from Thy Spirit? Or where can I flee from Thy presence?

If I ascend to heaven, Thou art there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, Thou art there.

If I take the wings of the dawn, if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,

Even there Thy hand will lead me, And Thy right hand will lay hold of me.

Jeremiah 23:23

"Am I a God who is near," declares the LORD, "and not a God far off?"

Matthew 28:20b

"lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

God is always available to us. He is near to us. He does not make us hunt Him down. This is our example.

## Do not return anger or digs in like manner

Someone attacks you or gives you a little dig. The attack could be unwarranted and mean. Right to your face he may call you names or impugn your motives or make false accusations. Or the dig could be subtle. Things like "You should know better" or "No wonder why you're..." or "That was really dumb." When this happens we want to pounce right away and clamp our teeth onto their neck.

How did Jesus react to these little digs? One example is in Matthew 4:3-4, "And the tempter [Satan] came and said to Him, 'If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.'" What was the little dig here? "Hey, if you're so high and mighty; if you're so special; if you're such a big deal; then do this." But here was Jesus' response, "But He answered and said, 'It is written, "MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD."'" Satan came at Jesus with that little dig, "If You are the Son of God..." But what did Jesus do? Did He jump right in and defend Himself and say, "I am the Son of God and I don't have to prove it to you!" Actually, He did not even address it. He just let it go by. Instead, He addressed the main issue.

Another example is in Matthew 27:39-43, "And those passing by were hurling abuse at Him, wagging their heads, and saying, 'You who are going to destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save

Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross.’ In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking Him, and saying, ‘He saved others; He cannot save Himself. He is the King of Israel; let Him now come down from the cross, and we shall believe in Him. HE TRUSTS IN GOD; LET HIM DELIVER Him now, IF HE TAKES PLEASURE IN HIM; for He said, “I am the Son of God.”’” They abused Him. They mocked Him. They made fun of Him. Again, what did Jesus say in return? –Nothing.

Proverbs 26:4-5 reads, “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him. Answer a fool as his folly deserves, lest he be wise in his own eyes.” How is a fool wise in his eyes here? It is because he just put you down with some snide remark and what did you do? –You fell right down to his level and responded in kind. Therefore, in his mind, you proved that you are just as low as he made you out to be. So he was right.

The temptation is always to jump right in and defend yourself and to give digs in return. Do not do that. If you have something to say then communicate it in a mature, thoughtful manner.

Too often we want people to pay and pay immediately for something that they said to us that we did not like. As hard as it is we need to learn to keep our mouths shut at these times. Proverbs 15:28 gives us good advice, “The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things.” We should be able to leave the conversation, think about what was said, and then get with that person at a later time and discuss things in a more reasonable manner.

There have been many times in my life that someone gave me a dig and I had to bite my lip to keep from nailing him back. But by the next day or maybe even an hour later I am so glad that I did not retaliate. Sometimes I would get back to that person if I felt that they were simmering something against me. But most of the time I did not reply at all because it appeared that they were merely being momentarily irritable or perverse. Some things are better off swallowing and forgetting about. We must learn to be gracious even in the midst of adversity.

1 Peter 2:19-23 is counsel worth taking to heart, “For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.”

When it comes to hostile relationships or situations it says here that Christ left us an example. What was that example? When He was reviled; He did not revile in return. When He was suffering because of others; He did not threaten them. He left the judgment to His Father. This is our example. And what is the point of an example? For us to do it.

This does not mean, however, that you should be a doormat. Sometimes when someone is attacking you it might be necessary to stop them and have them check their attitude. Are they out of control? Are

they red hot with anger? Are they being terribly cutting and vile? You do not have to allow them to continue on and on like that. But what it does mean is that you should not stoop to their level of name-calling. Deal with it in a gracious manner. If that means dealing calmly and maturely by giving your perspective then do that. If that means being silent; then be silent. But if that means simply saying, “We can continue this when you are in a better frame of mind” and then walk away, then do that.

If you always have to get in the last dig, if you need to always get the other person back immediately when they do something that you do not like, then you will lose friends. Everyone says stupid things at times. And sometimes people are just under stress and you are the one unlucky enough to be in their way at that time. Learn to take the hit on the cheek and, if necessary, even turn the other cheek.

## Do not judge other people.

We are an insecure people. Because we know our weaknesses and our sinful thoughts and motives we sometimes think that everyone else has figured them out also. This can make us guarded and edgy. It can also make us think that we are able to figure everyone else out also. Sometimes this is true. Just as we do not always fool people so it is that many times we can see through other people’s antics. But many times we go beyond the facts and presume other people’s attitudes and motives in a negative way. Sometimes we do this because we think that we are so clever. Sometimes we do it because the only way that we can feel good about ourselves is to put people below us. And sometimes we are nothing more than malicious.

When we develop false, negative impressions of other people we are judging them. God gives us a strong warning in Matthew 7:1-2 about doing this, “Do not judge lest you be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.” If you are quick to form sweeping character flaws about other people based on mere tidbits of information then, in the same manner, that is how you will be judged.

How can you tell if you are judging someone? Here are eight possible tests. If you fail at any of them then there is a good chance that you are guilty of being judgmental.

- a) Do the facts sustain the conclusion that I have drawn?
  - Can I honestly agree that I have formed my conclusion based on all of the facts available to me and that I am not overly emphasizing those that are negative and de-emphasizing those that contradict the opinion that I want to form?
  - Am I being fair?
- b) His perceived faults make me feel superior to him.
  - Do you now feel spiritually better than that person? Do you think, “Thank you, God, that I’m not like him”?
  - Or might you think, “Even I’m not that bad!”
- c) I am using his faults to justify my own shortcomings.
  - Do you ever have this attitude, “I thought that this one sin in my life was pretty bad but look at him. If anyone has to work on their life it’s him; not me”?

- d) Do I want to see him publicly exposed, ridiculed, and punished?
- Do you hope that others see what he is doing or find out about it and then take him to task?
  - Are you glad when he fails at something so that you can blame his failure as being directly caused by his sin?
  - You know that gossip is wrong so you cannot just blurt out your suspicions. So you lead the conversation so that the other person brings up his name first. Then that somehow enables you to open up the floodgates of gossip.
  - Do you find yourself telling others about his sin hoping that they will agree with you as to how big of a louse he is?
  - Do you find yourself telling others about his sin hoping that they will then go and tell even more people?
- e) Do you hope that his influence is reduced?
- If he is in a ministry do you hope that he drops out?
  - Do you hope that he fails or is at least admonished at his job?
  - Do you hope that his friendships fall apart?
- f) Do you find yourself reviewing his past shortcomings?
- You start thinking about everything wrong that the other person said or did no matter how trivial it may have seemed at the time. What was insignificant then has now become a terrible horror.
- g) Have you taken his several weaknesses or sins and parlayed them into concluding that he is an overall evil person?
- Everyone sins and has sins. Are you making his sins to be bigger than anyone else's so as to vilify him as much as possible?
  - Are you taking faults in one area of his life and drawing conclusions in other non-related areas?
  - Are you trying to make him out to be as bad as possible rather than wanting him to change and succeed?
- h) Do you feel that whatever he has done is so bad that you can never forgive him?
- Are you hoping that he does not repent so that you can continue to despise him?
  - What this person did was so horrible that you cannot find it in yourself to forgive him.

When you judge someone else, God is basically saying, "OK, I'm a God of mercy and I want you to be a person of mercy. I'm a God of forgiveness and I want you to be a person of forgiveness. I'm a God of patience and I want you to be a person of patience. But since you prefer to use your own standard of judgment then that's the one that I'll use with you also since it's the one that you seem to like so much."

If you are a critical, judgmental person then do not be surprised if you find yourself being isolated. Nobody likes a back stabber.

But people do sin and people do make terrible mistakes. The Bible commands us to rebuke those who sin. To not judge does not mean acting as though no one ever does wrong and ignoring it when it does happen. The key is knowing the difference between discernment and judgement. Discernment involves wisdom and the love of God. Judgment involves a negative attitude and wrong desires. Here are some ways that we can test to see if we are showing discernment or judgement when we think that we see sin in someone's life.

	<b>Discernment</b>	<b>Judgement</b>
1	Discernment is to perceive something obscure or concealed; to distinguish using wisdom. Discernment seeks out all of the necessary facts until all crucial factors and people are understood. <b>Proverbs 18:17</b> , "The first to plead his case seems just, until another comes and examines him."	Judgment forms quick opinions based on little information no matter how sketchy. <b>Proverbs 14:15</b> , "The naive believes everything, But the prudent man considers his steps."
2	Discernment is thoughtful and prayerful in considering the situation before drawing any conclusions. <b>Proverbs 15:28a</b> , "The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer..."	Judgment wants to broadcast its conclusions right away without thinking or prayer. <b>Proverbs 15:28b</b> , "But the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things."
3	Discernment tries to take into account the entire picture to try and determine a reason.	Judgment sees the negative and nothing but the negative.
4	Discernment comes with gentleness and humility knowing that sin is crouching at his own door. <b>Galatians 6:1</b> , "Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted."	Judgment wants to humiliate the person. It goes in with both guns blasting. <b>2 Samuel 16:5-7</b> , "When King David came to Bahurim, behold, there came out from there a man of the family of the house of Saul whose name was Shimei, the son of Gera; he came out cursing continually as he came. And he threw stones at David and at all the servants of King David; and all the people and all the mighty men were at his right hand and at his left. And thus Shimei said when he cursed, "Get out, get out, you man of bloodshed, and worthless fellow!"
5	Discernment is willing to offer solutions to the problem.	Judgment only wants to point out the negative.

6	Discernment is willing to talk to the person directly without spreading gossip.	Judgment oftentimes draws conclusions based on second and third-hand information and delights in gossip.
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God never tramples on us. We must never trample on another person.

## Be loyal

An English publication offered a prize for the best definition of a friend. Thousands of entries were received and the one that was given first prize was this: “A friend is the one who comes in when the whole world has gone out.”<sup>3</sup>

Do not abandon a friend when they have nothing more to give to you but, rather, need something from you.

- Do not abandon a friend because they are not the most popular or the best looking.
- Do not abandon a friend if they become unbearable when they are going through a deep trial.
- Do not abandon a friend just because nobody may particularly like her or if others are telling you to dump her.

We are going to look at three Biblical examples of loyalty. The first example is Ruth. We can read in Ruth 1:14-18 where Naomi had just told her two daughters-in-law to leave her while she returns to Bethlehem. “And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. Then she said, ‘Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’ But Ruth said, ‘Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.’ When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.”

Naomi, because of the death of her husband and two sons, was left with no one except her two daughters-in-law. She was on her own. She was in great sorrow. She was impoverished. She was old and could not work and because she was too old to have children she would probably never find a husband who could support her and Ruth. If Ruth came back with her to Bethlehem, the odds were that Ruth would never remarry because it was unlikely that an Israelite would marry a Moabite woman. These were not very encouraging circumstances for Ruth to stay with Naomi. Probably most people would have counseled Ruth to ditch her. Yet Ruth was loyal and God rewarded her. Ruth did remarry and she became the great-grandmother of David and from her line came the Savior of the world.

<sup>3</sup> Ed. Frank S. Mead, 12,000 Religious Quotations, op. cit., p. 155.



The second example is Ittai. The situation is where David's son, Absalom, pulled a coup and David had to flee with a small group of followers to save his life. As they were fleeing David stopped and took stock of the 600 men who had come with him. One of them was Ittai. We can pick up the story in 2 Samuel 15:19-22, "Then the king said to Ittai the Gittite, 'Why will you also go with us? Return and remain with the king, for you are a foreigner and also an exile; return to your own place. You came only yesterday, and shall I today make you wander with us, while I go where I will? Return and take back your brothers; mercy and truth be with you.' But Ittai answered the king and said, 'As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, surely wherever my lord the king may be, whether for death or for life, there also your servant will be.' Therefore David said to Ittai, 'Go and pass over.' So Ittai the Gittite passed over with all his men and all the little ones who were with him."

Here was the situation where Ittai had just joined up with David and David was telling him to go back. As a foreigner, Ittai was not obligated to serve anyone and so he was told that he should go back and wait to see whomever God would finally set up as king. Then Ittai could serve under that person without any fear of having made a wrong choice and then suffering for it. But Ittai did not make the most comfortable choice. He did not hedge his bets to see who would be the winner. He was not fickle.

What was the result of his loyalty? We can read in 2 Samuel 18:1-2, "Then David numbered the people who were with him and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. And David sent the people out, one third under the command of Joab, one third under the command of Abishai the son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, and one third under the command of Ittai the Gittite." When David was fleeing from Saul, Ittai remained loyal to David. Ittai could have called him a loser and left him. He could have taken the more convenient route and went home leaving David to fend for himself. He could have concluded that since Absalom was the king that the most expedient thing would be to provide his services to Absalom where he could get the quickest and most assured gain for his skills. But he did not. He chose uncertainty over assurance. He chose hardship over convenience. But most importantly, he chose loyalty over expediency. And David rewarded him as one of his most trusted friends and greatest supports. And through Ittai, God accomplished His purposes. Ittai stayed with the one who was struggling and in confusion and, as a result, he helped to make David the victor. He was not content to just be a tag-along. He was active in helping out his friend and in helping him to overcome his rough times.

And that is what God wants us to be like. God does not want us to dump our friends when their hard times make us uncomfortable. God does not want us to dump our friends when their side has dwindled down to a precious few. God does not want us to dump our friends so that we can step back and then choose the winner. God wants us to stay with that friend through the struggles and confusion and do what we can to make them a winner again.

Joseph Roux in *Meditations of a Parish Priest* said, "What is love? Two souls and one flesh; friendship? Two bodies and one soul."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ed. Frank S. Mead, 12,000 Religious Quotations, op. cit., p. 157.

Our third example is that most perfect example of loyalty—that of God. Hebrews 13:5 says, “Let your character be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, ‘I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU’” What is the purpose of money? So that we can have things that will make our life livable and comfortable. But what is God saying here? “Do not love money for what it can offer because what I have to offer is even better. Money cannot give peace of mind; but I can give peace of mind. Money cannot give you an assurance of intimacy; but I can give you assurance of intimacy. Money cannot give you joy that goes right down into your bones; but I can give you that kind of joy.” And on top of all of that it is guaranteed and forever because He said, “I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.”

Second Timothy 2:13 is a verse that demonstrates God’s loyalty, “If we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself.” Even if our faith fails, God will still stick by our side.

Do not make your friendships to be only ones of convenience. As it says in Proverbs 18:24, be a “friend who sticks closer than a brother.” You will find great reward.

## Do not be a pest

Proverbs 25:17 reads, “Let your foot rarely be in your neighbor's house, lest he become weary of you and hate you.” Another more familiar way of putting it would be “Don’t wear out your welcome.” A person who does not have many friends may find someone who will listen to them and be with them. For a person who is a social outcast, or at least perceives himself to be, this can be exhilarating. But a problem can occur when that person (or you) goes overboard and crowds their newfound friend’s time and/or space

How might this happen? One way might be by calling once or even more than once a day. I knew someone who had spent all afternoon taking another woman, who did not have many friends, shopping. Only 30 minutes after dropping the woman off at home she got a phone call from her, “So, what’s new?” How much could be new; only a half an hour had gone by?

I had a friend once who would call me almost every night and tell me about what was going on with him. It got to the point where I dreaded the ringing of the phone. Sometimes you need to step back a bit and see if the other person will initiate a call.

Another way that this can be a problem is to frequently drop by unannounced. For some people this is not a problem. For others, though, it is a great inconvenience. It may mean a sudden change of plans.

Overstaying a welcome can easily cause a problem. One guy who had nothing to do would get invited to a picnic and then either stay late into the night long after everyone else had left or would even ask if he could sleep over since it was too late to drive home.

Even if you have a great relationship with that person that does not mean that you are wanted there all of the time. You may love chocolate truffles but that does not mean that you would want to eat them every day. Well, that might not be a good example. Let us try instead: you may love meatloaf but you would not want to eat it for supper every day of your life. Proverbs 25:16 says, “Have you found honey? Eat only

what you need, lest you have it in excess and vomit it.” Even a good thing can become too much if it is over done.

Of course some people can talk to each other ten times a day and not grow weary of each other and that is great. But the point is that you need to be careful that you are not in your friend’s house or on your friend’s phone too much. Be sensitive to the situation. Weigh out how often they return your calls. And if that person does not want to talk to you every day then do not pout and assume that they, therefore, never want to talk to you. Even Jesus needed time alone apart from His disciples.

## If you expect mercy then give mercy

We expect others to understand that we are sinners and that we have struggles and so they should understand this and show us mercy when we fail. We hope that they will let our ill temper or our stupid remark blow by with nary a trace. We expect them to agree with the sentiment, “Look I’m only human. We all make mistakes. You should be understanding and just drop it.”

But if they do something similar to us! Ho, boy! Tie down the roof! “How can he say that to me? I don’t have to take that kind of garbage!” “What is wrong with her? That’s it! I’ve had enough!”

When we say something hurtful we want people to realize, “I’m just one person struggling with the weight of the world on my shoulders. God is merciful, so should you be.” But when they say something that hurts us it is more like, “They are as demons spawned from Hell! Even God cannot look upon them so how can I?”

Psalm 37:21 is a verse that is usually referred to as dealing with money but its general principle can be applied to many things, “The wicked borrows and does not pay back, but the righteous is gracious and gives.” The wicked expects from others and then does not give anything in return, but the righteous gives freely. This is its general principle. It can apply to money, mercy, grace, or compassion. This verse could be reworded, “The wicked wants mercy [or grace or compassion] but does not give any back; but the righteous gives mercy freely.”

Matthew 7:12 is referred to as the golden rule, “Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.” If you want people to show you mercy then you had better show them mercy. If you want people to understand how the stupid or insensitive things that you say are not malicious then you make every attempt to understand that the stupid or insensitive things that they say are not malicious. If you are having a bad day and everyone knows it but you expect them to forget it by the next day then you had better be willing forget other people’s bad days by the next day also. God does not allow it any other way.

In Matthew 6:12 in the “Lord’s Prayer” God says, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” In this prayer, God is commanding us to tell Him that He should treat us as we treat others. That can be rather scary. Maybe if we understood this better we would not be so eager to pray like this.

In Matthew 18:23-31 there is a story where a slave owed his king a tremendous amount of money, but the king showed him compassion and forgave him his debt. However, another slave owed this first slave a

very small amount of money. But the first slave choked him and threw him into jail. He showed him no mercy or compassion. We can pick up the story in Matthew 18:32-33, “Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?’” And then the king punished him severely.

In this story, one man, who was the king, said, “I showed you mercy. I showed you compassion. I forgave you. But you couldn’t do the same in return? When you blew it I let off of the hook. But when someone else blew it you took them to task!” The king, who represents God, was angry because the first slave hoped for and received mercy but he was unwilling to show the same to another person.

If you sin against someone no matter why or what caused it or what you are going through you still need to repent and ask forgiveness. But if someone sins against you then be quick with mercy. When you are able to do this then you will be amazed at how God will pour out His abundance on you. Do not expect more from others than what you are willing to give back in return.

I have seen many friendships break up because one person is cranky and expects others to always understand what he is going through but then would snap at others when they did something that he did not like.

## **Do not defend yourself at another’s expense**

There will be times when it will be necessary to do something that will hurt or disappoint another person. This might be where you are dating someone and you believe that the best thing to do would be to break up. Or maybe you are running a ministry and you have to ask someone to step down from assisting. When this situation occurs you hate to look like the bad guy and you do not want others to think that you are an insensitive louse. So, to save face, you might first set up the other person so that it will make it look like it was their fault so that you will be spared.

If you are breaking up then you might try to make it appear as though he or she had all of these faults that you had never realized and, though you gave it your best shot, you just could not see it ever working. Instead, accept your share in the situation.

Or if you know that some situation is going to make you both look bad then do not set it up so that they will be the one who takes the fall and you escape unscathed. Do not leave someone out there twisting in the wind. Be loyal to that person. Place that person’s feelings above even your own reputation and then let God raise you up. So many times I have seen two people get themselves into a mess, but one of them walks away and tells others how that whole fiasco was the other person’s fault—even when that was not true.

There is a famous story in the Bible where two people blew it and then tried to blame others. They were Adam and Eve and they ate the fruit that God told them not to. In Genesis 3:11-13 we can see what happened when God confronted them. “And He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ And the man said, ‘The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate.’ Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this you have done?’ And the woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate.’”

What did God say about their trying to pass the blame? –Nothing. He simply addressed their sin. God knows our hearts and He knows our sins to the fullest. We are not going to slip anything past Him. So when you try and escape from blame by pointing your finger at the other person God is not fooled. But now instead of merely having to deal with your part in the situation, which may not have even been wrong, you now have to confront your sin of unjustly trying to lay all of the guilt at the feet of another.

So many people have lost friends because they are always trying to come out of every situation smelling like a rose. Be willing to take the shots that you deserve. Do not throw someone else in front of the bullet. People will not respect phony spotlessness, but they will respect humility.

## Do not force Christians to meet higher expectations

I have heard so many times over the years Christians saying, “I just can’t trust Christians. I can trust my non-Christian friends more than I can trust my Christian friends.” Why do people say that? Is it because Christians are more untrustworthy than non-Christians? Is it because Christians are sneakier? Are they less sincere? That will certainly be true for some Christians. Just because someone is a Christian that does not mean that they are not lazy or self-centered or gossips. But that is probably not the real reason for this attitude.

Let us take a look at Colossians 3:12-13. “And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.” This verse is exclusively about how we should treat each other in the church. And what words does God use?

He tells us to have	Why?
Compassion	Because Christians can be hurting and suffering and in confusion.
Kindness	Because Christians can be needy.
Humility	Because Christians can be overbearing.
Gentleness	Because Christians can be vulnerable and fragile.
Patience	Because Christians can drive you crazy sometimes with their stupidity, with their self-centeredness, and with their weaknesses.
Bear with one another	Because Christians can be intolerant at times.
Forgive each other	Because Christians can sin against you.

What is the basis for commanding us to have this kind of heart? It is because the Lord has already and continues to have this heart towards us. God never asks us to be something that He is not Himself.

Jude 1:22 says, “And have mercy on some, who are doubting;” Christians have doubts. Christians have struggles. Christians have sins. Christians will blow it.

It is interesting to look up all of the verses in the epistles that talk about how we should act towards “one another.” These admonishments are meant for fellow believers; they are meant for those in the church. Following the same format as we did for Colossians 3:12-13 we can see what God has said.

To “one another” we should	Why? Because...	How?
Give preference	Christians can be self-absorbed	Think of others before you think of yourself, let them speak first, show them interest first
Be of the same mind	Christians can be divisive	Do not be deliberately contrary, do not treat some as more contemptible than others
Love	Christians can be unlovable	See people as God sees them and then be to them as Jesus would
Not judge	Christians can be judgmental	See the section on “Do not judge other people”
Build up	Christians can falter	Praise people for the good that they do, work with them on those areas where they are weak
Accept	Christians can hold others in contempt	Do not categorize people, if they are not as smart or rich or popular or attractive or socially adept as others still treat them as one for whom Christ died and loves
Admonish	Christians can sin	Obey Galatians 6:1
Greet	Christians can be snobbish	Be friendly to all, ignore no one, never give anyone the cold shoulder
Do not sue	Christians can be greedy or arrogant	Work things out, talk to each other, get an arbitrator
Wait for	Christians can be insensitive	Do not grab the best before the others arrive
Show the same care for	Christians can be prejudiced	Give the same to those who can give back as those who cannot, do not exclude or belittle anyone because they are outside of your group
Not challenge	Christians can be wrongly competitive	Rejoice with those whom God has blessed more than you, let others get the promotion, the recognition, and the praise without jealousy
Not envy	Christians can be envious	Rejoice with those whom God has blessed, be content with what God has given to you
Show forbearance	Christians can be irritating	Do not respond in kind to a harsh remark, do not give anyone the cold shoulder, do not disdain someone because they have an annoying habit
Speak the truth	Christians can lie or be deceptive	Always speak what is right even if it diminishes your reputation
Be kind	Christians can be cruel and hurtful	Do not belittle, snap at, or injure someone with your words, help others who are needy even to your own sacrifice, do not gossip
Be subject to	Christians can act superior	Be the first to serve others, do not just sit around and wait for others to serve you first, defer to other’s opinions or wishes if you do not see any good reason to disagree
Regard others as	Christians can be egotistical	Put other people’s desire, goals, and needs

more important than ourselves		above your own
Comfort	Christians can hurt and be confused	Be a good listener, pray with them, offer advice where it can help
Encourage	Christians can be discouraged or depressed	Support them with words and/or actions, be there for them
Live in peace	Christians can be very annoying	Do not harass, be friendly, do them favors, seek their good
Seek after that which is good for	Christians can be spiteful	Ask for God's blessings upon them and you give what would help them the most
Stimulate	Christians can be lazy	Help them make goals and do what you can to enable them to achieve those goals
Do not speak against	Christians can gossip	Do not tell others about someone else's shortcomings
Do not complain	Christians can be grumblers	If you are not sincerely seeking a solution then do not condemn other people or circumstances
Confess your sins	Christians can be proud and act perfect	If you have sinned against another then humble yourself before them
Pray	Christians can forget about God	Pray with them, pray for them, pray frequently
Be hospitable	Christians can want to take and not receive	Have people over for lunch or dinner, lodge temporary visitors at your house

If Christians were perfect then we would not need these commands. God would only have to tell us how to deal with those self-centered, sinful, evildoers in the world. But Christians can commit the same sins as other people. The church is not full of perfect people; the church is full of sinners and a lot of Christians can grind on us. Of course the same is true for our friendships and our marriages. To obey these commands we need grace, we need the Holy Spirit, and we need to pray a lot.

The problem is not that Christians are worse than non-Christians but that we expect more from them. We hold Christians to a higher standard because we think that they should already be everything that God wants them to be.

Many relationships and marriages have failed because one person put unreasonable expectations onto the other person. And instead of being willing to work with that person, instead of taking the time to make that person more like Christ, instead of being patient and forbearing they want that person to be everything that they expect them to be and they want it now. Well, you know what? That will never happen.

When you have those expectations then you will put a strain on the relationship. You will focus on those areas that you do not like and you will take their slowness to change as a personnel offense and as a lack of concern for your feelings and desires. The result will be that you will become resentful and demanding.

Quite a number of years ago there was a button going around Christians circles with the letters "PBPGINFWMY." What it stood for was, "Please Be Patient, God Is Not Finished With Me Yet." We need to constantly keep that in mind with or without a button to remind us.

For those Christians who seem to be so terrible: Are you praying for them? Have you humbly gone to them with your concerns and possibly even reproved them? Are you willing to work with them to make them more like Christ? Or are you just complaining about them to others? Are you gossiping about them? Are you just belittling them in your mind?

The only person that you should hold to higher expectations is yourself. For everyone else, apply Colossians 3:13 and all of the “one another” verses. It will do wonders for your friendships.

## Be genuine

How would you like it if you dated someone for a while and then found out that a lot of what they were about was merely show and window-dressing? You would feel cheated and deceived. So you should not do that to others.

What does it mean to be phony?

- It means acting more spiritual than you really are.
- It means making yourself out to be more important or wealthier than you really are.
- It is when you lie about your age or your job or your education.
- It is making believe that you are interested in something that you are not just because the other person is.
- It is making believe that you are an expert at something that you are not.
- It is trying too hard to be funny or intellectual or godly.

If you do not feel confident in presenting your true self then change those things that you think are unappealing. Being phony is like being a worm on a hook. You will look interesting for a while but eventually you will stab the other person with the barbed hook that you have been hiding and then the other person will rightfully run away. Unless you are really, really good you will eventually give yourself away anyway. Most people are not that easily fooled. In communication the actual words make up 7% of the message, the tone of voice makes up 38% and the nonverbal or body language makes up 55%.<sup>5</sup> Do you really think that you will be able to fake all three all of the time?

## Be positive

Be positive about yourself, be positive about others, and be positive about life. If there is one thing that will wear people down it is someone who is always critical. We all have struggles; life is rarely smooth sailing for anybody. So what we do not need is someone putting hooks in us and trying to pull us down even further. It has been said that “misery loves company,” but I think that it is more true that “misery makes company.”

Do not put yourself down. Nobody wants to be with a loser and if you portray yourself as one then you will turn the other person off. And do not paint yourself as a sad sack so that someone will go out with you

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<sup>5</sup> H. Norman Wright, *relationships that work [and those that don't]* (Ventura, Regal Books, 1998), p. 48.



because they pity you. That is not how to build a wonderful relationship. People are attracted to confidence so be confident in yourself. If you have to dress up more fashionably then do so. There is nothing wrong with that. If you have to exercise more to trim up then set up a scheduled program. If you feel good about yourself then others will also feel good about you. But if you feel lousy about yourself then others will feel lousy about you, too.

Some people put themselves down all of the time because they are wanting to beat others to the punch. But if you can learn to think more positively about yourself then other people's slings will not affect you nearly as much, if at all. Proverbs 26:2 reads, "Like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying, so a curse without cause does not alight." If someone calls you a loser but you know that in God's sight you are anything but that then that remark will not have any affect. Oftentimes the kid at school who is picked on the most is the one who reacts the most. It is no fun to pick on someone who is able to confidently shrug it off and walk away.

Do not put others down. People love gossip. They love to hear what scandal is going on. When they hear about other people's failures it makes their own misgivings seem that much more justifiable. For most people the only way that they can feel better about themselves is by having others dragged beneath them. Of course this is wrong. We should feel good about ourselves because of what God has made us.

But some people love to demean others. They may attract people who want to listen but they will not attract friends. For someone who puts down others it is only a matter of time before you become their fodder. Therefore, everyone will be hesitant to share any part of their life with this type of person. When others gossip about someone else then you defend that person or if it really was clearly a sin that is being talked about then ask the gossips if they are going to help that person. Too much of the world is filled with backbiting and ridicule. God wants someone who will support and encourage others. You be that person.

Do not put down everything all of the time. People get tired of hearing how lousy your job is, how lousy the church is, how lousy your neighbors are, how lousy your health is, how lousy your finances are, how lousy your circumstances are and so on. You probably got tired reading that sentence. Imagine how wearying it is to hear that from someone all of the time? I know several people who are like this and I get tired of hearing it. They are not interested in remedying anything; they just like to complain about it. It gets to the point where I do not even want to bring up a new subject because I know that is just new fodder for them to rail at. I get tired of trying to defend or explain everything.

If you are critical like this then stop it. This does not mean becoming a Pollyanna and seeing everything through rose-colored glasses. But it does mean learning to see that apart from sin and evil most things do have a positive side that can be discussed for once.

If you struggle making or keeping friends then some time listen to your conversation. Are you frequently putting down yourself or others or everything in general? If so, then maybe that is your main problem. "When you're smiling the whole world smiles with you" may be overly cliched but it goes a lot further to making friends then being continually glum.

There was a woman who had been severely burned about her face. She was quite disfigured. But when people saw her they thought that she was very attractive and did not even remember the scars. Why was that? It was because she was always smiling and cheerful. That is what people saw and remembered. May this be what people remember about all of us.

**You will have success if you:**

- Read your Bible every day
- Pray every day
- Attend and are involved in a Bible believing church
- Actively seek to meet the needs of others
- Sincerely care about other people
- Worship and reverence God often
- Always seek to do what is right even if it is more difficult
- Repent when you are wrong and forgive when you have been wronged
- Share God's way of salvation with others

### ***Foundations for deep relationships***

As friendships deepen they become broader, more vulnerable, more committed, and more sacrificial. These are all qualities that cannot stand on their own. In order to last they must rest on a solid foundation. The following attitudes are that foundation and must be present and growing for a relationship to sustain. They may not all be at the same level but they must all be present to some degree.

Sometimes these attitudes may exist as mere emotions; i.e. you feel understanding or you may feel loving or patience. But ultimately you must be able to choose to be these qualities even when you do not feel like it. Emotions can change like the weather. You may love someone so much one day that you feel that you cannot live without him or her. By the next week it has settled down to a pitter-pat of your heart. The following week you are distracted by some other pressing needs and it is given hardly a thought. But through all of those weeks you still must make the choice to love but not just as an emotion but as a choice and as a desire.

We do not expand and deepen these attitudes by sheer luck. You will never wake up some day and suddenly be trustworthy. Consistency will not sneak up on you. You will not slide unconsciously into being an understanding person. These things require an effort. They require work. They must be built through time by knowing, understanding, and making right choices. It will usually involve more character development on our own part than in changing the other person. And as we develop these traits we will become more like the character of God who has all of these attitudes in completeness and perfection.

Pray about each of these areas and ask the Holy Spirit to help you with them.

### **Trust**

To trust someone is to be firmly confident in that person's character to be confidential, reliable, wise, and sensitive to your emotions, needs, opinions, plans, and goals. What are some aspects of trust?

*Confidential.* When you trust someone you are willing to share personal matters that are important to you knowing that they will not take that information to someone else. There will never be a sense of betrayal.

*Reliable and faithful.* They are always there for you; to comfort you in sorrow and to rejoice with you in your time of joy. They will not ignore you or abandon you because other friends are around.

*Wise.* You can trust that their counsel will come from a godly perspective. If they do not know an answer you can be assured that they will not fake it.

*Sensitive.* They understand who you are and why you make the decisions that you do. You know that they will never deliberately be cruel or hurtful. They will not be critical but will correct you with humility and gentleness.

*Honest.* You can trust that person to be honest with you. They will reprove you when you have sinned. They will never act one way around you when you are alone together but differently when around a group of friends. They will not tell you what you want to hear but what you need to hear.

*Responsible and dependable.* When you ask them to do you a favor you know that they will make every effort to do it on time and to do it right. They will never come up with phony excuses. They will never leave you hanging.

*Confidence.* You know that they will do their best concerning you and not just when it is convenient for them. You know that they are not just using you for their own ends.

*Fidelity.* In a marriage you are confident that your partner will not be at all tempted into giving his or her emotions, affections, or body to another.

Trust is important because you know that they will always be there to catch you when you fall. You do not have to keep one eye on them.

Without trust there can never be openness. People who do not trust others are always suspicious; they are always putting up walls and keeping everything tucked away close to themselves. They are like a man in a rainstorm with no umbrella who tightly holds valuable papers under his coat.

Trust always involves a certain amount of risk. People will disappoint you. That is an unfortunate price to pay, but the rewards of being able to share your heart with someone that you can trust is far greater.

## Consistency

Consistency is not easy predictability. Consistency is the confidence that the person will not unexpectedly and without reason radically change behavior, morals, or mood. Of course people do change over time and, on a smaller scale, people can be affected by health, weather, circumstances, relationships and so on. But these changes are generally within a reasonable range. However, we will find it difficult to become close to someone who is all over the place on areas that are important to us.

We will push away from the person who is kind and thoughtful in most areas but then will quickly accuse and attack when they are inconvenienced. How many of us recoil when our favorite preacher is

found to be committing adultery? What about the father who reads the Bible at the dinner table and is so pious in church but then rages at his wife for every little thing? We can understand people being in different moods but it is difficult to visit someone who is sweet one day, terribly cranky the next, and depressed on another. That is like playing a slot machine—you may hit a winner this time but the next time you lose.

When we approach God we do not have to worry about whether He will like us today and accept us into His presence. We do not have to timidly approach Him with stammering and quivering afraid that He might be in one of “those moods” and decide to rip us to shreds. Instead Hebrews 4:16 reminds us, “Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need.”

How can we be consistent?

*Not letting our moods run uncontrolled.* We may feel like lashing out at everyone who is nearby, but knowing that this is wrong we instead choose to be kind. This does not mean being a big phony, but it does mean controlling our temper, being especially careful to hold our tongue, and perhaps getting off alone to pray.

*By trying to do what is right in all situations.* We should not talk about how much we love God but then curse our neighbor. We should not oppress others when we can get away with it, gossip under the guise of prayer, be prejudiced against people different from us, or give generously at church but steal from our job. We should apply the Bible in all circumstances and not just when it does us the most good.

*By exhibiting the same morals in private as we do in public.* We should not have a “church face” and a “home face.” We should not treat someone better in public because we want to have a good reputation. We should not condemn others for what we have found out about them but then do the same things when we think that we are safe and will not be exposed.

## Respect

To respect someone is to recognize the value that they have as a creation of God and also for what God has done in their lives personally. It is seeing the other person the way that God sees them. It is knowing that God considers that person as valuable enough to die for. Therefore, there are two aspects to respect: 1) an equal respect for each person as having tremendous worth from God. 2) A personal respect based on how much their character is like that of God’s. It is the second aspect that we are concerned with here.

How can you show respect to another person?

*Listening to.* This means listening carefully to what they have to say. It means considering their opinion as valuable even if you do not agree. It means not jumping in to share what you want to say until they are finished. Paul Tillich, an American theologian, said, “The first duty of love is to listen.”

*Deferring to.* You trust enough in their wisdom, understanding, and concern for you that if you do not see any reason to disagree or be contrary then you will assent to their opinions or wishes.

*Honoring.* Everyone has some good qualities. Be free to point out those qualities. You can say, “I really admire how you serve in that ministry.” Or “You are a real example to me of perseverance.” Do not

ever call that person a derogatory name. Do not ever refer to them as stupid or dumb. Instead, praise that person for good things that they say or do. Be generous with your praise and praise them to others. Most people like to slander and drag down their spouse or others. Do not you be like that, do not get dragged into that my-spouse-is-worst-than-your-spouse-but-see-what-a-trooper-I-am game. Even if the others are saying, “My husband does nothing but complain and he is so lazy,” you can say, “My husband really cares a lot about all of us and he always tries to do the best for us.” Do not put the person down to anyone even in a joking fashion.

*Defending.* When others are being petty and are putting your friend or spouse down then be bold and emphatic enough to defend them. And even if what he or she did was wrong you can still stifle the gossip. You do not need to just sit there while everyone else is sending out depth-chargers to sink him even further.

*Encouraging.* Help that person to achieve his goals. It means, at the minimum, giving verbal support to that person. I get really tired of people who always have to say something negative about everything. When Billy Graham was in New Jersey a while ago I volunteered to help out with several aspects of the crusade. I told a good friend of mine this and instead of encouraging me she said, “Hopefully this won’t affect your job.” Here I was trying to do something good and all that this person could do was to come up with some negative spin on the whole thing. Another time I bought a new car and when I told someone the first thing that he said was, “That car is really bad on snow.” I thought, “Gee, I almost had a moment of pleasure there. Thank you for bursting my bubble and bringing me back to reality.”

*Sustaining.* Everyone has their down times. They may feel as though circumstances have battered them around and they need to pull back a bit and gather their emotions, goals, finances, and/or esteem. At these times do not kick at the person because they are wounded. Instead, do what you can to support them and help them through these times.

Respect is earned as many have said. It is not bestowed on someone just because you are close to them. However, I have found that people are more deserving of respect than they generally get. Usually it is more like a group of people going into an exquisite and wonderful mansion and then commenting while they leave about how tacky the wallpaper was in the sixth bedroom. No one is perfect but when we comment on someone, all too often it is the characteristic that is their weakest that comes to mind first.

The more that we learn to respect others the more that we will find others respecting us in return.

## Understanding

Understanding involves making an effort to see why this person does what they do and how they think. It involves seeing life from their perspective. It means looking beyond the surface of that behavior or words and knowing why it happened.

What are areas that we can gain understanding in?

*Health.* Some people just are not the picture of vigor. When doing some strenuous activity such as sports or hiking that we are enjoying we must force ourselves to limit what we do to accommodate their limitations. To have understanding is not to try and push them further than they are able to go.

*Motives.* Many people have had traumatic experiences or may have been neglected while growing up. This will affect their motives. It may be obvious to you what course of action to take in some situation but for them that choice is terrifying. They may be willing to sacrifice great loss for the sake of predictability and safety. That may drive you crazy but if you understand why they are like that it may make it easier to come up with a compromise or entirely different solution.

*Desires.* One person wants to be surrounded by material comfort while another prefers the freedom of having very few things. One person likes quiet walks while the other likes doing things together such as jigsaw puzzles or playing games. It will indeed be the rare person who will share all of your same likes and desires. But instead of setting up a competition of “Will we do it your way or my way this time” understanding might allow you to appreciate why they want to do the thing that you never could see yourself doing before. Understanding will allow you to see why that means so much to them.

*Emotions.* One person can be told something and shrug it off whereas someone else falls apart. Emotions are shaped by many different factors. Probably very few people are completely normal in all aspects of their emotions. An older single person who is emotionally stable may get discouraged at the sight of a young family. To understand another person’s emotions is to not quickly dismiss their reaction to something as being a lunatic. It is to know why they are affected so easily by that and so that enables you to be able to help them through it.

*Interests.* Someone may like to collect exotic insects; to you that is disgusting and barbaric. Or he may be a huge sports fan. To you that is nothing more than cheering for men or women wearing various types of pajamas and running around a lot. If you make an attempt to find out why they are interested in that then you may gain a deeper appreciation for that interest—even though you still may not embrace it as the greatest thing on Earth. It may also give a greater understanding of who that person is.

*Family.* Our families will shape who we are more than anything else. Eighty five percent of our personality is developed by the age of six.<sup>6</sup> By discussing how their parents related to each other or to their children should provide great insights into the person. It will also send up red flags when they are imitating their family’s bad habits.

How can we better understand another person?

*Talking together.* This involves drawing out the other person while sharing your own life. Drawing out another person requires sincere and focused interest and asking appropriate questions. Learn to avoid belittling statements and ask non-accusatory questions. What is a belittling statement? –“Politics is so boring I can’t see why anyone would be interested in it.” Whereas a question that leads to understanding might be, “What is it about politics that you find so interesting?”

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<sup>6</sup> Paul D. Meier, M.D., Frank B. Minirth, M.D., and Frank Wichern, Ph.D, Introduction to Psychology & Counseling (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1982), p. 91.

Understanding starts with knowledge but then goes further than just the facts and into the motives. What is a question that leads to knowledge? –“What is your favorite movie?” Whereas a question that leads to understanding would be, “Why is that your favorite movie?” You should learn how to ask appropriate questions that will delve deeper and deeper into who the person is. This will take practice. You may get a few “That’s a little too personnel, isn’t it?” responses or looks but then you can take that as your current boundary.

Most of us are unequipped to ask these types of probing questions because we would rather talk about ourselves than to listen to what others have to say. We may think about that other person a lot, but we think about ourselves all of the time. But that leads to the next aspect.

*Listening.* We cannot ask relevant questions if we do not listen to the other person. This means being genuinely interested in that person and what is happening in their life. How many times have you been talking to someone and you felt that they were only listening to you so that they could bring each topic back to themselves? Here’s a true example.

Me: “I just got engaged.”

Self-absorbed Person: “Oh congratulations! I want to get married. I thought that I was going to get married a few years back but it didn’t work out.”

Me: “We’re going to have a Fall wedding.”

Self-Absorbed Person: “I used to love the Fall but then it seemed that every relationship that I was in broke up in the Fall. So now I hate it.”

By now I’m realizing that this person is always working the conversation back to herself so I try something outlandish as a test.

Me: “My fiancé is an astronaut.”

Self-Absorbed Person: “Really? I once dated a guy who loved to play this video game about outer space.”

By now I have simply given up. I might as well just sit back, say “So tell me all about yourself—your emotions, your desires, your opinions, and anything else that pops into mind. Oh, and by the way, feel free to repeat many of these things several times,” and then become glassy-eyed.

*Observing.* See how that person reacts to what you say or how they behave in certain situations. Their responses will tell you a lot about themselves. If every time that you mention her father she tenses up ever so slightly then you know that there is something there. You might want to gently ask about it at an appropriate time.

*Contemplating.* Understanding what makes a person tick is more than just gathering some facts. It requires putting conversations together and seeing how everything melds. This does not require a psychology degree but it does require thinking. Of course nobody wants to think that they are being psychoanalyzed and that is not the goal. The idea is to get a better understanding of that person; not play junior Sigmund Freud.

Understanding a person takes a lot of time and effort. Whereas you can respect someone that you have never met you must spend quite a bit of intimate time with someone in order to understand them. In a sense, you can spend a lifetime with someone and never come to a full understanding but it is certainly well worth the effort trying.

## Communication

Communication is a mutual sharing of opinions, thoughts, emotions, desires, needs, goals, likes, dislikes, and lives. It involves talking, writing, body language, and actions. Full communication involves discussing the bad things as well as the good.

How can we develop total communication?

*Make opportunities.* Instead of reading the paper or watching TV during meals make it a point to talk to each other. If one person is going to be late then, if possible, wait until you can be together. When visiting places like museums or parks do not spend all of the time only talking about what you see but concentrate on each other at times. When driving home ask the other person what they liked most about the day and why.

*Be equitable.* You may take the suggestion of sharing about yourself very seriously and go on and on. That may be fine at times but you need to let the other person talk also. Becoming intimate is a two-way street. But on the other hand it does not mean just allowing the other person to share incessantly without you ever adding anything in. There are poems and analogies about how a close relationship is being like two streams that flow into each other and form a mighty river. But if one of those streams is a dry bed then there is not any additive effect. Yes, some people need a lot more words to say the same thing as another person and the time may not be split exactly 50/50. But there should at least be an attempt by both parties to open up and to give each other that same opportunity.

*Make an effort.* Because life and circumstances change so do people. Communication is an ongoing effort. Too many people settle into a rut where neither bothers to even try or care to communicate. I had a poem published on this called “Nick and Stella.”<sup>7</sup>

The thin, black hands  
of the starburst  
wall clock sends  
its plastic summons.  
Nick and Stella shamle  
to their daily  
rendezvous with the  
patterned placemats  
set before them.

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<sup>7</sup> Bob La Forge, “Nick and Stella” Paisley Moon, Fall 1992/Winter 1993, p.26.



Flatware clangs ceramic plates  
decorated with  
large yellow flowers.

Place settings courtesy of  
\$50 worth of groceries  
from Foodtown.

The rustlings of a carefully  
divided newspaper  
provides all the conversation.

Nick's amoeboid belly  
is digesting the  
band of tin  
which edges the  
formica table.

He breaths heavily through  
his nose  
while he chews.

The conversation is folded;  
the greasy steel is placed  
among the petals.

The capless bottom of  
one of the chair's  
hollow metal legs  
scratches the  
decolored linoleum floor  
as it is pushed back.

They sink silently  
into their  
vinyl furniture;  
only the pulsing of  
the screen  
disturbs their darkness.

Nick falls asleep and  
breathes heavily  
through his nose.

The wall clock signals.  
Stella gets up,

sets her alarm,  
and goes to bed.

*Argue maturely and sensitively.* This might be the hardest time to communicate. Yes, it is true that some couples seem to bicker, complain, and yell at each other rather easily. But this is not communicating; this is attacking, berating, assaulting, accusing, criticizing, or whatever else you might want to call it. But this is not communicating.

Disagreements will happen. It is how they are handled and resolved that makes the difference. Communication involves maturely discussing the situation, sharing why you did or said what you did and how you felt. It means first examining yourself before pointing your finger at the other person. It requires listening patiently to what the other person has to say and considering his or her points. It means trying to work out a solution and not just attempting to nuke the other person into surrender.

I remember one instance where two people were arguing. The wife was on the attack at that point and the husband said that he did not want to argue anymore and just got up and walked away for a minute. Then he came back and criticized something about her. The truth was not that he did not want to argue anymore, but that he only wanted to argue when he was making all of the attacks.

So many times when I am counseling people they want to do nothing more than point out what is wrong with the other person. Husbands and wives will do that to each other all of the time. I have to tell them that if they only point out the other person's faults then nothing will ever change. They have to look at their own shortcomings first and then do something about it. That is the only way that change will ever occur.

Immature ways of handling arguments is conversation killers like "I guess that I'm just always wrong" or "Like you're so perfect." If you say "I don't want to talk about it now" to avoid discussing the issue at all then that is wrong, but if you are sincerely planning on revisiting the issue when the circumstances are better then that is fine. If a fault, mistake, or sin is pointed out to you and your response is to attack the other person without attempting to examine what you might have done wrong is to be arrogant and unteachable. That is a technique called *ad hominem*, which means that you are not interested in discussing the point reasonably but are only trying to deflect it by attacking the person initiating it.

Of course it is not necessary to air every gripe and offense. If this happens then you will probably find the opposite effect of communication becoming suppressed because everyone is walking on eggs. Many of the smaller and one-time offenses will just need to be swallowed and forgotten.

## Patience

Everyone has faults. Not everyone does things as well as you do. Some people take longer to change than others. All of this requires patience. Patience is the ability to see beyond your own schedule and expectations and wait for someone to change at their own reasonable pace.

What helps us to develop patience?

*Understanding that if the attitude for improvement is there then the results will come.* Sometimes we are impatient because we want the results right now; we cannot wait. But people cannot go from “A” to “Z” in one swift move. It takes time and for certain issues that have deep and terrifying roots it may take more time than for most people. We can either stand on the side with our arms crossed over our chests and bark out instructions or we can roll up our sleeves and pitch in to help.

It has been said that it is not so important where you are at but where you are going. Ecclesiastes 4:13 sums this up well, “A poor, yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction.” Someone who has reached a high level of accomplishment or character but no longer desires to change or improve (i.e., he is not teachable) is worse off than someone who is still near the starting gate but is running as fast as he can towards the goal.

*Being able to help the person according to their schedule rather than your schedule.* You may see clearly where the person is at right now and where it is that they should be. Then you draw a straight line between those two points and that is the path that they should take in order to change. But that person may not be able to take that route for a number of reasons: they may have other issues that are clouding the picture, some task along your route may be insurmountable for them and instead of going through it they may have to go around it, or they might not be emotionally or psychologically ready to take one or more of those steps. To be patient is to be willing to understand what they are capable of accomplishing at the moment and helping them with each step as they are able. It also means realizing that what may have been doable yesterday is no longer doable because something has changed.

*Giving God a chance to work.* We want people to get saved today. We think that this one characteristic is the one to improve on first. We think that the work should start immediately and without delay. But God may have other plans. God knows what is more important and He knows that this one characteristic that we are so juiced about them changing first cannot be changed until this other, more hidden, issue is dealt with first. We should try as much as possible to determine if and how God might be working in that person’s life before we decide to play junior Holy Spirit.

*See the good.* Someone may not think or care that their behavior or attitude is wrong or hurtful. Would you want to throw away everything that is good just because of these one or two things? We have a tendency to think that it will be better with someone else and sometimes that is true. But have you taken for granted all of the good things in that person because they have become routine? Will another person be more compatible or easier to take? Perhaps, but have you given the person that you are with a chance and are you being fair?

*Being willing to wait.* Sometimes that person is obstinate and has no desire to change at all. Maybe she has dug in her heels and refuses to admit any wrong or faults and is highly defensive when you even try to talk to her. In this case you may be able to do nothing other than try to lead an exemplary life (applying the principle of 1 Peter 3:1-2 to both men and women) and to pray. To be patient is to endure this and hope that it is only for a season.

Developing patience is perhaps the hardest of all of these foundational qualities. But if we do not learn patience then the result will be frustration, anger, and disgust. We will then, as is usually the case, bring it right back to ourselves with thoughts such as, “If he cared about me he would change more quickly.”

Unfortunately, patience is usually learned the hard way. Romans 5:3 tells us that patience is learned through tribulation and in 2 Peter 1:6 patience follows self-control. Tribulation and self-control are not two of our favorite things. But these are the primary things that will help us to develop and grow in this vital foundational quality.

## Repentance

How difficult this can be! The things that we will do to avoid true repentance with other people. We may simply be extra friendly hoping that will wash away the offense. We may blame the other person to try to force them to be the one who repents. Or we may refuse to talk to them ever again. All because we are not willing to admit that we are wrong.

Repentance is to admit that we have done wrong and to sincerely desire not to commit that wrong again. There is repentance before God and repentance to someone that we have sinned against.

Why is repenting before God so important? There are entire books written on that matter but we will just examine one verse: 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” We are going to look at some of the words in this verse.

To confess is to admit to God the wrong that we have done. It is not to hide the sin or to deny it. It is not to make excuses or to blame someone else. All that God asks from us is that we be honest: “I have sinned.”

God is faithful and just. In the scriptures, God’s faithfulness is tied to His promises. He will always do that which He has said. 2 Corinthians 1:20 reads, “For as many as may be the promises of God, in Him they are yes; wherefore also by Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us” and Hebrews 10:17, “and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.”

The word “just” is interesting. We associate justice with punishment; not with forgiveness. So how does justice play into this? It is because Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay the entire sum of the penalty for our sins and then God raised Him from the dead. Do you know what is the significance of the resurrection? Because God raised His Son from the dead, it showed that He fully accepted Jesus’ payment for our sins. The risen Christ is proof that God will, indeed, forgive us of our sins when we repent because if He does not forgive us then Jesus did not accomplish His mission on the cross and so cannot rise from the dead. When we confess our sins, God must forgive us or He will not be just. He is faithful to forgive because He has promised to do so, and He is just to forgive us because Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again.

It is interesting to note that the word “our” in “to forgive us our sins” is not in the Greek. This sets up a subtle contrast between this expression and “all unrighteousness.” The verse may be paraphrased, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive the sins we confess and to cleanse us from all

unrighteousness.” The idea is that when we confess the sins that we are aware of, God will cleanse us completely and thoroughly from all unrighteousness even those that we forgot or are unaware of. We do not need to agonize over sins that we cannot remember. God takes care of that Himself.

The word “cleanse” means to wash clean. In the Hebrew culture it meant to take a dirty pot and to make it shiny.

So you can paraphrase this entire verse as, “If we acknowledge our sins to God, He will be faithful to His promises and remember that His Son, Jesus Christ, paid for those sins and He will remove the guilt of those sins and wash away all of the dirt from all of the wrongs that we have committed and we will shine like new creation” This is why repenting before God is so important.

Why is repenting to someone that we have sinned against so important?

*It clarifies our need to change.* If we never see ourselves as doing wrong then we will never change. But even if we really do know in our hearts that we have done something wrong but are unwilling to admit it then any effort to improve will be postponed.

*It cleanses us.* Guilt, shame, and sin are like garbage and unless we get rid of it they will continue to build up and pollute us. Confession incinerates these things.

*It restores a broken relationship.* If we have done someone wrong then it is more than likely that there will be a rift between us. Repentance helps to bring two people together that were previously on different sides.

*It is commanded.* James 5:16 says, “Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.”

*It is living in truth.* When we try to deny or suppress our sins against one another we are living a lie. We are trying to pretend that we are better than we are and that something that we said or did was either misinterrupted, totally justified, or simply never happened. God created us to function in truth. When we lie about our sin our conscience will bother us, we will be tense, we will act phony, our fellowship with God and with that person will be strained, and we will lie, blame, justify or whatever it takes to verify that our sin really was not sin. Is not it just easier to repent?

## Forgiveness

Sometimes forgiving can even be harder than repenting. But whether it is hard (or so we might even think—impossible), goes against our nature, or is something that we have never done before we must still do it for our own sakes, the other person’s sake, and for the relationship.

What are some key steps in forgiving others?

*God forgives us.* The first step in forgiving others is to recognize that God has greatly and abundantly and completely forgiven us when we are born again. Any godly character that we practice must first radiate from God’s character. You can go to a number of seminars on how to do evangelism and hear a bunch of rah-rah sermons on reaching the lost. You may help out with a few outreaches and pass out some tracts. But until you see God’s burning desire for the lost, it will never burn in your own heart. You may have the

technique, but you will not have the heart. And so it is with forgiveness. You must first see how abundantly God has forgiven you before you will be able to forgive others.

*Pray for power.* This takes realizing that we cannot do it on our own--that we lack the power, and that we lack the desire. Let us take a look at a passage in Luke 17.

5 And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"

6 And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and be planted in the sea'; and it would obey you.

7 "But which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'?

8 "But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me until I have eaten and drunk; and afterward you will eat and drink'?

9 "He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he?

10 "So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'"

In verse five the apostles are asking Jesus to increase their faith. But for what? Was it to move a mountain? Was it to reach the world with the Gospel? Was it to heal someone who is terribly sick or maybe even to raise the dead? What was this incredibly great task that Jesus was asking them to do that they were forced to cry out, "Increase our faith"?

We see the answer in verses three and four. Their request was in the context of forgiving someone. Jesus just told them that no matter how many times someone offends you, you need to forgive each and every time. And they said, "But we can't do this! It's impossible! So give us more faith so that we can do this."

But notice Jesus' response in verse six. The tree that is mentioned here is probably the black mulberry. The rabbis thought that its roots could remain in the ground for 600 years. Clearly, this is something that has dug itself down deep and would be hard to move. So there is this large, deeply rooted tree and Jesus is saying that in order to remove it completely and cast it into the sea you would need what? A hundred men with ropes? A giant bulldozer? A sharp axe, a shovel and about 100 years? No, we just need something as small as a mustard seed. What Jesus is emphasizing here is that in order to effect miracles, our faith does not have to be great, it just has to be genuine and to have its foundation in a great God.

When we struggle with forgiving someone the problem is not that we do not have enough faith to forgive them. The problem is that we do not have any faith to forgive them. Why? The main reason may be because we do not want to. We want to see them suffer for what they did. We want them to feel the same hurt that they made us to feel. We want to give them the message that if they hurt me then they will feel pain also, so they better think twice about hurting me again. But if someone hurts me and then I make them suffer for it to the point where I feel satisfied that they know what it feels like then I cannot forgive them. Why? Because forgiveness involves releasing someone from a debt. But if I make them pay off that debt

then there is nothing left to forgive. Let us not confuse forgiveness with justice or to somehow try and mix the two together. Let us not think that if someone hurts us, that we can grab them by the neck and shake them real hard and then let go and say, “I forgive you, brother” that we are being noble and Christ-like. Forgiveness means graciously releasing them from a debt; not making them do penance first.

Back to Luke 17. Just like this mulberry tree, hurt can dig its roots deep into our lives. It may even feel like those roots have been there for 600 years. And it may feel that there is nothing that we can do to extract those roots from out of our heart and from out of our thoughts. But Jesus said that it only takes the smallest amount of faith to do this. This gives hope. We can, by the grace of God, forgive anyone; no matter how deep, no matter how long it has been there. We need to pray, “God, give me the desire to forgive. Give me the power to forgive.” We can forgive others the way that God forgives us. The key is that we must want to forgive them.

Something else that is interesting about this passage is that the mulberry tree is cast into the sea. In Micah 7:19 God said about Himself, “He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.”

But then Jesus continues this teaching in verses seven through ten with a very interesting and what seems to be unrelated story. What is Jesus talking about here? He is saying that we do not need to become a spiritual giant in order to forgive someone, even if that person has hurt us badly. We just need to use what little faith we already have to believe God that He wants to give us the desire and the power in order to forgive that person.

How do we get to that point? By obeying God in other areas. Notice that this story does not even say anything about forgiveness. It is about serving. It is about doing those basic things that God wants us to do. It is not even talking about doing great things. The servant in this story is not out there raising people from the dead or preaching the Gospel to thousands of people. He is out there doing that which is simple. He is plowing or tending sheep. He then comes in and serves a meal and clothes himself properly. These are not terribly difficult things to do. Psalm 111:10 says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; A good understanding have all those who do His commandments; His praise endures forever.” God does not make forgiving others hard. But He is saying that if you do not have the faith to obey God in even the simple, basic commands then do not expect to have the faith to do something like forgive another person. If you are not regularly attending a church, if you are not reading the Bible on a consistent basis, if you are not praying or obeying other commands then how can you expect to be able to forgive?

A key to forgiving someone is not for us to psyche ourselves up until we think that we have convinced ourselves that we should forgive that person. It is not weighing the reasons for and the reasons against. The key is in believing God to do the work in our own hearts and to believe His strength and His power. We will struggle with forgiveness so long as we leave God out of the picture and try to accomplish this on our own.

*Do not vilify them.* This next point may not apply in every situation but it is something to think about. Lewis Smedes in his book “Forgive & Forget” says it well. We need to see the deeper truth about the

people who have hurt us; “a truth our hate blinds us to, a truth we can see only when we separate them from what they did to us.... For the truth about those who hurt us is that they are weak, needy, and fallible human beings. They were people before they hurt us and they are people after they hurt us.”<sup>8</sup> When someone hurts us we can too easily make them out to be monsters in order to justify our bitterness and our own bad attitudes. We can enlarge their sin to be even greater than what they are in every other area of their life. If they have gossiped about us then we see them like a big, ugly rat that does nothing else in life than run around and tell everyone they meet wicked lies about us. We can de-humanize or even de-Christianize them. To be able to forgive someone we must see them as sinners for whom Christ loves and died for.

*A lack of forgiveness will enslave you.* If you cannot free people from their wrongs then you will enslave yourself to your own painful past and will then allow that bitterness to become your future. You can reverse this future only by releasing the other person from their sin against you and you can only do that by forgiving them. In Philip Yancey’s book “What’s So Amazing About Grace” he says, “I once heard an immigrant rabbi make an astonishing statement, ‘Before coming to America, I had to forgive Adolph Hitler,’ he said. ‘I did not want to bring Hitler inside me to my new country.’”<sup>9</sup> Hebrews 12:15 says, “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.” When you are bitter and refuse to forgive, not only will it destroy your own life, but it will also negatively affect the lives of those around you.

*Get strength and accountability from others.* Tell someone else about your lack of forgiveness and ask them to pray for you. But be careful not to tell or hint at who the person is who has sinned against you. Do not use this as an excuse to gossip. The unforgiveness is your sin and that is of greater importance to you at this moment than what the other person did to you.

*Extend forgiveness.* If possible, we should offer our forgiveness to that person. If our forgiveness only remains in our mind and cannot be outwardly expressed then it will do little good. When doing so there several points to realize.

They should understand the truth of how much they hurt you. This does not mean going on the attack. It does not mean ripping them to shreds and calling them names. It means explaining from your perspective why you were so hurt. Not, “This is what you did to me!” But, “I was hurt by what you said or did and this is why.” Do not expect that person to agree with you about every little detail. That is not necessary and it is unlikely to happen. If you want total agreement on every insult, hurt, or offense you will never get it. You do not have to force them to feel remorse for every word, every nuance, and every action. The first step is for you to forgive them. That is absolutely the most important part of this whole process. It is even more important than for them to repent.

You must be truthful about what happened and how you felt. Do not exaggerate so as to make them feel as badly as you can make them.

Make an attempt to restore the relationship.

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<sup>8</sup> Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive & Forget – Healing the Hurts We Don’t Deserve* (San Francisco, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984), p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1997), p. 99.



Perhaps the most egregious act of one person sinning against another was Saul against David. Saul tried everything that he could think of to destroy David to the point of chasing him around the country in order to kill him. Did David forgive Saul? I believe so and some scriptures indicate this. David was able to wish Saul well (1 Samuel 24:21-22). David considered Saul to be important as a person. Even though Saul was a failure in many ways as king, David did not berate him or recount all of Saul's failures or sins. David did not play him out to be a monster (1 Samuel 26:24). David was sincerely grieved at Saul's death. He was not gladly thinking, "See, I knew that God would get him eventually. That certainly justifies my dislike of him." All too often when we have had a conflict with someone, even after we believe that we have forgiven him, we can still secretly hope that things will go poorly for him or even be a little glad when we do hear about something going lousy for them. David was not like that. He found no vindication in Saul's misfortune (2 Samuel 1:24-25a).

We are going to look at two Bible stories. In each one, someone was terribly sinned against. And yet, their responses were opposite. We are going to see how this affected their lives, their futures and how God viewed their reactions.

The first story involves Simeon and Levi. In Genesis 34:1-7 we can see where Shechem, who was outside the tribe of Israel, raped Simeon and Levi's sister Dinah.

In verses 13-17 Jacob's sons pretended to go along with Hamor [Shechem's father] in order to trap them and get revenge. Notice what is missing from the sons of Jacob. They did not pray or cry out to God. They did not seek counsel or their father's advice. They lied or, at least, used half-truths. They schemed together about how to get revenge. Obviously, they did not make this story up on the fly. They sat around and planned it out. When we are sinned against, is our first instinct to cry out to God. Do we seek counsel? Or do we lie and plot revenge? Do we think evil thoughts towards that person?

Then in verse 25 we read how Simeon and Levi killed all of the males of Shechem's village and then stole what was left. They punished even those who were associated with the transgressors. Lack of forgiveness sometimes knows no boundaries. My enemy's friends become my enemies is an old saying. Have you ever been hurt by someone and then snubbed his or her friends? This is wrong.

In verse 30 Jacob erred in that he did not reprove Simeon and Levi for doing evil but only for causing him trouble. He was more concerned about consequences than righteousness.

In verse 31 we discover that they could not get their eyes off of Shechem's offense. They focused on the sin and not on God's grace and forgiveness. They let another person's sin dictate their own lives. Shechem's sin dominated their thoughts, their actions, and their excuses.

Throughout this story notice how many times God's name comes up—zero. They never took the situation to God. They never even tried to rely on His grace and power. And the result was the ruin of their own lives and the ruin of the lives of those around them including their own family.

Then we go to Genesis 42:24. It is interesting how Simeon was the one taken and held in prison. The one whose life was already imprisoned by unforgiveness is now the one who is held in an actual prison.

Finally in Genesis 49:5-7 we read about their future. These brothers are forever linked because of their sin. In this prophecy of Jacob concerning all of his sons they are the only two who are mentioned together. We can see some of the consequences of revenge and unforgiveness: They were not led by God's guidance. They were not vessels of God's glory; i.e., God would not shine through their lives.

Unforgiveness is tied to anger, destruction of others and of ourselves, self-will, wanting our way rather than God's way, and cruelty. The result was that God cursed them and God divided them; i.e. they did not have the strength to do what should have been able to do.

The second story involves Joseph who was one of Jacob's other sons. In Genesis 37:18-20, 23-24 we can see how Joseph was offended. He was unfairly schemed against. He was personally hurt and the attack went deep.

In Genesis 45:3-5 Joseph brought God into the middle of the hurt. He did not focus on the sin, instead he focused on the God who can overcome all sin.

Then in Jacob's same prophecy in Genesis 49:22-26 we see what lied ahead in Joseph's future. He was fruitful. Notice how many times the word "blessings" is used. What is the theme of verses 23-25? When he was attacked, God stood by him and supported him and blessed him.

Look at the contrast:

- 1) Simeon and Levi perpetrated violence. Joseph resisted violence.
- 2) Simeon and Levi lost the council of God. Joseph had God helping him.
- 3) Simeon and Levi lost the glory of God. Joseph was surrounded by the Almighty.
- 4) Simeon and Levi were cursed. Joseph was blessed five times from the heavens above, from the depths below, and from all around him.
- 5) Simeon and Levi were scattered; their strength was removed. Joseph was distinguished.

Who would you rather be? The one who fumes about your undeserved hurt or the one who puts God into the center of your hurt and forgives?

People will hurt us. We must forgive. Otherwise, our relationships will seethe with bitterness, hurt, and revenge.

## Love

There are many different levels of love. But true love involves sacrifice. In John 15:13 Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." Love mean putting the other person's needs, desires and wants above even your own. Philippians 2:3 is one of the most powerful but difficult verses in the Bible, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself"

The greatest treatise on love ever written is found in 1 Corinthians 13. We are going to take a look what love means and how we can apply it by examining four verses in this chapter.

- 4 Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant,
- 5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered,
- 6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth;
- 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

*Love is patient.* It should be noted that the first definition of love in this section is for patience. Maybe that is because patience is the first thing to go when love wavers. This word as used here is more regarding people than circumstances. It means to be long or distant from anger. It has the picture of there being a lot of space between you and your anger with a very long fuse in between. This is in contrast to the person who always tightly clenches his anger in his fist ready to swing at the first provocation. Love does not retaliate when wronged. It waits for people who have faults to change. It waits for people who have sinned to repent. It waits for people who are weak or who doubt to be strengthened. Love does not toss aside these people because they get in your way. It realizes that maybe God has put them into your path so that you may stop what you are doing and minister to them.

- When you hear that someone has gossiped about you and then you spread around something terrible about them in return then you do not love.
- If someone in a ministry is doing an adequate job but is not quite up to your standards and so you quickly replace them then you do not love.
- If someone is struggling with anxiety and you take the time to help them grow in their pray life and trust in God then that is love.
- If someone in customer service takes longer then you had hoped to get you some information and you do not throw a tantrum or criticize that person then that is love.

*Love is kind.* Love is generous; it readily gives to others in need. This might be time, resources, or a listening ear. It is hospitable; it does not view guests as obligations or inconveniences. It is warm and friendly; it does not ignore people because they are different. It reaches out to the lonely and the needy. It is sympathetic and understanding; it does not take advantage of another's misfortune or weakness. It treats others with dignity and respect. Love is never cruel to people nor to animals. It gives a sense of safety and security to a relationship. Love allows people to relax when they are around you.

- If you see someone new at your church and you go over and talk to them to make them feel welcome and comfortable then that is love.
- If someone did something to you that you did not like and so you give them the cold shoulder then that is not love.
- Do you serve food at a soup kitchen or deliver supplies to the homeless then that is love.

- If you unfavorably compare your wife, your children, or your friends to other people then that is not love.
- If you are able to include other people in your life, your interests and in your goals then that is love.
- Are people able to be open with you, able to share their thoughts, their feelings, and their emotions without worrying about being rejected then that is love.

*Love is not jealous.* Jealousy wants to protect what it already has. It does not want to lose possessions, affections, or position. Whereas envy wants for its own something that another person already has. Both of these concepts exist in the word used here. This does not mean that we should foolishly give away everything that we have and impoverish ourselves (1 Timothy 5:8), but that we should be content and generous with what God has given to us.

- If you hope that someone does not get the recognition or the ministry or job promotion that you wanted for yourself then that is not love.
- If you hope that the person who did get that ministry or job position that you wanted fails and looks bad then that is not love.
- If you cannot rejoice with someone who is getting married because you are not married then that is not love.
- If you cannot rejoice with a couple who are having a child because you want to have a child then that is not love.
- If someone who already has more of something than you do and then gets even more because they deserve it and you can rejoice then that is love.
- If you are able to support and encourage someone even if it means that they leap over you in some way then that is love.

*Love does not brag.* Love is not a vain windbag or blowhard. It does not try to impress people with its knowledge or accomplishments. Love will share useful wisdom and be a good example but only so that the other person will grow and become more like Christ and not merely to impress them.

- Do you monopolize conversations with how great a person you are or with what you have accomplished then that is not love.
- If someone is pleased to tell you something that they have done and then you have to top them then that is not love.
- If there is a conversation going on about some subject and you have to jump in and spill everything that you know just to impress them then that is not love.
- If someone fails or sins and you boast about how you would never do anything like that then that is not love.

*Love is not arrogant.* Some like the translation “puffed up.” Love does not act condescendingly to others nor does it act superior and oppressive. Love does not consider itself to be more important than

others. Love does not sit back and wait to be served; love jumps to its feet and serves others. Love does not think that it is beyond correction from even the newest Christian.

- If you are a ministry leader or a pastor and you refuse to do the dirty work because you have “more important things to do” then that is not love.
- If someone sends you an anonymous letter of correction and you refuse to even look at it because it is unsigned then that is not love.
- Do you refuse certain people at your church because their appearance is not up to what you think is proper or because they are dirty then that is not love.
- If you expect other people to always pay for your meals, take you places, and give you things when you make no attempt to sacrifice for any one else’s needs or desires then that is not love.

*Love does not act unbecomingly.* Love does not make a fool out of itself. It is not rude. It does not act dishonorably. Love does not draw unnecessary or excessive attention to itself.

- Do you insult waiters or waitresses because they made a mistake or were not fast enough then that is not love.
- Do you make a public scene because you did not get your way then that is not love.
- Do you wear clothes that are sexually provocative then that is not love.
- Do you belittle your spouse, children, or friends in front of others then that is not love.
- When you are playing sports or games and you have to win at all costs even if it takes the fun out of it then that is not love.

*Love does not seek its own.* Love does not wait until all of its desires and wants are fulfilled before seeking to assist others. Love does not squirrel away things that it may not even want just to ensure that others will not get it first. It is not competitive.

- When food is being served do you jump to the front of the line to make sure that you get the best that is being offered then that is not love.
- If you are able to be genuinely interested in all aspects of another person, wanting the best for that person, and being willing to sacrifice to help them achieve it then that is love.
- If someone is in a crisis or is sick and you sacrifice doing some things that you like to stay with them then that is love.

*Love is not provoked.* Love is not driven to anger or resentment. It is not irritated.

- When someone is getting on your nerves and you are able to handle it maturely and graciously then that is love.
- If someone serves you a food that you do not like or gives you something that is the wrong color or size and you snap at them or criticize them then that is not love.
- If someone offends you and you scheme on how to get them back then that is not love.

*Love does not take into account a wrong suffered.* This means not keeping a record of someone else’s wrongs especially so that you can launch this list at them when you want to criticize them. Love does not hold a grudge. Love allows the restoration of the repentant.

- If someone offends you and then sincerely admits that they did wrong, if you still hold a grudge or expect more from them then you lack love.
- If someone leaves a cup or your tools around and you say with anger, “There you go again” then that is not love.
- If someone does something wrong and then feels terrible about it and you do not hammer them even more then that is love.

*Love does not rejoice in unrighteousness.* Love does not side with immoral or illegal acts even if it would be to its own profit. Love hates excessive or misguided justice. Love does not glory in sin.

- If someone does something wrong but then it gets blown up way beyond what you know to be the truth and then they are punished in accordance with the inflated story and you are glad then that is not love.
- If you like to brag about how drunk you got or what woman you had sex with then that is not love.
- If someone that you do not like gets caught in sin and you are smug then that is not love.
- When someone who you know is guilty is acquitted and you are pleased then that is not love.
- When you know that a program or movie is risqué or foul and you refuse to bring your family or friends to it then that is love.

*Love rejoices with the truth.* Love is not glad when someone gets away with something that is wrong. Love does not admire the clever thief or the amoral hero. Love is glad to find out that it was wrong or had misinterrupted a situation so that it can now walk in the truth.

- When you do something wrong and are caught and then admit to the situation exactly as it was and fully accept your responsibility without twisting anything to implement someone else then that is love.
- If you believe a certain doctrine and you hold to it despite all evidence to the contrary then that is not love.
- When someone rightly corrects you and you accept it without being defensive then that is love.

*Love bears all things.* Love is like a watertight vessel. It is able to contain itself from venting or raging when put under hardship and trying circumstances. The word “bears” is related to the word “roof” or “to protect by covering.”<sup>10</sup>

- When your spouse or friend is unnecessarily criticizing you or belittling you and you do not retaliate in anger then that is love.
- When a bad driver cuts in front of you and you do not curse him or get furious then that is love.

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<sup>10</sup> Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament* (Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1986), p. 239.

## **Love and Pain—Relationships That Hurt**

- When your family or friend is being accused and you walk away leaving them to fend for themselves then that is not love.

*Love believes all things.* Love thinks the best of any person until that is proven otherwise. It is human nature to first think the worst and then force the person to prove their innocence. But love is not like this. Love gives people the benefit of the doubt. But this does not mean that love is a rosy-eyed fool that disregards negative facts in order to always be positive. Love is not gullible.

- When you start a new job and people say nasty things about a co-worker that you have not even met and you find yourself accepting their gossip as fact and so avoid that person then that is not love.
- When someone makes a malicious comment about your pastor or someone in your church and you accept it unquestioningly then that is not love.

*Love hopes all things.* Even when other people no longer hope in that person who is wavering in their faith or strength love is able to continue hoping for the best. Jesus did not extinguish a smoldering wick or break a broken reed.

- When your friend has fallen back into drinking or drugs and all others have given up on him in disgust but you stay with him then that is love.
- When someone talks about accomplishing some goal that you may think they are grossly unequipped or unprepared for but you are able to encourage and support them anyway then that is love.
- If someone does something seemingly stupid but you are able to defer to their integrity until you find out all of the facts then that is love.

*Love endures all things.* Love continues to be steadfast even when tempted to do otherwise. When the battle rages close at hand, love is the soldier that stays at his post and does what he is commanded to do; he does not run.

- When you are with some old non-Christian friends and they talk you into going out drinking or watching pornography or using foul language then that is not love.
- When your boss wants you to do something wrong or illegal and you go along with it for the sake of your job then that is not love.
- When someone wants you to harm another person or their possessions and you refuse then that is love.

<p><b>You have a critical spirit if you:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine much of what people say and do with an eye for what is wrong</li> <li>• Focus a good portion of your conversations on what is wrong with your church, pastor, job, family, friends, neighbors, etc.</li> <li>• Think that you have a gift for finding problems or weaknesses</li> <li>• Make sweeping condemnations based on one small or perceived failure</li> <li>• Lash out quickly in judgement before hearing all of the facts or the other side of the story</li> </ul>
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- Usually find yourself alone in a condemnation of something
- Find yourself all too often using phrases like, "I'm only telling you this for your own good" or "Believe me, I'd rather not have to be the one to tell you this, but..."
- Think of your criticisms as "helpful opinions" or "love jabs" or as "guideposts to maturity" rather than as the stinging reproofs that they really are
- Are forced to rely on unverifiable support for your reproofs such as "The Holy Spirit told me" rather than being able to give a real example
- Are generally only able to enumerate the "wrong" or weak parts of a sermon but never any good points

## ***Expectations***

One of the biggest causes of relationships and marriages falling apart is because one of the persons becomes greatly disillusioned and is unable to either accept the shortcomings of the other or is unwilling to work to remedy it. Some disillusionment in a relationship is not unusual. No one will ever be perfect and no one person will ever be able to fulfill all of another person's needs. So there will always be a sense that not every piece of the two puzzles will fit absolutely perfectly and that some pieces will be left open. That is actually normal because God created us not so that one other person will be all that we will ever need but that we will also need God and close friendships to make us whole.

The issue is not whether there will be disappointment but how it is dealt with. Disillusionment provides us the opportunity to grow and compromise. The problem is when the disillusionment and discouragement becomes greater than the desire to overcome them and to strengthen the relationship.

There can be many reasons for disillusionment: one person might have been phony and now the real person is coming out or someone was blind to the other's faults no matter how large they loomed. But probably the biggest cause of disillusionment is going into a relationship with unreasonable expectations. And the higher our expectations are the greater the potential for this problem because then we are coming closer to idealism rather than to reality.

So what can you do to avoid falling into the trap of unreasonable expectations while you are still unmarried? Make out an honest list of what you are looking for in a mate. Write it down on paper. You may never have done this and you may be surprised at what you are thinking. Then go through your list and determine what is set in stone and what is set in sand. Those set in stone are absolute necessities. This list may be as long or as short as you honestly need to make it, but, if you are a Christian, then there must be at least one requirement set in stone that is irrevocable and that is that the other person must also be a Christian. Those written in stone might include the following:

- She must faithfully attend a good church
- She must have regular devotions
- She must be financially responsible
- She must be good with people

These are things that are reasonable and, to you, necessary.



Those set in sand are things that can be compromised. They are qualities that you would love for the other person to have, but they are not showstoppers for the relationship. In a want ad those characteristics set in stone would be listed under “required.” Those set in sand would be those listed under “desirable” or “a plus.” They might be:

- It would be great if he has a college degree
- It would be great if he exercised three times a week
- It would be great if he is willing to share household chores
- It would be great if he likes cats
- It would be great if he likes punk/industrial music

These are things that may be reasonable to a degree but you must be willing to give up any or even all of them without anger or bitterness.

A problem is when your entire list or a great deal of it is set in stone and nothing is negotiable. Then, unless your list has almost nothing on it, you will either never commit to anyone or you will be guaranteed to become disillusioned.

So what happens when you meet someone that seems great except for one or more of the necessary expectations not being met? Then you have several choices.

- 1) Try and change the other person. This may not be so bad if done right. What is the right way?

Let us say that you love cats and you put this in concrete and he really does not care for them. You can tell him all of the benefits that you have had from owning a cat. You can introduce him to your cats and encourage him to play with them. You can ask him why he does not like cats and see if any of his reasons are misguided.

What is the wrong way? You can bombard him with cute cat stories ad nausea until he runs screaming into the darkness. You can repeatedly tell him why there is something wrong with him because he does not like cats hoping that you will grind him down. You can tell him that if you two ever get married that you will have cats whether he likes it or not.

What is the difference with these approaches? With the first approach you are discussing it together and you are trying to win him over to your viewpoint. With the second you are trying to wear him out, or humiliate him, or arrogantly telling him that you will have your way and that is it.

But ultimately, if he does not come over to your side then you will have decide on one of the following three remaining options.

- 2) Your second choice is to drop him like a hot potato. Cats are important to you and if he does not like them then out he goes. This is a requirement set in stone and if he does not meet it then away with him.

- 3) After much hand wringing you can honestly drop this expectation from your list. It will be tough and it will possibly hurt but you can decide that this one requirement does not outweigh everything else that is great about him.

But a word of caution, do not half-heartedly drop it only to resurrect it some time in the future because, if that is the case, then the disillusionment will come. If you find yourself thinking, “We’ve been married

five years now and you'd think that by now he'd want to have a cat just because he knows how important it is to me. I've been more than patient." then you and the relationship are headed for trouble. The truth is that you never really dropped this requirement; you only put it aside for a while.

4) Keep this as an expectation and assume or hope that he will change in the future. This is the worst thing that you can do because this is what sets up disillusionment and then, ultimately, anger. This is same as the previous choice but instead of resurrecting what you think you had dropped, here you know that you expect him to eventually change. You have simply put the fulfillment on temporary hold.

This final choice is, unfortunately, what too many people do in their relationships. Then the longer this expectation goes unfulfilled the more that it simmers and burns and the more that it becomes a point of contention. Then hurt comes in with thoughts like, "He just doesn't understand me." Or "He isn't being fair." Or "My needs are not being met and they should be." Or "He must not think that I'm important or he'd make more of an effort." Or "He knows how important this is to me." Then comes anger, which can manifest itself in resentment, indignation, or bitterness. This leads to more and bigger doubts about all kinds of things. Frustration runs high and there are arguments about every little thing. Being contrary, attacking, and being defensive are all frequent actions. Finally the relationship dies.

Have you ever heard of the proverb: "For want of a nail the horseshoe was lost. For want of a horseshoe the horse was lost. For want of a horse the rider was lost. For want of a rider the battle was lost. For want of a battle the war was lost."? It may sound overly dramatic that the loss of one nail determined an entire war. However, do not glibly toss aside the effects that even one unmet expectation can ultimately have on a relationship. It is like the fly in the ointment.

Of course after we get into a relationship we can start to develop expectations that we did not have before. This is fine so long as they are based on what we already know about that person and are not beyond that person. Expectations are not goals. They are not ways to stretch the other person into something else.

Let us face it, we all have expectations. They are necessary because without them we would settle for anything and then we would probably be miserable all of our lives. However, if we do not properly determine which expectations are necessary (i.e., those set in stone) and those which are desirable but unnecessary (those set in sand) then we can have several possible problems.

1) If our list of necessary expectations is too long then we will spend our time searching for that perfect person who will have to meet every one of our expectations and so will be on an endless hunt.

2) Even if our expectations are not that many some of them may still be highly unreasonable. We may have an expectation that less than one percent of the population can fulfill. If we can live with that then fine. But maybe instead of having to marry a millionaire settle for someone with financial stability. Maybe instead of someone who is drop-dead gorgeous choose someone whom you find attractive and forget about what anyone else thinks. Maybe instead of someone who is fanatically in love with cats settle for someone who likes cats and wants to have one. Be careful

that some of your necessary expectations are not just vain desires. Athletes, celebrities, the gorgeous, the powerful, or the rich may not make the best husband or wife for you.

3) We can carry unmet expectations into a deep relationship or marriage that may, ultimately, lead to great disillusionment, anger, frustration, and possibly divorce.

We must all be diligent to be careful not to make these mistakes. We need to understand what we want and expect from a relationship.

Our expectations belong to us only. We should never try and force, intimidate, or threaten people to be what we want them to be. The most that we should do is to help them to be what God wants them to be. Anyone who moves in that direction will be a better friend or mate anyway.

**You have a problem with anger if you:**

- Often yell or raise your voice to get your way or force your opinion on others
- Seethe for days, weeks, or even longer at the least slight or inconvenience
- Use foul language in an argument
- Insult and belittle the person with whom you are in disagreement
- Use physical violence such as hitting, pushing, or squeezing
- Try to intimidate person with your physical presence such as backing them against a wall, making a fist, or looming over them
- Become mad at the slightest provocation
- Slam doors, throw things, stomp around the room, turn music on really loud or similar acts

***An example of a Biblical relationship—Jonathan and David***

History and literature have produced countless examples of great relationships where we can find much to emulate. But perhaps the greatest of them all was between a king's son and shepherd who would one day sit on the throne.

Saul was the king of Israel and was Jonathan's father. When Saul died Jonathan would have been the rightful heir to the throne. But Saul had a madness that was soothed by music. David became known to the king's courts by slaying the Philistine giant Goliath. He was also an accomplished musician and was brought in to play the harp for King Saul. Eventually David conquered many of the King's enemies and the people's hearts went for David. This enraged Saul and eventually Saul spent much of his time and energy trying to kill David. Saul also tried to turn Jonathan's heart against David because he knew that David was the people's choice to become king instead of his son.

In all of this time Jonathan and David became great friends and what we can learn from their friendship can strengthen and deepen our own relationships. In this story we will see tremendous sacrifice, selflessness, encouragement, and support. These were not cardboard characters. They were not myths or examples that God made up. These were real people who did exactly what the Bible records about them. If we lived back then we could have seen them together, we could have heard their conversations, and we could have seen the affect that each had on the other.

## 1 Samuel 18:1

“... the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, Jonathan loved him as himself.”

Why did God word this verse this way? Why did He not just say, “Jonathan was knit to David”? Or “Jonathan and David were very close”? In the Bible the word “soul” has several senses to its meaning. In its broadest meaning it denotes the very life and essence of a person. When people were counted for a census, the Bible says that they were counted as souls, that is, as persons (Exodus 1:5 and Deuteronomy 10:22). So, in this sense, the soul means the very person himself. God evens refers to “My soul” as another way of referring to Himself. Thus when God speaks of His soul He is summing up all that characterizes Himself in His love, holiness, wrath, faithfulness and so on.

In a narrower sense the soul denotes man in all of his varied emotions and inner powers. A person’s soul contains his desires and his emotions. In the Bible the soul is said to weep (Job 30:16), to have patience (Job 6:11), to have knowledge and understanding (Psalm 139:14), thought (1 Samuel 20:3), love (1 Samuel 18:1), and memory (Lamentations 3:20). In today’s language we would say that the soul is our personality or ego.

In the New Testament, “soul” is often translated as “life.” So we read that Jesus gave His soul as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28) and He laid down His soul for His sheep (John 10:14).

So to say that “the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David” is to say far more than “Jonathan was knit to David.” It meant that every part of Jonathan to his deepest emotions was intricately intertwined and woven to every part of David. They could be emotional with each other, they could share anything with each other and because their souls were knit or bound together it meant that one of them could not experience their emotions alone. The other one would surely feel and participate in those same emotions.

The result of this was that Jonathan loved David with a total and uninhibited love; he “loved him as himself.” To love someone with the love that you have for your own self is the greatest love that you can have. It is a love that sacrifices. John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.” It is a love that looks away from self and onto others. Philippians 1:3-4, “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.”

We will never love another person as completely as we might until we are willing knit our souls to theirs. This takes sacrifice. This takes work. This kind of relationship is one of vulnerability. It means being willing to be deeply hurt. This is a challenge to each one of us. You might ask yourself:

- Am I willing to share my deepest emotions with another person?
- Am I willing to be vulnerable?
- Am I willing to hold nothing back?

- Am I willing to intertwine my emotions with someone else so tightly that I will hurt with their hurt and feel their joy when they rejoice?
- Am I willing to take my eyes off of my needs and desires so that I might fulfill their needs and desires first?

And are you willing to do this with someone who is less than perfect?

### **1 Samuel 18:3-4**

“Then Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, with his armor, including his sword and his bow and his belt.”

Of all of the things that Jonathan could have given to David why did he give David these items and what did they symbolize? The robe was generally a very ornate piece of clothing that was usually only wore by the most wealthy and powerful people. In Ezekiel 26:16 foreign princes were often notable for their luxurious embroidered garments. So by giving David his robe, Jonathan was saying that my wealth and power and prestige are yours. Use them in any way that you see fit.

Armor, of course, was used for protection. By giving David his armor Jonathan was making himself vulnerable and, therefore, proving his trust in David as an equally caring friend.

The sword was generally a short, two-edged blade used for close in fighting by using quick jabs and thrusts. By giving David his sword, Jonathan was ensuring to David that he would not attack him or in any way personally hurt or offend him when they were together.

The bow was a long-range weapon. Oftentimes the person who was killed by an arrow never saw the person who fired it. It was almost an anonymous attack; the archer knew whom he was attacking but the victim never saw it coming. So by giving David his bow, Jonathan was saying to David that David never had to fear that Jonathan would talk about him behind his back or slander him or gossip about him. Jonathan would never blindside David.

The belt was a fabric, usually leather, linen or wool folded to around five inches in width. It was used to carry coins, knives or food. On a journey or when work was being done, the undergarment was often tucked around the belt. In Jeremiah 13 it symbolized usefulness, faithfulness, and loyalty. And in Isaiah 11:3 it symbolized righteousness and faithfulness. So, in the Bible, the belt did more than just hold up someone's trousers. It symbolized usefulness, righteousness and faithfulness. So by giving David his belt, Jonathan was in essence telling David that he wanted to be useful to him and that he would be faithful and loyal to him.

So by picking these particular items Jonathan was telling David

- That David had all of Jonathan's wealth and power for his use.
- That Jonathan left himself vulnerable to David and trusted him to return due care.
- That Jonathan would never hurt or offend David.

- That Jonathan would never talk wrongly about David to others.
- And that David had Jonathan's full usefulness, faithfulness, and loyalty.

These are vital keys to right relationships. Jonathan did not just pledge his friendship; he wanted to prove it and to give David confidence that he really meant it. Jonathan did not just pledge generalities; he pledged specifics. And by doing so, he told David that he was David's faithful and trustworthy friend.

### **1 Samuel 19:1-3**

"Now Saul told Jonathan his son and all his servants to put David to death. But Jonathan, Saul's son, greatly delighted in David. So Jonathan told David saying, 'Saul my father is seeking to put you to death. Now therefore, please be on guard in the morning, and stay in a secret place and hide yourself. And I will go out and stand beside my father in the field where you are, and I will speak with my father about you; if I find out anything, then I shall tell you.'"

That word "delighted" has the idea of giving or of wanting to improve the other's person's life. We can see that in 2 Samuel 22:20 where it says, "He [God] also brought me forth into a broad place; He rescued me, because He delighted in me."

Here, Jonathan had to take sides. There was the king, his father, who was wealthy and powerful and from whom he could ask for and get anything. On the other side was David who was a shepherd boy, not terribly wealthy and who probably did not have much in the way of wealth or power to give to Jonathan. So whom did Jonathan choose? He could have set David up, had him killed and been the hero. Instead, he chose loyalty and friendship over immediate reward.

When you are forced to take sides, do you choose the most popular or the best looking or the richest or the most powerful? Or do you choose loyalty? Are you willing to shun the immediate reward for the sake of a friend? Are you willing to help someone out of a tight jam even at the possibility of your own personal expense?

### **1 Samuel 19:4-5**

"Then Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father, and said to him, 'Do not let the king sin against his servant David, since he has not sinned against you, and since his deeds have been very beneficial to you. For he took his life in his hand and struck the Philistine, and the LORD brought about a great deliverance for all Israel; you saw it and rejoiced. Why then will you sin against innocent blood, by putting David to death without a cause?'"

Here we read how Saul was speaking ill of David. Jonathan had three choices. 1) He could have taken the easiest route and agreed with Saul. 2) He could have simply ignored the comments or changed the subject. 3) He could defend David. Which one did Jonathan choose? He chose the third; he defended David and notice how he defended him.

- 1) He pointed out to Saul that Saul's attitude was wrong or potentially wrong ("Do not let the king sin...").
- 2) He pointed out to Saul that David had done nothing wrong to him ("he has not sinned against you").
- 3) He pointed out to Saul that David had been helpful to him ("his deeds have been very beneficial to you").
- 4) He gave specifics to prove his points ("he took his life in his hand and struck the Philistine...").
- 5) What David did was right ("the LORD brought about a great deliverance for all Israel").

Nothing kills gossip faster than turning around and speaking well of the person. If you do not appreciate someone putting down a friend of yours then say something good about the person. Nothing douses the hot coals of gossip better than the cool water of a good report. Be willing to stand up for and defend a friend.

#### **1 Samuel 19:6-7**

"And Saul listened to the voice of Jonathan, and Saul vowed, 'As the LORD lives, he shall not be put to death.' Then Jonathan called David, and Jonathan told him all these words. And Jonathan brought David to Saul, and he was in his presence as formerly."

What was the result of Jonathan's defense of David? Even Saul, whose heart was so filled with loathing towards David, relented and was willing to reconcile. Jonathan worked hard to reconcile his friend to someone who hated him. True friendship does not take the attitude that rifts between two other people are their own business and so let them fight it out. True friendship seeks a solution and tries to bring those people together in harmony.

Jonathan did not say to Saul, "Well, obviously, you and David have to work some things out. Call me when it's over." No, he made an effort. He worked as a middleman or mediator.

We read in 1 Timothy 2:5 how God did this for us, "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." A mediator is someone who resolves or settles differences by acting as an intermediary agent between two conflicting parties. This is what Christ did. This is what God wants us to do likewise. Matthew 5:9, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

When you find yourself in the middle of a conflict do you duck and run? Do you bow out and wait until the dust settles before returning? Do you jump into a front row seat to watch the cat fight? Or do you get involved in trying to promote reconciliation? Are you willing to be a mediator?

#### **1 Samuel 20:1-2**

“Then David fled from Naioth in Ramah, and came and said to Jonathan, ‘What have I done? What is my iniquity? And what is my sin before your father, that he is seeking my life?’ And he said to him, ‘Far from it, you shall not die. Behold, my father does nothing either great or small without disclosing it to me. So why should my father hide this thing from me? It is not so!’”

Jonathan was a friend that David could share his troubles with. He was able to pour his heart out to Jonathan. He was able to talk to him about his confusion and his anxieties. David knew that Jonathan would be patient and not condemning.

Are you the type of friend that people are able to open up to? How can you be like this?

- a) By learning to patiently listen.
- b) By asking questions to draw out that person and to show that you are truly interested in their life.
- c) By showing with your body language that you really do care. For example, do not look past them as they are talking to you. Do not have a far off look as though you are thinking about who is going to win the game this weekend. Look at them. Focus on them. Give them your full attention.
- d) By being trustworthy with the information that they tell you; i.e., do not tell this to others no matter how juicy it is.
- e) By asking them about the situation later. That may be later that night or the next day or next week, but follow up with the situation.
- f) Make an effort, if possible, to find some kind of solution if they come to you with a problem. Even if that means doing nothing more than praying with them.

Jonathan did not use this meeting as an excuse to talk about himself. When David shared his anxiety with Jonathan, Jonathan did not listen for a bit and then jump right in with his own troubles. He did not say, “Well you know what happened to me? I was sitting at the table and my own father tried to run me threw with a spear.” Nor did Jonathan come back with a “I know exactly what you are going through because I...”

When people share their troubles with you

- a) Do not see it as an opportunity to turn it around and talk about yourself.
- b) Do not necessarily try and relate to their situation especially if you cannot. If someone is suffering through the tragic loss of a relative do not say, “You know, I can sort of relate because I once had this goldfish that I really loved and then one day I came home and there he was on the top of the water.”
- c) Listen, listen, listen.
- d) If you can truly relate or if you can share something from your own life that will help them then do so.
- e) Always offer your loyalty and support.



David did not use his own problems as an excuse to make Jonathan his whipping boy. Here was David, he was adored by the multitudes. By killing Goliath he saved his nation from possible conquest by the Philistines. He was being persecuted not because he did something wrong but because of someone else's envy and jealousy. He was being chased like a rabbit through a harsh and lifeless wilderness while a king and his army were trying to kill him. Can any of us relate to this? –Probably not. Yet when we are going through far less trials do we ever have the tendency to take out our frustrations on our close friends or relatives? This is wrong. David never once lashed out at Jonathan. He never once treated him poorly. If you have the habit of kicking people who are loyal to you just because you are frustrated then you must repent and stop that behavior.

### **1 Samuel 20:3**

“Yet David vowed again, saying, ‘Your father knows well that I have found favor in your sight, and he has said, “Do not let Jonathan know this, lest he be grieved.” But truly as the LORD lives and as your soul lives, there is hardly a step between me and death.’”

In verse two Jonathan said that he thought that his father, Saul, did not really want to kill David and that his attacks only occurred during his times of madness. David knew, however, that Saul's attacks were more than fits of temporary insanity. He knew that Saul's heart was first envious and then fearful and that Saul's solution to these feelings was to eliminate David.

Here we see that Jonathan and David's friendship was well known. It was not hidden; it was not kept in a box. It was nothing to be ashamed of. We should not be ashamed of our friendships either even if they might be to our potential detriment.

### **1 Samuel 20:4**

“Then Jonathan said to David, ‘Whatever you say, I will do for you.’”

Jonathan was willing to do whatever it took for his friend David. He did not weigh the perils to his own life. He did not weigh out his loss of power or his loss of riches or go off someplace and ponder, “Is this worth it?” He was loyal.

In Philippians 2:5-7 we read, “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.” Why did Jesus Christ empty Himself? It was solely for the purpose that God could have a relationship with us. God Himself placed no limits on the sacrifices to be made for a friendship.

### **1 Samuel 20:27-29**

And it came about the next day, the second day of the new moon, that David's place was empty; so Saul said to Jonathan his son, 'Why has the son of Jesse not come to the meal, either yesterday or today?' Jonathan then answered Saul, 'David earnestly asked leave of me to go to Bethlehem, for he said, "Please let me go, since our family has a sacrifice in the city, and my brother has commanded me to attend. And now, if I have found favor in your sight, please let me get away that I may see my brothers." For this reason he has not come to the king's table.'"

Once again we see here where Jonathan defended David and protected him. We must continue to remember that these were real people struggling with the unknown results of their choices.

When our friends are being maligned, God does not want us to be silent. But notice that in defending David, Jonathan did not attack Saul. Defending one person does not necessarily mean attacking the other. If you are defending someone, do not start out with, "Well, look at you..." or "You're one to talk" or "You're not exactly perfect yourself." Learn to be gracious even in the midst of sin.

#### **1 Samuel 20:33**

"Then Saul hurled his spear at him [Jonathan] to strike him down; so Jonathan knew that his father had decided to put David to death."

Jonathan stuck by his friend even to his own possible hurt.

#### **1 Samuel 20:34**

"Then Jonathan arose from the table in fierce anger, and did not eat food on the second day of the new moon, for he was grieved over David because his father had dishonored him."

Jonathan had deep feelings for his friend David. His was not a utilitarian friendship. It was not one where the friendship only existed for what they could get from each other. Good friends allow themselves to feel deeply. They are willing to express those emotions.

#### **1 Samuel 20:41**

"When the lad was gone, David rose from the south side and fell on his face to the ground, and bowed three times. And they kissed each other and wept together, but David more."

David showed humility towards his friend and he acknowledged with gratitude all that Jonathan had done for him. Do you ever take your friends for granted or do you appreciate what they do for you? Do you thank people for what they do for you or do you act as though they are rendering service due to you?

#### **1 Samuel 20:42**

“And Jonathan said to David, ‘Go in safety, inasmuch as we have sworn to each other in the name of the LORD, saying, “The LORD will be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants forever.”’ Then he rose and departed, while Jonathan went into the city.”

Despite all of the problems, they still reaffirmed their loyalty to each other. They never wondered if their relationship was too much trouble. Are you willing to verbalize your loyalty to another person? Sometimes it is not enough just to show it. People need to hear it also.

Ultimately, their relationship was centered on God. They trusted that by doing right God would bring them through the tumultuous times. They trusted in the promises of God. The strength of their relationship was bound up in their commonality of the things of God.

Ecclesiastes 4:12 says, “And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.” This verse is usually used in the context of marriage, but it is also true for friendships. Who is “him”? Many would say that this is the devil. One person will have a difficult time not being deceived by the devil. Two people will be able resist the devil, but the implication is that it will be difficult and that, eventually, they might be split apart. But if there is the third person of God, then that union will stand strong.

Your strongest and most secure relationships should be with fellow Christians. That is not to say that your relationships with non-Christians should be abandoned. But a relationship humbly based on God should be able to stand the test of storms.

### **1 Samuel 23:16-18**

“And Jonathan, Saul's son, arose and went to David at Horesh, and encouraged him in God. Thus he said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, because the hand of Saul my father shall not find you, and you will be king over Israel and I will be next to you; and Saul my father knows that also.’ So the two of them made a covenant before the LORD; and David stayed at Horesh while Jonathan went to his house.”

This is the last meeting that Jonathan had with David. We can see several points here.

Jonathan knew that David was potentially discouraged. David had been running all over the wilderness hiding from Saul. Jonathan did not wait for David to call him; instead, he went to David. When you know that someone is struggling, do not wait for him to come to you. Even if it is inconvenient, go to him.

Jonathan went to be an encouragement. He did not go to share in a pity-party. He did not go and agree with David about how rough his life was, “I know how hard it is David. You’re running all over this miserable wilderness. You’re dirty. You’re hungry. You’re tired. You have every right to be miserable.” No, he went to be an encouragement, not to agree with his misery.

He got David to look to the future; not to wallow in the present.

Even though Jonathan was next in line to be king he willingly acknowledged David’s right to the throne and his own willingness to be subservient. He exemplified Philippians 2:3, “Do nothing from

selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself.”

He reiterated his loyalty to David.

They reaffirmed that the LORD was the center of their relationship.

## **2 Samuel 1:26**

“I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; you have been very pleasant to me. Your love to me was more wonderful than the love of women.”

Finally, David heard that Jonathan was killed. That word “distressed” in the Hebrew means “to bind,” “to tie up,” “to be restricted or cramped.” You get this picture of David bent over on the ground in great sorrow. David was unashamed in expressing his emotions for his friend.

“Your love to me was more wonderful than the love of women” is a very strange phrase to our ears and some have used it to conclude that their relationship was homosexual. This is completely wrong. David had a number of wives and a number of concubines and, as we read through the Scriptures, we do not seem to find him particularly attached to any of them. Many of his marriages were for political reasons and his wives and concubines did not seem to show much loyalty to him. It may be possible to say that none of them were what we would think of as the traditional loving union between two people. But his relationship to Jonathan was different. It might well have been the most honest, intimate, and loyal relationship that David had and thus he could say that Jonathan loved him more than anyone else ever did.

## **2 Samuel 9:1**

“Then David said, ‘Is there yet anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan's sake?’”

It was discovered that Jonathan had a son named Mephibosheth.

## **2 Samuel 9:9-11**

“Then the king called Saul's servant Ziba, and said to him, ‘All that belonged to Saul and to all his house I have given to your master's grandson. And you and your sons and your servants shall cultivate the land for him, and you shall bring in the produce so that your master's grandson may have food; nevertheless Mephibosheth your master's grandson shall eat at my table regularly.’ Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants. Then Ziba said to the king, ‘According to all that my lord the king commands his servant so your servant will do.’ So Mephibosheth ate at David's table as one of the king's sons.”

This is a touching ending. Jonathan was gone, yet David still wanted to honor his memory and to bless those whom Jonathan would have wanted him to bless. David never forgot Jonathan and he blessed even the relatives of Jonathan in his honor.

We looked at one of the greatest friendships in all of history. What were some of the key characteristics of the deep friendship that Jonathan and David had for each other?

- Willingness to sacrifice
- Loyalty
- Defending the other's reputation
- Trying to reconcile other broken relationships
- Allowing yourself to be vulnerable
- Allowing yourself to feel emotions towards that person
- Not being ashamed of the friendship
- Being there for that person when they are struggling
- Listening to that person
- Trying to be an encouragement to that friend
- Blessing the friends and relatives of your friend

All of these things and more were exhibited in the relationship that Jonathan and David had for each other. This is the type of relationship that we should strive for and by God's grace we, too, can have a David in our lives. But first we must be willing to be a Jonathan.

<b>You are bitter if you:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Find yourself always on the edge of being angry</li><li>• Are critical of everything and find yourself easily vocalizing it</li><li>• Do not care what you say to people and how it might affect them</li><li>• Take every inconvenience personally as though everyone is out to make your life miserable</li><li>• Expect everyone to do what you want and then get mad if they are unable</li><li>• Are unable to maturely discuss a disagreement but must rant and rage</li><li>• Constantly fume because you think that everyone is always stepping on you</li></ul>

## Dark Clouds and Red Lights—Relationship Problems

In an apparent attempt to build my confidence in facing the real world my mother would always say that it is “you vs. you.” I never quite knew what this meant or what the rules would be. Clearly there would be no head slapping, eye gouging, or ear twisting since that would not only hurt but would also look silly.

We might all be sitting around talking about some relative, an activity that was always better than any movie we could rent. It would never center on any worthy accomplishments. An uncle could win the Noble Prize but we would talk about how he used to sit at the Thanksgiving dinner table and constantly scratch his armpits. One misspoken word by an aunt or a faux pas by a cousin and we had a conversation starter for months. The best thing that any relative could bring to a potluck dinner was only their appetite. A beautiful and delicious cake would be eaten like starving lions around an antelope and then forgotten about. But have someone forget to bring anything at all and we had delicious conversation far beyond the next holiday. But eventually my mother would look wistful and say, “But he’s good people.” *People?* I know that he was greedy and incorrigible but was he also demon possessed or schizophrenic?

My mother has perfected the sacrificial servant motif through decades of stringent practice. “So mom, what do you want to have for dinner for your birthday?” The answer was well predictable. “I’ll just have toast,” she would say with such an unworthy demeanor that would make even Cinderella blush. “You don’t even have to put any butter on it. You need to save your money. I’m just happy to have you here.” Eventually we would talk her into going to a Chinese restaurant where she would always order vegetable lo mein; the cheapest dinner on the menu at \$2.95. “Mom, why don’t you treat yourself this year? Get something different.” “But I like vegetable lo mein. Why can’t I have what I want?” So we would order appetizers to flesh out the dinner. She would take one meager item and then my father and I would consume the rest.

She has an uncanny ability to find the most dangerous aspect of any activity. “Mom, I’m going to get a haircut.” “Make sure he doesn’t cut your ear with those scissors. They keep those scissors really sharp; it doesn’t take much to draw some blood. Tell him to be careful around your ears. Tell him this before he even gets started.”

Or another time, “Mom, I’m going to the convenience store to get some milk.” “Don’t forget to wear your seatbelt.” OK, that was not too bad. That was pretty tame as far as worse case scenarios go. Maybe she is losing her edge. Wearing a seatbelt is important and the fact that I have not failed once in over 30 years to put it on does not necessarily diminish her reminder. “Oh, and before you go in.” Oh, oh. “When you get there, sit in the car for a few minutes and see who’s in there. Convenience stores are robbed all of the time. If there is anyone suspicious then wait until they leave. Or, even better, pull out and go around the block. There might be shooting.

Promise me you'll do that." "Of course, Mom. If there's a bullet with my name on it, it'll have a hard time finding me." Will I sit in my car when I get to the store? Of course not. But I will get my milk and my mother will have peace of mind and is not that really what matters?

Many times I wanted to tell my mother to stop being so negative or to not be so "motherly" with me. But then I would realize that she still prepared my meals. And on several levels I decided that it would be to my advantage to simply maintain the status quo.

Relationships can have problems from many different ways. One person may have a wrong attitude that keeps them from having deep relationships. Or there may be a dysfunctional character quality that is stirring up all kinds of problems. Or the way that the relationship has come together may be harmful.

Every one of us has baggage from previous relationships and every person that we meet has baggage from previous relationships. But no matter how deep the rejection and hurt that we have had we must learn that the good from close relationships will out weigh and, ultimately, cleanse away a lot of that pain.

Our best example is God. More people will ultimately reject Him than love Him. "The road is narrow." Many people will hate Him. "They spat on Him." Even Christians will disappoint Him. "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God." But despite this disappointment and rejection God does not quit. And because of that, we can be saved and maintain an eternal intimacy with God.

We are going to take a look at three unhealthy ways that can sink a relationship and, by doing so, make it easier to recognize these trouble spots when they come up so that they can either be remedied or avoided.

### ***Unhealthy thinking***

The thought patterns that we develop can result from many factors: our parents, the interactions that we have had with friends, neighbors and other people, our attitude towards God, our health, our finances and so on. Though we usually cannot change or avoid these things there is always a choice of how we will respond to them.

If you see yourself or another person fitting into any of these cases then action should be taken to change these attitudes. These thought patterns will disrupt and hinder the development of good, solid relationships.

### **You find yourself only with companions rather than in relationships.**

What does this mean? Only having companions means that all of your friendships are shallow. This may be because you are waiting until that perfect person comes along. Companionships are usually tossed together more because of circumstances than because of a deep mutual interest. A person who only has companionships may indicate that he is only looking to immediately fill specific needs rather than for a person to share their lives with. When you only have companionships you find it easy to go from one person to another and the loss of contact with any one of them is easily forgotten.

This person will do what is called relational surfing. They will hop around from one relationship to another never staying around long enough to settle in and get to really know or appreciate that person. This type of person is a relational vagabond.

You may be someone who always has only companions rather than relationships because you like going out or dating but you do not like commitment and vulnerability. However, God was not interested merely in being companions when it came to us. He did not save us just so that we do not have to go to Hell and so that we can wander the streets of gold forever without ever running into Him. He saved us so that we can intimately know Him.

In Isaiah 49:15-16 God says, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands” This is intimacy. God does not stamp “saved” on our foreheads; He stamps the saved on His hands.

If you find yourself only having companions then you should examine why. Is it because you truly desire deeper relationships but lack the skills to do so? Then study the section on “How to Have Great Relationships” and then “practice” relationships. Learn to work at them.

Or maybe you put up a wall when a relationship hits a certain level. This is probably related to some kind of fear. Try and determine what that fear is and, if necessary, seek Christian counsel for it.

## **You avoid close relationships out of fear of being hurt.**

You may have put a lot of hope and energy into a particular relationship and then something tragic happened and he or she was gone. They might have simply walked away. Things may have gone steadily downhill and what was once filled with such hope is now a scorched remainder of what once was. Maybe nothing much happened with someone that you had high hopes for. Or maybe the person passed away. There can be a number of reasons for this failure or disappointment. But the end result is that you are now so hurt by what happened that you will do almost anything to keep it from happening again; even if it means pushing away any potential good. You have become the person who, because you bit down hard on a bone once while eating, will now never eat again even if it means your eventual death. But in this case with relationships you will not physically die, but you will allow yourself to emotionally die.

Everyone has some kind of fears regarding relationships. There is the fear of being ridiculed, of being rejected, of being ignored, of being exposed, of being dumped for another, and many others. Ultimately there needs to be the realization that the benefits of relationships far outweigh the negatives.

In Matthew 7:14 Jesus said, “For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it.” More people reject God than accept Him and yet He still pursues those whom He can. People grieve Him, they disappoint Him, they reject Him, and they curse Him. But God does not give up on people. Neither should we.

Identify your fears and talk to someone about overcoming it. It may not be quick and it may not be easy but it will definitely be worth it.



## You avoid close relationships out of fear of being exposed.

Some people are phonies. They try and act more spiritual than they really are. Or they try and be more important or wealthier or caring than they really are. But they know that it is all a front and that, if the other person finds this out, then all bets are off.

Sharing lives means being genuine with others. If that means changing something that is wrong or weird about you then do so. But for everything else it means no apologies, no shame, and no disclaimers. If you tell a lie you will tell it forever but if you tell the truth you only need to tell it once. It is much easier to be yourself than to be a fake.

Everyone has something that they might be ashamed for others to find out about. These things do not need to be revealed right away. For example, if you had committed a crime in the far past or you married young and it quickly failed. They can come out as you get to know each other better.

However if this dark side is something that you know that they will ultimately be detrimental to the relationship then it should be mentioned earlier on in the relationship. I knew one situation where the man was an addicted gambler, but he hid it well. He married a wonderful woman who brought a nice sum of money into the marriage. Near the end of their first year together she noticed that there was not any money in any of their checking accounts to pay the bills. She asked him about it and he confessed that he had been gambling all of their money away behind her back. He was forced to leave before he lost the house, too. This is a problem that should have been mentioned early on since it would definitely affect the marriage.

Other examples of where someone should reveal a potential problem is when someone's personality is occasionally adversely affected by medication or where there is a deteriorating health problem that might not be obvious at this stage. Discussing these things is only fair to the other person. There should never be an attitude of "Well, it's not my fault that you didn't notice this problem before. But you married me and now you have to live with this."

If you feel that you have something to hide and it is preventing you from getting deeper into relationships then consider what that issue is. If it is a sin then you can repent and put it behind you. If it is not sin then maybe something can be done to lessen it. But if not, then realize that someone may be willing to accept that one issue because the rest of who you are is so good. But if you do not believe that you even have enough good to balance out any of the bad then work on becoming more like Jesus' character. As you become more like God there will be nothing bad enough that will be able to overwhelm godliness.

The fear of being exposed can be changed. It does not have to be a problem.

## You avoid close relationships because you want to stay in complete control.

Relationships mean sacrifice. Adam lost a rib for Eve. Jonathan gave up his potential to be king for David. Joseph had to carefully guard Mary's reputation when he found out that she was pregnant with Jesus. God had to die for us.

Some people want every aspect of their lives laid out predictably and neatly. The problem is that people will have a tendency to mess that up. If you want complete control then you will have to go it alone. But if you want depth then you will need people.

Let us read a few passages about sacrifice and think about the sacrifice that was made. Think about how vulnerable this Person became and then consider why He did it.

Mark 15:15

And wishing to satisfy the multitude, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, he delivered Him to be crucified.

Matthew 27: 29-31

And after weaving a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand; and they kneeled down before Him and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they spat on Him, and took the reed and began to beat Him on the head. And after they had mocked Him, they took His robe off and put His garments on Him, and led Him away to crucify Him.

Mark 15:31-32

In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes, were mocking Him among themselves and saying, "He saved others; He cannot save Himself. Let this Christ, the King of Israel, now come down from the cross, so that we may see and believe!" And those who were crucified with Him were casting the same insult at Him.

Mark 15:34-37

And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "ELOI, ELOI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?" which is translated, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?" And when some of the bystanders heard it, they began saying, "Behold, He is calling for Elijah." And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed, and gave Him a drink, saying, "Let us see whether Elijah will come to take Him down." And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed His last.

2 Corinthians 5:21

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

This is not God telling us that we need to sacrifice; this is God making the ultimate sacrifice. This was done so that we might have a relationship with Him. Of course, God is not asking us to die for a date, but He is asking us to be willing to give up our control so that we might be vulnerable to another.

If someone else recognizes some sin in your life then that is a chance to repent and become more like Christ. If someone points out weaknesses in your life then that is a chance to change and become more like Christ. And if someone notices ways that you can strengthen some areas then that is a chance to grow and become more like Christ. See these as opportunities to become better. Do not blindly jump to your own defense or attack the faults of the other person.

We all make mistakes. Doing so does not necessarily make us losers. None of us knows the absolutely best way to do everything. Relying on other people is part of the enjoyment of a relationship as you both learn to interact, support and learn from each other.

### **You lack social/personnel skills so you do not even try.**

Many people grew up isolated from others. They might have been made fun of by other children or were ridiculed by their parents. As a result, they do not know how to develop good relationships. Sometimes they try too hard but only end up being annoying and sometimes they do not try at all.

We have looked at how to develop these skills in other sections of this book. There are also a lot of other good books on right relationships. But in a nutshell, if you need to develop better social skills then try some of these things.

- Study God's relationship with us. How does He relate to us?
- Become a people person by focusing on people and not using people to focus on yourself.
- Listen to others. Ask them relevant questions. Remember what they say and ask them about it later.
- Be positive about yourself and be an encouragement to others. Do not gossip. Nothing kills a mood faster than putting down yourself, the other person, or someone else.
- Ask others how you can better develop your social skills. Ask for specific examples.

Becoming good at relationships takes time and effort. Just because you may have gotten a late start does not mean that it is impossible. Moses may have had a speech handicap (Exodus 4:10) yet he became the spokesman of God. There may be a lot of stumbles and failures but the key is to learn from them and try again.

### **You expect perfect relationships and then bail out when your expectations are not met.**

Another way of phrasing this is that no one is good enough for you. Perfect friends are awfully hard to find. They have to never disappoint, be insensitive, be moody, cranky, or depressed, or say the wrong thing. And as if that is not enough they also have to always be available when you need them, have the exact right words for each situation, know when to rejoice with you, weep with you, and when to leave you alone. That is a pretty tall order. But there are people whose tolerance of other people's mistakes or shortcomings is razor thin. It is like walking on the top of a fence; one slip and you are gone.

The reality though is that, at one point or another, everyone will let you down; everyone will disappoint you. Some will do it intentionally either because they are mean or because they are put themselves above you. Most will do it quite by accident either because they did not realize the possible consequence of their actions or because they simply cannot read your mind and know exactly what they

should have done in order to please your every whim. And some will disappoint you simply because you put people into lose/lose situations where they can never do enough for you or be enough to you.

Your quest should not be to find that someone who is perfect. Your quest should be for you to learn to be gracious and compromising and tolerant. What needs to be realized is that we are all sinners including yourself.

Once again God is our example here. Romans 5:8, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” God takes us “as is.” He does not ask us to be perfect before He accepts us. So you too should not expect someone to be perfect before you accept them.

### **You expect everyone else to make the effort.**

This may be because you found a lot of friendships to be phony or shallow or people that you thought were solid friends became quickly uninterested in you. Or maybe you poured your heart out to someone and got nothing in return. So now you figure that if anyone is going to be your friend they are going to have to prove their sincere interest by taking the initiative each and every time.

There are people out there that cannot go beyond a certain level of intimacy. You may just have had the chance of finding many of them. Or maybe you just expected too much too soon. Or maybe you are someone who easily “tells all” and is wonderfully transparent, but most people are not like that. Or maybe you are just shy. There are many reasons why your relationships were not as reciprocal as you had hoped. Some may have been their fault and some of it may have been your unreasonable expectations.

But whatever the reason you now sit in your chair and wait for everyone else to make the first move. And there are some people, God bless them, who will actually make the effort to talk to people who are by themselves. But even those people, if they get no return initiation, will get the feeling that they are simply unwanted and stop making the effort.

But whatever your reason it will have to go. There is no such thing as a born “people magnet.” Those people who always have someone around them are like that because they have learned to be a good friend. God does not play hard to get and neither should you.

#### **You are a faithful friend if you:**

- Stick by a person who is struggling even if it is inconvenient for you
- Do not draw immediate conclusions from rumors without first checking out your friend’s side
- Make yourself generally available
- Will follow-up a friend’s difficult situation with a phone call or visit
- Know when to give advice and when to simply listen
- Are genuinely concerned about the other person’s life
- Are willing to adjust your schedule for the sake of your friend’s needs
- Are reliable in keeping appointments and in fulfilling tasks that you said you would do
- Are willing to help someone get their life back together even when their fall is a result of their own sin
- Can set aside your own privileges or rights for the sake of someone else

- Cannot enjoy something that is harmful to your friend
- Can generously give that which will improve the quality of your friend's life
- Work with a friend to fulfill their goals

## ***Unhealthy people***

Everyone has faults. Once I was in a particularly long trial and someone wondered if that was the case because my heart was not right. My first thought was, "Of course my heart isn't right. And neither is yours or anyone else's. It's because all our hearts are wrong that we need God's grace, mercy, patience, and forgiveness."

But in this section we are not going to look at the sins that people commit but, rather, at those people who have an encompassing character sin that will be guaranteed to cause problems in any deep relationship. These are not sins that are the result of a situation such as bitterness even if they last a long time. Nor are they sins or characteristics that are generally triggered by events. Examples might anger and depression. Nor are they sins that may be annoying but will not necessarily destroy a marriage or close friendship such as self-absorption, moodiness, and withdrawal. These are sins that will affect all areas of a person's life and their results will be severe.

Anyone with the grace of God can change. Even deep lifelong habits can be triumphed over. But usually that takes time and may involve a lot of frustration and anger on both sides. These are people whom you could be friends with but whom I would greatly suggest thinking twice about marrying.

If you see yourself as any of these people then you need to get before God and change your ways; otherwise, you will be the one who destroys the relationship.

## **The constantly rescued**

This is a person who seems to be frequently bailed out by other people. Whatever their problem might be at the time it seems to affect them more than it would other people. They may appear pathetic and rely heavily on other people to help them through these frequent crises. What are some areas that this might be manifest?

### **a) Emotionally**

This person goes from one emotional crisis to another. There will usually seem to be a good basis for the trouble but the problem is that the response is always overly dramatic and histrionic. This type of person is high maintenance and will wear you down.

### **b) Financially**

Are you a love interest or merely a bank to the other person? Anyone can have a financial problem, but someone who is always in a financial crisis should be examined more carefully.

### **c) Relationships**

If the other person is always getting into arguments or in trouble with other people then there might be something more foundationally wrong than that they attract problem friends. If there is some inability on

their part to get along with people then it is only a matter of time before it happens to you. You do not want that to happen after you are married.

d) Physically

This person might always be sick or troubled by some ailment. Many times this is related to a lack of discipline, exercise, or self-control. Their physical problems may be real but, as in many other areas, they are exaggerated and easily become debilitating. These ailments may prevent this person from getting and keeping a good job or from being reliable. Sometimes these people appear to be more hurting when someone else is around or when they know that they are being looked at.

e) Spiritually

You do not want to get romantically involved with someone who is frequently having spiritual doubts and struggles. Instead of walking up a mountain path together growing closer to God, you will always have to stop and throw her a rope because she just fell off a cliff again.

Of course God wants us to be there for other people and there will be times when the frequently rescued will be going through a actually difficult time. These people may be irresponsible and confused and may not be able to help themselves as easily as other people. If there is a continual crisis that is not due to some unusual circumstances then you had better think twice. Be careful about choosing your friends because their weaknesses make you feel needed.

## The perfectionist

What are the signs of a perfectionist?

- They set goals that are beyond reasonable and then are easily frustrated when they are not exactly met.
- Someone who freaks out when things are not “just so.”
- They obsess over minor mistakes and imperfections. This may involve their grammar, their house, their clothes or any number of things.
- Their pursuit is not just for excellence but for perfection.
- There is never a sense of completed satisfaction.
- They oftentimes feel that there is one and only one correct way of accomplishing something.
- They can have moments of pumped up grandiosity as well as moments of terrible shame and worthlessness.

There are two major problems with a perfectionist. 1) They will never be satisfied with anything that they do. 2) They may apply their perfectionism to you. When this happens you will never be quite good enough, you will never be able to please him with anything that you do, and you will eventually wear down.

Of course God wants us to do all things well but He does not want us to be burdened with perfectionism. If you detect that the other person is a perfectionist then watch out. Life is full of inconsistencies, mistakes, errors, and compromises. That is why we have mercy, forgiveness, patience and understanding. God, thankfully, does not jump on us every time that something is not just so and neither should we do that to ourselves or to others.

## The controller

A controller is someone who feels that he knows the best way to handle everything. Efficiency is his goal. Therefore allowing someone to grow and learn through an experience is not as important as getting it done quickly and well.

Notice a few characteristics of a controller.

- He is not so much interested in communication as in letting you know his opinion.
- He is oftentimes smug and condescending.
- He has an attitude of superiority.
- He will always claim that he is only saying this for your own good.
- He will frequently correct others although he may couch the correction with subtlety and humility. For example you may have completed something but took longer than he would have liked so he might say, "I didn't realize that you didn't know exactly how to do that. I should have showed you first."
- He will keep you on a tight leash.

If you marry a controller then you will not be able to grow the way that God wants you to grow. Instead, you will only change the way that the other person wants you to change.

## The flawless

This person never feels that he does anything wrong and has no sense of personal shortcomings. He always finds someone else to blame and rarely takes responsibility for his mistakes.

A wife who cut herself on a steak knife while doing the dishes blames her husband for buying knives that are too sharp. A man who bangs a knuckle while fixing someone else's car blames that person for breaking the car in the first place. A woman who spills a drink says to her husband, "Look at what you made me do" even though she is the one who put the drink down and he never touched her.

This type of person must always be right and will never see any need to change. What that means is that there will never be any growth in him or any attempt to conform to you. You will always have to be the one who does the compromising and changing. Instead of moving towards each other, you will be the one that always does the moving. This will wear you out.

## The possessor

This person does not trust you. They must know where you are all of the time, who you are talking with, and why are you doing certain things. They want you all to themselves. They will probably try to discourage you from having much contact with your friends and family. They are very suspicious. They may carefully check over the phone for any unfamiliar calls. Sometimes they will even check the mileage on your car to see if you went out and how far.

Of course as two people get closer to each other they will want to spend more time with each other. But if one person becomes too confining or too exclusive then there will be a problem. Eventually, if you marry this person, then many years of your life will be lonely and unfulfilled because all of your friends were driven away.

This person is oftentimes very jealous and very insecure. They may accuse you of acts or thoughts that are unjustifiable and unreasonable and no amount of proof to the contrary will fully satisfy their suspicions. They may even imagine an entire conspiracy. One man thought that because his wife had made a phone call to their bank that she was secretly withdrawing money so that she might leave him for another man. That was the furthest thing from the truth, but he was convinced otherwise.

You will find yourself constantly having to explain any circumstances that are out of the ordinary. Every phone call must be explained. If you dress up then the possessor thinks that it is for some other person and so you cannot win. If you make their favorite meal then it is because you are guilty of something. The possessor fears that their partner will find another person or place that is more appealing than what they currently have and will leave. The result is that the possessor feels that they must guard and control everything.

No one can live like this. If trust is not there at the start of a relationship then how can it ever develop? Relationships usually start out trusting because you do not have a history of hurt.

Possessiveness is dangerous. If the other person is like this then get out. You may feel nice right now being the center and focus of his or her universe but eventually you will be smothered. You need to break out of this jail as soon as you can.

## The fixer

This is where one person feels the responsibility to retool and change another person. The relationship is more of a teacher/student or parent/child relationship than one between two equals.

A fixer is different than a controller because a fixer will usually have a specific goal or change in mind. You have become his project. Whereas a controller is more interested in everything being done in the most productive manner, which is defined as his way of doing things. A fixer may not necessarily think very highly of himself; in fact, he may actually feel inferior to others. It is his drive to fix others up that gives him his self-worth. Whereas a controller thinks that he has a much better grasp of how to accomplish things than other people. A fixer is driven by the weaknesses and shortcomings of others. A controller is driven by his own self-importance.



One problem is that a fixer is easy to take advantage of. He feels obligated to jump right in and do whatever is asked of him.

Another problem is that once the fixer feels that his or her work is done then they do not feel needed any more. That is one reason why some of their marriages fall apart.

Also, the person being “fixed” can become resentful and annoyed. No one wants to enter into a marriage where most of the attention that they get is how they can be improved. They are not an old car to be tinkered with or furniture that needs to be reupholstered.

## The abuser

This can be one of the most dangerous people to become close to. The abuse can take many forms, it may be physical, emotional/verbal/mental, or sexual (yes, even in a marriage). It can be active such as hitting or yelling or it can be passive such as neglect or rejection. It can be frequent or it can be intermittent. We will take a brief look at each of these so that they might be more easily recognized as wrong and not normal behavior.

The abuser is not always continuously abusive. There may be scattered times referred to as the “honeymoon” when he is wonderful and sweet and repentant claiming that he will never do it again. This will keep the abused person hanging on because she thinks that things have taken a turn for the better and that he has truly changed. Unfortunately, most of the time the abuse will appear again. If you find yourself in this cyclical situation then call an abuse hotline (check the front pages of your phonebook) or talk to a counselor. No one deserves to be abused.

An abuser can be either a male or a female although males tend to dominate this category. But for the sake of simplicity I am always going to refer to the abuser as a male in this section. These lists are not comprehensive, but they should give a good idea of what is not acceptable behavior.

### **You are a conscientious or responsible friend if you:**

- Do a task well and not just to get it done
- Do all things as though you were doing them for God
- Use all available resources to get the job done well and efficiently
- Ask questions to understand the full expectations of the task and not just guess and hope that it is OK
- Can ask for help when a task seems overwhelming
- Do not allow trivial distractions prevent something from getting done
- Keep your word even when it is no longer convenient
- Assume more responsibility to help relieve the stress and pressures of others
- Are able to adjust your plans and priorities if the best course of action has changed

## Physical abuse

Active:

- Hitting
- Pushing
- Grabbing and squeezing very hard
- Kicking
- Biting
- Choking
- Slapping

Passive:

- Withholding (Holding back food, time spent with your children or family, or other resources as punishment)

## **Emotional/Verbal/Mental abuse**

Active:

- Intimidation (“Don’t you ever do that again or I’ll...”)
- Comparison (“She looks a lot younger than you even though she is a few years older.”)
- Rejection (Telling you that you are unwanted or worthless)
- Ridicule (For displaying emotions, for accomplishments completed or not attempted)
- Corrupting (Forced to watch acts of cruelty, exposure to drugs, alcohol, gambling, or criminal activity)
- Humiliation (Forbids or monitors how much you talk while in public, frequently points out any supposed faults that you may have, disgraces you in front of other people, calls you derogatory names)
- Criticism
- Threatening (Threatens to harm, remove, or kill possessions, pets, friends, relatives, children, or you)
- Sarcasm
- Domination and control

Passive:

- Abandonment (Staying away overnight or for longer periods of time)
- Ignoring (Showing no interest, not answering or responding to, walking away from conversations)
- Isolation (Not allowing you to talk to friends, force you to be alone in a room for long hours, severely limits your access to money or a car)

## **Sexual abuse**

Active:

- Forces you to engage in sexual acts that you do not enjoy
- Forces you to have sex when you do not want to (If you are married then is called marital rape)
- Forces you to trade sex partners with one or more couples

Passive:

- Withholding affection
- Uses sex as the solution to all arguments or after a violent episode
- Forces you to dress provocatively in public when you are ashamed of doing so
- Gets his thrills and stimulation from pornographic movies or magazines
- Flirts with other women with no regard to your feelings
- Talks about how there are a lot of other women who would want to have sex with him if you do not

### **General questions to ask yourself**

- When you try to discuss the problem with the abuser does he become hostile and aggressive?
- Do you feel trapped?
- Are you afraid of him?
- Do you have a sense of powerlessness and dependency?
- Is there a sense of “What he says, goes”?
- Does he make you feel depressed, withdrawn from life, or worthless?
- Is he driving you to alcohol, drugs, or other destructive habits?
- Do you feel that you deserve to be treated badly?
- Does he deny that any abuse has taken place even when it should be clear that it has?
- Does he force you to live like a non-person?
- Do you keep thinking that it will get better when it never does?
- Do you blame yourself for how he acts?
- Does he force or suggest that you punish yourself such as by cutting yourself or by other destructive acts?
- Does he make you feel emotionally numb?
- You know that it is wrong but you are afraid to leave because of the children or because he will hunt you down?
- Has your self-esteem plummeted because of how your are treated?

If you have experienced any of the above behaviors on a fairly frequent basis or can answer “yes” to any of the general questions then you should definitely talk to a counselor or someone who is knowledgeable about abuse. If the relationship is just a friendship or even an engagement then you should

seriously consider breaking it off. If you are in a marriage then seek professional help to determine the best course of action.

No one deserves to be abused in any way by any one. Psalm 40:2-3 reads, “He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay; and He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. And He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; many will see and fear, and will trust in the LORD.” God delivers us from trouble; He does not want us to suffer in it. It is never God’s desire for anyone to be the victim of an abuser.

## The addicted

When discussing addictions this does not include medication for illness. There are many types of addictions that may be legal or illegal: alcohol, drugs, or prescription pills. There are numerous reasons as to why someone would be addicted: starting young as a kick, using them to forget misery, constant exposure, peer pressure, enjoying the high, and so on. But the cycle is usually the same: depression, use, guilt, depression, use, guilt...

People who are addicted may seem like more fun when they are on their drug but ultimately it is destructive. The use of the drug will become more frequent and heavier as the body adapts to the current stimulus. Addictions are physically, psychologically and emotionally destructive, they are expensive, they lead to unpredictable behavior, they are shameful, they are controlling, they ruin families and friendships, and can easily be fatal in any number of ways.

Do not believe that the person will change just for you. The person who is an addict needs help, not a deeper relationship.

## The mentally disordered

There are many reasons and causes of mental illness. A person who has a mental disorder needs immediate and consistent help. That person should not enter into marriage until he is either cured or the illness is under definite control.

A short list of some of these illnesses is:

- Explosive Disorder (uncontrollable bursts of rage)
- Severe paranoia
- Schizophrenia
- Severely limiting phobias such as agoraphobia (leaving familiar places), heliophobia (sunlight), lalophobia (speaking), and ombrophobia (rain) to mention a few.
- Hallucinogenic, delusional, or bizarre behavior
- Severe antisocial behavior
- Manic-depressive psychosis

<b>You will have peace and contentment if you:</b>
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- Are able to put your trust in God about terrible circumstances
- Can respond with grace even in the midst of sin
- Focus on giving rather than on getting
- Remember that Christ's death proves that He loves and cares about you even when it appears that is not true
- Do not allow people to push you into sin but learn to do what is right
- Forgive
- Pray for your oppressors rather than scheme against them
- Are patient for your desires
- Do not demand your "rights"
- Repent
- Do not establish difficult or unlikely expectations in relationships
- Do not draw broad negative conclusions about yourself or others based on flimsy evidence or trivial matters
- Know that doing what is right and doing your best is more important than the results
- Give thanks in all things
- Pray for guidance and wisdom in all situations and decisions

### ***Unhealthy relationships***

There can be two people who are fairly normal and who have basically the right attitudes and yet together they do not mesh well. Why is it important to study unhealthy relationships? Should not most people be able to see that for themselves? Unfortunately the answer is no. Many people may see one of the issues that we are going to examine but they think that it is normal. Or they may not see it at all because they are not looking for it. This section will hopefully alert you to some of the ways that a relationship can be unhealthy. It is trying to answer the question, "Will this current or possible relationship work or am I wasting my time?" This can help you determine whether or not that car that you are looking at has an engine in it or not. If it does not then it is not going to go anywhere.

Why is this important? Because it may save you a lot of heartache trying to get something to work that just is not going to happen. If you think about a car without an engine then no matter how much you press down on the gas pedal or turn the key it is not going to go anywhere. Some relationships just are not going to work out no matter how much effort you put into it. God put everything that He has into developing a relationship with every person who has ever lived and yet even He is rejected more than He is accepted.

Also, you will not waste as much time. Why be stuck in some situation for months or even years that just is not going to happen?

Throughout this discussion you must realize that no one will ever be perfect and that many successful relationships will have some of these following issues to a small degree. The red flag starts to wave when any of these issues is major or there are several of them. Also realize that relationships are extremely complicated with many issues clouding up the scene such as previous relationships that are unknown to the other party. This might be relationships with parents, childhood abuse, or conscious or unconscious biases or opinions. It could even have been an extremely pleasurable or painful experience that made a great

impression such as when you were twelve you saw the most amazing car and out of it stepped a woman with red hair and so you have always had a thing for women with red hair although you do not know why. Or, conversely, a car driven by a woman with red hair once hit you and so you have always loathed women with red hair. You cannot absolutely judge the potential of a relationship based on a checklist.

But we are going to look at some issues that might help you to better understand and evaluate yourself, the other person, and where your relationship might be heading. These do not only apply to dating and the prospect of marriage but can also be applied to close friendships to a degree. It pays to recognize the signs of a healthy or unhealthy relationship; to know when to hang in and work on it, and when to move on.

However, in all of these cases if you are married and these problems or those listed in the section “Unhealthy people” exist then, unless it is abusive, you should first try to salvage the marriage through counseling or whatever means possible. Though Romans 12:18 is not in the context of marriage it is still applicable: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” The two keys are 1) “if possible.” If there is even a slight glimmer of hope then do not give up on your marriage. 2) “So far as it depends on you.” You can only do so much, you can only be so patient, so merciful, and so forgiving. But when you have done what you can and there is no change in the other person’s attitudes, actions, or motives then you might consider how necessary it is for you to remain in a destructive situation. This does not necessitate divorce but perhaps separation might be advisable. No one deserves to be the fodder of another person’s sins.

## Relationships based on a single trait

How many men date a woman who is a shrew simply because she is beautiful? Or how many women marry a man because he has a great job or because he is in a powerful position? Health can fail. People lose their jobs. Body parts droop. People become senile. Talent can fade.

When you marry someone you are marrying a total person and the rest of who that person is cannot be ignored. What if you take your eyes off of that one trait and look at the rest of the person. Do you still like what you see? If not then you better get out.

God does not close a blind eye to the things about us that are not good. God loves us for all of what we are. He will help us grow out of our weaknesses. He will give us the grace to repent of our sins. He will trim away parts that hinder us. But God does not pick any of us because He is enthralled with one particular trait. God does not need the celebrity or the great athlete or the talented musician. He chooses people and works with what we are as a whole person.

Choosing a single trait may work out if you are a violinist and she is a pianist and you want to form a touring group, but there better be more than that if you are to get married.

Probably one of the single traits that a man will focus on to the neglect of all others is a woman’s looks. It has been said that boxers punch harder when a beautiful woman is around. It is unfortunately true that men will forgive an attractive woman much more than one who is not. It may be a rush to picture yourself walking into a room with this beautiful woman on your arm but what will it be like the rest of the

time? Though it is important to be physically attracted to the woman that you marry God makes it clear that character weighs far more importantly than looks. That is why He wrote Proverbs 31. We can take a brief look at what God thinks is the complete woman. The woman described here is an ideal who has tremendous accomplishments (she has maidens, plants a vineyard, sews, is vigorous and healthy, is shrewd in real estate) that God surely does not expect every woman to achieve. But the point is the character that is behind and drives each of these accomplishments.

10 An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels.

The comparison is interesting. Jewels are beautiful to look at but generally they have no value other than the artificial one that people place on them. An excellent wife is far greater than jewels because her value is true and deeper than the initial dazzle.

11 The heart of her husband trusts in her, And he will have no lack of gain.

She gives no reason for her husband to be suspicious or jealous. She is responsible and dependable. He can confide in her knowing that she is trustworthy. She is an asset to him and not a liability. She knows what is needed and does what is necessary to ensure that it has been provided.

12 She does him good and not evil All the days of her life.

She does not gossip about her husband, is not glad when he fails, and supports and encourages him. She is committed to her husband for all of her life.

13 She looks for wool and flax, And works with her hands in delight.

She looks for the best and to do the best job possible. She is cheerful in what she does and does not complain.

14 She is like merchant ships; She brings her food from afar.

She likes variety and is not content to do the easy and routine all of the time. She does not allow convenience to rule her decisions.

15 She rises also while it is still night, And gives food to her household, And portions to her maidens.

She is willing to abandon comfort when necessary and provides for her family. She is fair in how she deals with people and is willing to serve those who are under her authority.

16 She considers a field and buys it; From her earnings she plants a vineyard.

She is wise in her decisions. She is not flighty and rambunctious. She does not make expensive impulsive purchases. She is able to save and invest. She does not simply buy a vineyard but she plants one. This

implies studying to learn about the task at hand, careful designing, and a desire to be industrious and work hard.

17 She girds herself with strength, And makes her arms strong.

She is not lazy. She works energetically. This contributes to her being healthy and vigorous.

18 She senses that her gain is good; Her lamp does not go out at night.

She can ably distinguish between that which is righteous and good and that which is a waste of time. That her lamp does not go out at night may mean that she plans ahead. She is ever watchful. She is willing to work at something until it is complete.

19 She stretches out her hands to the distaff, And her hands grasp the spindle.

She learns a skill and then applies it. Today we may not spin our own cloth and make our own clothes, but we can learn cooking skills, craft making, sewing, gardening, or a host of other skills and hobbies. This world has so many wonderful things to learn about that it is a shame to waste our lives in front of the TV or just killing time day after day.

20 She extends her hand to the poor; And she stretches out her hands to the needy.

She is sympathetic and generous. She is willing to associate with the downtrodden. Despite all of the time that she needs in providing for her own household she still makes sure that she has enough time and resources remaining for the unfortunate.

21 She is not afraid of the snow for her household, For all her household are clothed with scarlet.

She is prepared for emergencies and likely problems.

22 She makes coverings for herself; Her clothing is fine linen and purple.

She takes care of herself. She does not act like the martyr who sacrifices everything so that her family can have it all. People do not look upon her and say, "What a noble woman. See what rags she wears. She has given everything for others."

23 Her husband is known in the gates, When he sits among the elders of the land.

She respects her husband and supports him. She does not feel that she needs to dominate him though she is certainly competent and successful in her own right.

24 She makes linen garments and sells them, And supplies belts to the tradesmen.

She is productive. She can run a business if necessary. She is willing to aid in the family income.



25 Strength and dignity are her clothing, And she smiles at the future.

She is no sad sack. She is confident and knows her value in God. She does not walk around stooped shouldered whining about how terrible a person she is or how awful her circumstances are. She anticipates and prepares for the future. She is not a worrywart about what may come.

26 She opens her mouth in wisdom, And the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

She is not a petty gossip nor does she delight in scandals or slander. People come to her for godly advice knowing that she will be kind and gentle and not condescending. Since Proverbs talks about the fear of the Lord being the beginning of wisdom (1:7) this is probably a reference to her knowledge and study of the Scriptures and the ways of God.

27 She looks well to the ways of her household, And does not eat the bread of idleness.

The “ways” of her household may refer to habits, speech, attitudes, and actions of her husband and children. She is careful that all know how to avoid worldliness and pride and how to walk on the path of righteousness. She does not find contentment and satisfaction in being lazy.

28 Her children rise up and bless her; Her husband also, and he praises her, saying:

She does not praise herself but finds others doing that for her. Her relationship with her children and husband is great.

29 "Many daughters have done nobly, But you excel them all."

She stands out among even the noble. Her husband prizes her highly.

30 Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, But a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised.

Charm is deceitful because it is a put-on whose purpose is to captivate the interest of someone, but it is not the real person. Beauty is vain because it is hollow and appeals to your ego or body while neglecting your more important soul and spirit. Then we see the force behind all of the success mentioned in the previous verses; she fears the Lord. Charm gets tiresome. Beauty fades. But godliness is the only quality of the three listed that has the capacity to grow and deepen and last the longest. The great charmer and the ravishing beauty may seem to be the most appealing when at parties, but a godly woman will bring the most respect and will ultimately produce the most wonderful and satisfying marriage.

31 Give her the product of her hands, And let her works praise her in the gates.

What she starts she brings to maturity. She does not begin a marriage with great enthusiasm but then grow fidgety and bored. She does not get tired of teaching her children what is right. She is faithful to the end and ultimately she will find joy and satisfaction in what she has accomplished. She will look back and have no regrets because all that she did she did well and unto the Lord.

So when all is said and done are you considering marrying that woman because she closely matches God's description of an ideal wife or because she is a "babe"? Of course there are many godly women who are also physically attractive, but what does God say is the most important? Who will be the better wife, the better mother, the better companion? –The godly woman or the supermodel? God knows what He is talking about; He knows what will make us happy and what will deceive and trap us. Character vs. looks: do not be shallow, see a woman as God sees and appreciates her.

## Relationships that are opposed by your friends

Other people can be wrong and some people can just be catty. But it would behoove you to pay careful attention to what others think or say especially if they know you or the other person well. Love can be blind. Others who are more objective may be able to see more clearly.

When people tell you to get out of a relationship ask for specifics and then carefully weigh what is being said. Do not be stubborn.

## Relationships based not on who they are but on what they may become

If you are going to marry someone then you must love him or her for what they currently are and not for what they might become. In some areas that person will always stay the same whereas in other areas they will change but you do not know how. Therefore, you cannot gamble on what direction a person will take even with all of your goading and prodding.

Perhaps this person is not mature spiritually but you think that once he gets into Bible studies and goes to church regularly then he will get his spiritual life in shape. Think again. It is more likely that you will be drawn down to his level than the other way around. 1 Corinthians 15:33 says, "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company corrupts good morals.'" Notice that it does not say, "Good morals elevates bad company." And Proverbs 13:20 says, "He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm." If you find yourself compromising your beliefs in order to maintain a relationship then you had better leave A.S.A.P. If there is anything that will poke a stick into the eye of your convictions it is relationships—more so than money, more so than power. Relationships will twist us up emotionally and cause us to do or think things that three months ago we did not think that we would ever do.

Perhaps she spends too much money on herself and has maxed out all of her credit cards but once you are married and you are able to help her she will soon be on the road to responsibility. The more likely reality is that the only road that will be traveled on is when you are on your way to the poor house.

Maybe he checks out other women regularly but you figure that once you are committed to each other then he will only have eyes for you. More likely you figured wrong. Yes, he can repent and never lust again but the more probable scenario is that there will be lots of arguments over this area.

Maybe she has a problem with anger or is too moody or chatters too much but once she is in a stable marriage she will feel better about herself and all that will change. The only thing that will change is your realization of how poor a judge of people you are.

Yes, people can change. God can do wondrous things in people's lives. But if this person needs to change then you had better be patient enough to wait until that change takes place before you make any kind of commitment. "Potential" is a concept that may never become a reality. Do not think that you will be able to remake, reshape, or reconstruct your partner into the person that you want him or her to be after you are married.

You will never marry the perfect person and, while married, you will both have to make some large adjustments and compromises. But too many people go into a marriage hoping for a change that never comes and then they are left frustrated and feeling trapped. You have to like what is there now because what is hoped for may never come.

## Relationships that are unbalanced

This has nothing to do with education, money, age, or race. This has to do with caring for each other and being mutually interested in each other. This has to do with commitment and with giving. If these four things for one person are far greater than for the other person then there might be a problem.

What are some ways to tell if a relationship is unbalanced?

- One person does all of the giving. You might say that the man should pay for all of the meals and give all of the flowers and so on, but woman can give tokens of affection also.
- One person tries to constantly "talk up" the relationship while the other person seems unimpressed and uncaring.
- One person takes all of the initiative, makes all of the plans, talks about the future together and the other person seems to act as though it was just something to do.
- One person drags the other to church, initiates and carries all of the spiritual discussions, and is the only one who really shows any kind of interest in spiritual matters.
- One person is excited about introducing the other to their friends and family while the other seems to avoid friends and family when the person is around.
- One person believes strongly that it is an exclusive relationship while the other is looking to date others.
- One person offers much sincere support and encouragement when the other is down or hurting whereas the other shows no such reciprocation.
- One person focuses on the other whereas the other focuses only on their own self. One woman that I dated and I would pray together. I would start off and pray for things in her life. Then it would be her turn and she would pray for things in her life. At the end of these times I would say, "Well, I prayed for you and you prayed for you."

No relationship will be completely balanced so there are a few considerations.

Some of this out-of-balance could just be different personalities. For example, one person could just be more aggressive while the other is shy or one is just more expressive and demonstrative whereas the other is subtler. But the two questions that you would have to ask yourself are 1) is it *really* different personalities or is it just a lack of interest by one party? 2) If it is simply different personalities then can you live with this for the rest of your life?

Maybe you are just on different levels at the moment but, given time, the other person will catch up and you will both be equally caring and interested in the other. This could be true and, in that case, you will need to exercise patience. But at some point you have to evaluate whether the relationship is moving more into that balance or if it is just staying in the same place.

What is an example of a perfectly balanced relationship? There is only one and that is the Trinity. As you read the Scriptures notice how each one points to the other and glorifies the other.

Jesus says of the Father in John 8:54, “Jesus answered, ‘If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing; it is My Father who glorifies Me, of whom you say, “He is our God”.’”

The Father says regarding Jesus in Matthew 17:5, “While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and behold, a voice out of the cloud, saying, ‘This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!’”

Jesus says of the Holy Spirit in John 14:16-17, “And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you.”

In Luke 10:21 it talks of Jesus through the Holy Spirit looking to the Father, “At that very time He rejoiced greatly in the Holy Spirit, and said, ‘I praise You, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth.’”

You can see that each focused on the other and drew praise and adoration to the other. Notice, also, how they knew each other and supported each other.

In a true balanced relationship, each person will focus on the other and place the other’s needs, wants, and desires above even their own. Why is this balanced? Because each person is giving 100% to the other. It is not 50/50, it is 100/100.

There are other great relationships in the Bible that you can study. There is Jonathan and David, Naomi and Ruth, Esther and Mordecai, or Jesus and any of His disciples but especially Peter and John.

## Relationships based on desperation

What are some signs of desperate people?

- They feel that time is running out and they have to get someone quickly.

- They are like wolves. They seem to be always hunting for a date. They only go to events to scope out the opposite sex. Merely making friends or having a good time is subservient to getting a telephone number or a date.
- You can see them asking out many others. They use the shotgun or fishing net method of dating. Instead of being truly interested in one person and appreciating him or her they will ask out as many as possible hoping that one will take the bait.
- They will try to get your phone number after talking to you for only a short amount of time. This indicates impatience and a fear that something will scare you off first.
- They believe that having a date or a spouse is the only way to complete or validate their life. They feel that they must be in a relationship.
- They may hop from relationship to relationship as others learn what they are really like. They do not make much of an effort to improve or change their character; instead, they are simply trying to find someone who will take them “as is.”
- All or much of their conversations revolve around how to get a date.
- Their standards continually drop until breathing is their only requirement. If they are a Christian they may even talk about dating non-Christians since “God hasn’t provided anything yet.”

They might be more interested in being in a relationship than they are really interested in you no matter what they may say otherwise. They are the sort of person who can be said to “be in love with love” but they may not be in love with you.

## Relationships still living in the past

Usually this will take one of two forms: bitterness or longing (or a mix of both). Both will be deadly to the current relationship.

Most of the time this bitterness exists because someone believes that they were treated horribly and unfairly in a previous or possibly even current relationship.

Hebrews 12:15 states, “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.” Anyone who is bitter about something in the past will carry that bitterness into the future and, therefore, his or her bitterness will become your future. Bitterness reveals a lack of forgiveness and of holding grudges and hurts. If that person can hold bitterness towards someone else then they can eventually hold it towards you, also.

Bitterness leads to anger. It leads to cynicism. It leads to moodiness. It can ruin both people just as easily as it can ruin the one who harbors it. A bitter person is bound to the past and will not be able to fully commit to your future together. You can certainly help that person to understand forgiveness and repent of the bitterness, but you should avoid getting into an intimate relationship until that happens.

Longing occurs because this person was in what they considered to be a great relationship. They might have felt that they were perfect for each other and had high hopes and expectations. But then something happened. Maybe they broke up or the other person moved or passed away. In any case, this person still feels that, though there is not any realistic hope of ever getting back together again, something may happen and they will be reunited. Should this be the case then you are nothing more than a substitute. You will always be compared to that other person. You can do better than that.

Your relationship should not go any deeper until the person is able to truly put that past relationship behind him. You deserve their full attention.

## Relationships where conflicts are not properly handled and resolved

Every relationship will have its conflicts. But there are two crucial questions to ask regarding those conflicts. Are they easily sparked by trivial issues? How are they handled?

I know several couples that bicker and argue over every little thing. I may ask how much further it is to a restaurant that we are all going to. One will say 20 minutes and the other will have to jump in and say that it is only 15 more minutes and then give an explanation as to why their estimate is correct. Or another couple that argued because she felt that you should only use one cotton swab to clean both ears whereas he always used one per ear. Oh, the horror.

In these kind of cases there is never a sense of allowing the other person to be close. There is not enough patience. There is not enough mercy. These are not important matters. It does not really matter if it is 15 or 20 minutes away; I was not planning on doing a time trial, I just wanted a general idea.

If there is bickering while dating then what do you think will happen when you are living together?

The second issue is how those conflicts are handled. What are some wrong ways to handle conflicts?

- Using name-calling such as “stupid.”
- Having to always be right and never being able to apologize or admit wrong.
- Recalling past episodes of failure or mistakes.
- Ranting and raging and stop listening to what you have to say.
- Walking away without discussing the situation.
- Exaggerating what happened to justify their histrionics.
- Twisting or lying about the facts to “prove” that they are right.
- Using intimidation or physical force or making threats.
- Mentioning other people who supposedly agree with your side against the other person.
- Denying that there even is a problem when it is clear that there is.

If any of these are true in your relationship then you have a problem.

How does God handle conflict? Isaiah 1:18 says, “‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ says the LORD, ‘Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson,

they will be like wool.”” First, God recognizes a conflict. He does not gloss over it or pretend that it does not exist. Second, He calls for mature communication. He says, “Come now, and let us reason together.” Third, Instead of merely making an accusation, He proposes a solution where we both come out as winners.

If the two of you argue frequently and do not maturely resolve those conflicts then you might consider backing out. As time goes on and this behavior is not consciously altered then you will both just learn how to dig in your heels and nothing will ever be resolved or changed. Arguments will never focus on solutions but only on blame.

## Relationships with frequent lying, criticism, anger, or belittling

An open and honest relationship means that you both can see the strengths and the weaknesses in the other person and be encouraging and supportive. A damaging relationship involves too much focus on negative traits. This can even be disguised by the one person expressing their concerns or corrections in a gentle, seemingly helpful manner; sort of the “I’m saying this for your own good” approach. But, ultimately, the person is simply attacking.

If a person can easily lie to you then how can you trust anything that he says? Can you live the rest of your life with someone who hides things from you and then refuses to tell you the truth when confronted? Do not think that this will change when you get married. A liar will tend to be more devious, more likely to engage in wrong acts, and more unfaithful because they do not feel the need to be honestly accountable to anyone; even you.

Criticism finds a weakness, sin, or undesirable trait and then hammers it. There is no desire to discuss the issue maturely and with an eye for a solution. There is no attempt to tolerate it or to be patient. The critical person is not truly interested in the other person changing for the better as much as what “I want” even though that will probably be vehemently denied. Criticism will grind you down. It turns an innocent and honest relationship into a battle. And even if a solution is presented it is usually done so with arrogance and impatience. Criticism does not build up people; it only damages relationships. And as the relationship deepens the criticism will usually broaden.

Frequent anger is generally a sign of immaturity, self-centeredness, frustration, and an inability to constructively resolve antagonizing circumstances. There is a lack of self-control and a lashing out without concern for any immediate and long-term affects. If you marry an angry person you will find yourself walking on eggshells and being the brunt of unnecessary and destructive attacks. Proverbs 22:24 makes itself clear, “Do not associate with a man given to anger; Or go with a hot-tempered man.”

Belittling can be direct, it can utilize sarcasm, and it can hide itself in humor. But it generally flushes out to be “cheap put-downs.” Whereas criticism may hide behind the guise of “just trying to be helpful,” belittling puts up no such front. It is not teasing. Teasing should be innocent and playful; it does not mean to hurt. Belittling reveals a deep insecurity and low self-esteem. If you are with someone who cuts you down, then bolt. You are better than that. And besides, if you are that awful then why are they going out

with you to begin with? The problem is not you; the problem is that they are destructive. You should feel better about yourself when you are with this person and not worse.

All of these behaviors are damaging to a relationship. They are not cute. They are not fun. They are not helpful. They emanate from an insensitive, immature person. If you are dating someone like this then you should seriously consider backing away. Eventually you will be worn down, your own self-esteem will drop, and you will usually find yourself biting right back. Is this what you have waited for all of your life?

## Relationships that are not yet available

If a man or woman that you are interested in is married then it is definitely not God's will for you two to be together no matter how perfect it may seem. Even if their marriage was initially wrong and was brought together for all of the wrong reasons, it is now God's will that they stay together (with the possible exception of adultery or abuse on that spouse's part).

Also, if that man or woman is separated and even if a divorce is pending it is not God's will for you to date that person. They are still married in God's eyes and it is important that they and you continue to honor the sanctity of that marriage vow. Until that marriage is officially over it may be God's will for the two of them to reconcile and be reunited no matter how foolish or ridiculous that may seem to you at the moment. It would, therefore, not be your place to disrupt how God may be working in each of their hearts. That person is not free until the marriage has legally ended.

### **You are patient if you:**

- Can endure unwarranted criticism without immediately striking back
- Are able to work at the pace that the other person needs in order to change rather than at the pace that you want to go
- Can pray for a boss who is always maligning you rather than scheming how to get him or her back
- Understand and accept that God's timing is oftentimes different from your own
- Are willing to work more slowly to get something done right rather than just getting it done
- Can understand that some people will make more mistakes than you would in the same situation
- Know that in some situations it is better to wait until conditions are better than to rush on ahead
- Are able to persevere in prayer even when nothing seems to change
- Can quietly suffer through a friend's ill mood or depression until they can get back to being their familiar selves again



## Love and Pain—Relationships that Hurt

My mother. She uses words like a chimp uses a paintbrush.

It is not enough for my mother to be correct; she must be *perfectly* correct. My father could start telling a story about how they went over to my aunt's house and found out that one of our relatives just went into the hospital for life-saving surgery. This is a serious story about a serious person having something serious done to them. So my father will start, "We went over to my sister's house and while we eating lasagna..." "ZITI, it was ziti," my mother would forcefully interject. Now if the story was about how much my father liked the meal and wanted me to investigate the recipe then I could see why the exact entrée was important. But it wasn't. My father was just setting the table (so to speak) for what the main, and serious, point was. Now such exactness is important if you are intercepting Hitler's messages and you get the name of the country wrong. "Hitler isn't going to invade Portland, you fool, he's going to invade Poland. Tell the convoy on their way to Maine to turn around now." But we're talking about a cheesy pasta dish; they're basically the same thing anyway.

This perfect correctness isn't only restricted to my mother apparently. In fact, it isn't even restricted to the female gender. I was driving with a married couple and I asked the wife how far she works from where we were currently at. She answered "ten minutes" at which the husband jumped in to set the record straight. "It is 13 minutes," with a large emphasis on the "13." I didn't really care; a granularity of ten minutes would have been more than sufficient. "ten minutes," "twenty minutes," "thirty minutes" are all perfectly acceptable answers. That she was off by three minutes would only have mattered if I was planning on running the distance.

But back to my mother. This correctness does not merely apply to others' stories. Sometimes she'll lose a detail on one of her own tales and then hack at it like she's trying to clear briars with a machete. "We were going to a garage sale on Oak Street. No, wait a minute. Maybe it Larch Street. Was it Larch? I can't remember. It could have been Oak. But I think that we turned onto Oak but then we went onto another street where the garage sale was." I would interject, "Let's just say it was Larch. And so what did you find?" Turning to my father she would ask, "Was it Oak or Larch, I can't remember?" "Oh for crying out loud," he would say with growing frustration, "just tell the story." Before the story was even half over, we would all be twitchy. "It was the really large yellow house on the left. No, no, I got that mixed up. I think it was the blue house with the four kids running around." Long... thoughtful... pause. "No, it was the yellow house. Now I remember because they had a rocking chair half-way up the driveway." Sometime between when my jaw slightly trembled and I resigned myself to this eternity it was definitely concluded that it was the blue house. Eventually we would discover that the hard-hitting denouement of the entire story was that she got a package of six cloth napkins for a dollar.

Every human relationship will fail or disappoint us at some time in some way. That failure may be catastrophic or it may merely be a disappointment. But it will come. And the closer that we get to someone the more likely that we will experience one of those failures. That is one reason why some people do not want to get close to other people. It may not be because they are snobs or unfriendly. It may simply be because they do not want to be hurt.

So when we do experience one of these failures or disappointments there are several questions that we need to ask ourselves.

- 1) How am I going to react to this?
  - Am I going to be vengeful? Or am I going to be gracious?
  - Am I going to become depressed? Or am I going to look to God for my encouragement?
  - Am I going to become angry and bitter? Or am I going to forgive, if necessary, and move on with my life?
  - Is my whole self-image or self-esteem going to fall to the ground crushed? Or am I going to be confident in how God still sees me?
- 2) Is the friendship worth fighting for?
  - Should I make any effort at all to try and patch things up? Or is time to let go and move on?
- 3) Will I turn inward and isolate myself or will I draw nearer to God and let Him work with me?
  - Does a failed relationship mean that you should, therefore, pull away from all relationships? Or does it mean that you should draw nearer to the one relationship that will never fail? And of course this is God.
- 4) How will this affect my relationships with others?
  - Will I drive others crazy with my constant whining? Or will I seek out others so that I can learn from them?
  - Will I take out my frustrations on someone else? Or will I deal with my frustrations in a mature, correct manner?
  - Will I still seek to minister to others even in my own time of need?

The choice of which road you will take when a relationship fails is always up to you. God will be faithful to give you the strength to do what is right.

In this section we are going to examine two situations in which a relationship has produced pain and hurt. In the first situation a schism has developed between two people because some conflict arose. In this case the solution is to try and resolve the conflict.

In the second situation two people have broken apart in a way that seems irretrievable. This could be between friends, between a boyfriend and a girlfriend, or between a husband and a wife. Conflict resolution

has been tried and failed and now both parties have gone their separate ways. The result is usually a lot of pain and discouragement. In this section we are going to see how to possibly heal from that break.

## ***Resolving Conflicts***

There is only one verse in the Bible where God outright calls a Christian a liar: 1 John 4:20. “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.”

Conflicts between individuals or between groups of people can tear a church or lives apart. Sometimes the conflict may start out like the explosion of a bomb. But other times it may start out as a small crack or disagreement in the relationship that is left to fester. And because sin will never go away on its own this disagreement will grow and push the combatants further and further apart. Then the unwillingness by either person to humbly and graciously resolve the conflict can become greater than the original conflict itself. Tribes or clans in parts of the world have been in conflict for centuries without even knowing why the hostility started in the first place. We can oftentimes see in the news how one group, yet again, slaughtered members of the other group. In the same way some people can go decades without talking to each other and not even have a clear recollect as to why it started. All that they are able to tell you is that it was the other person’s fault but they cannot remember why.

## **Why should we resolve conflicts?**

Our lives have two directions: vertical and horizontal. The vertical is our relationship with God and the horizontal is our relationship with other people. We are a unity. We cannot take one aspect of our lives and put it over here and not think that it will not affect the other parts of our lives. We cannot separate the vertical from the horizontal.

Matt 22:37-40 says, “And He said to him, “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.” This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.” On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”

These are the two foremost commands. Think of them as two pedestals side-by-side on which we are standing with one foot on each. The one pedestal is our love for God. The other pedestal is our love for our neighbor. If one of these pedestals crumbles, we will fall off of the other. We may wave our arms in circles trying to stand on one leg but eventually we will tire and fall off.

Many Christians spend great portions of their spiritual lives tottering and doing all that they can to keep from falling onto their faces and they do not know why. They may read their Bibles every day and serve in church and pray with enviable fervency. They may seek God for everything, but still they struggle and they cannot understand why. Maybe the answer is because, although they truly do love God, they are not talking to that one Christian in church. Or they have a big problem with a family member and are

always at odds with that person. Or maybe they are rude to their neighbor or to a co-worker. Maybe there is someone that they just do not like. And so they are trying to stand on only one pedestal.

We should resolve conflicts because it will affect our entire spiritual life and eventually even our love for God will suffer.

Referring again to 1 John 4:20, if you hate your brother, God does not merely say that you will not be fully blessed or that you will have more struggles—He says that you are a liar. Why would you be a liar? It is because each person is made in the image of God and is a small reflection of who and what God is. How can we reject a person without rejecting that part of him or her that reflects God?

Also, God is love and He loves each person, Christian or not, with a tremendous and sacrificial love. On this basis God is able to command us to love all people. Matthew 5:43-47 says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR, and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” In John 14:15 Jesus says, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” So God commands us to love our neighbors but then also says that if we love God we will keep His commandments. So if we do not love someone but instead have rejected or reviled someone then how can we say that love God when we do not even do what He says?

We resolve conflicts because pretending to love God while rejecting another person is lying and deception.

Galatians 5:14-15 says, “For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another.” The phrase “bite and devour” has the sense of wild animals attacking one another. There is no conscience to the harshness of the attack so long as the other person is beaten. The result is that you will both be consumed or annihilated. This destruction may be emotionally, psychologically, spiritually or all of these.

We resolve conflicts because if we do not then we have the potential of destroying ourselves.

Galatians 5:19-21 lists the deeds of the flesh. These are thoughts or actions that result from our fallen, sinful nature and are against the desires of God. Those who practice these deeds will not please God and will not be able to practice the character of God. Of the fifteen deeds listed eight are related to our attitude towards other people. These are “enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying.” All of these will either potentially cause a broken relationship or is the result of one.

We resolve conflicts because they will prevent us from developing the character of God.

In John 13:35 Jesus says, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” It is the nature of the world to be suspicious of other people. So when anyone makes a personnel sacrifice for someone it is thought to be heroic. Non-Christians can shrug off devotion and theology. They can dismiss reason and apologetics. But they are confounded by lasting, committed love for each other. Anyone can act pious. Anyone can learn some logical arguments. But it is only a genuine person who can consistently sacrifice for others.

So when we are at work or school or in our neighborhood and we gossip or slander or envy, this allows them to think, “she’s just like the rest of us.” God wants us to stand out. He wants us to be different. He wants us to be heroic every day. Then people will know that we are different, they will know that we are Christians.

We resolve conflicts because they will destroy our testimony to non-Christians and they will sink Christians into the same muck as everyone else.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus preaches, “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, ‘Raca,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.”

We resolve conflicts because it will suffocate our worship and because God commands it.

1 Corinthians 20-21, 26 says, “But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; or again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ ... And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.” This entire chapter talks about how a church is like a human body and how each member of the church is like a different part of the body. Some people may be eyes whereas others may be feet. When a real human body develops a condition where parts of the body such as the immune system attack other parts of the body then a serious crisis occurs that may cripple the person or may even result in death. In the church when one member degrades or attacks another member then the entire church will suffer. This is true even when the conflict is not directly known or seen by others. This is because conflicts go beyond the interaction between the two combatants and will affect the entire character and attitudes of both.

We resolve conflicts because it will hinder the effectiveness of the church.

## Conflicts strike at the very heart of who we think God is

In 1 John 1:6 we read, “If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.”

You may say, “I know that I don’t get along with this person, but my times in the Word have never been better, my prayer life is great, and the rest of my fellowship is good.” Guess what? God says that you are deceiving yourself.

Why is this? Many say the reason is because we cannot say that we are walking with God when we resent someone made in His image. That is valid, but I think that it goes deeper than that. It goes to the very heart of who we think that God is.

1 John 4:19 says, “We love, because He first loved us.” There is a cause and effect in operation in this verse. We can even have the slightest sliver of love in our hearts only because God first loved us. Love does not flow naturally from the laws of physics or biology. It can only come from the character of God. This is true for Christians as well as for non-Christians.

But what is the opposite of this verse? Is it, “We do not love because God does not love us?” No! Think of John 3:16. The indisputable fact is that God always has and always will love us. God’s love for us can never be removed from the equation. His love for each and every one of us is eternal, unconditional, sacrificial, overflowing, and any other transcendently wonderful word that you can think of. So the realistic opposite of this verse cannot change the notion of His first loving us.

So what is the opposite of 1 John 4:19? It would have to be, “We do not love because we do not believe that God loves us.” We will only practice godly character that we first see in God.

- If you do not see God as being merciful to you then you will not show mercy to others.
- If you do not see God as being gentle and sensitive to you then you will not be gentle and sensitive to others.
- If you do not see God as being faithful to you then you will not be faithful to others.
- If you do not see God as being concerned about time then you will be very often late to appointments.

We can apply this to any character quality that we can think of. The more that we see who and what God is, the more that we will be broken by our own sin and the more we will be like Him. Proverbs 29:19 explains, “A slave will not be instructed by words alone; for thou he understands there will be no response.” We are that slave. God never tells us to do something that He has not already done Himself nor does He ever ask us to be something that is not already an intricate part of His own character. So when God gives us a command or a precept it has already been done by Himself. Another way of phrasing this verse might be, “A slave who only hears words and does see corresponding character will not be obedient.”

Second Samuel 22:27 says, “With the pure Thou dost show Thyself pure, and with the perverted Thou dost show Thyself astute.” Some versions translate “astute” as “twisted.” God is never twisted but we can make Him that way in our minds. Sometimes we twist God to make Him to match our sin and sometimes our sin results from our wrong concept of God. Either way, how we live our lives and the attitudes that we have are a reflection of how we view God.

So if we resent or dislike someone then that grinds against the true character of God and reveals a misperception of how we think about the character of God. The closer that we get to understanding the

perfection of God and His light the more broken that we must be. But we can let our sins hide in the eclipses that we perceive in His character. This is why holding resentment towards another person is such a terrible sin to God. It degrades someone made in His image and it disparages His character.

O, to dwell there above  
With the saints that we love  
That will be glory.  
But to dwell here below  
With the saints that we know  
Now that's a different story.

## What does it mean to reconcile with someone?

Reconciliation means more than that our enmity is put away, but that now we are on the same side. The root idea in the Greek is a change of attitude or relationship. Whereas before we were on opposite sides, now, by mutual agreement, we are on the same side. A derivative of one of the Greek words is used in the New Testament in the restoring of a withered hand or a blind person being given sight. It is not merely that the disease is removed, but that the ravaged body is made healthy.

Reconciliation means being willing to restore a friendship that had become a war. It means replacing the accusations and criticisms with support and encouragement. It means taking two people who were pulling in opposite directions and getting them to pull together. This takes grace.

Reconciliation does not necessarily mean that you must both agree on every detail. It is acceptable to allow both of you to maintain differing views on some small issues. In that case you can say, "We obviously aren't in agreement on what was said at that time. So why don't we just chalk that one up to different recollections and leave it at that? It's what you thought was said versus what I thought was said and since it wasn't recorded there isn't any point in beating this to death."

Reconciliation does not necessarily mean that you must now be best friends and take your vacations together. There is an issue of trust, which may or may not have to be rebuilt. If I invite someone over to my house and he steals silverware out of my kitchen there may be a need for reconciliation. If that is successful I may invite him over again. But once again, he steals my silverware. This may lead to, yet another, round of reconciliation. After things are resolved I may invite him over to my house but you can be sure that I will be careful to see that he stays out of the kitchen. We may be reconciled but that does not mean that I trust him.

Trust is earned and is developed out of situations where the person proves himself to be reliable, faithful and responsible. I can be friends with someone and yet be fully cognizant of their weaknesses and limitations. This does not make the friendship any less significant. It just means that I can enjoy this person's company while appreciating their strengths and understanding their weaknesses.

## Principles of Resolving Conflicts

### 1) Communicate.

Talk to that person. Call them up. The best way is to talk to them in person. That way you can both respond immediately to what the other person is saying and not speculate over the nuance or implication of something as might happen in a letter or in an email. But if you simply cannot bring yourself to address the person directly then a short letter or email may be the way to go. However, if you do go this route then, if possible, keep it brief and leave the details to be discussed in person.

When you are going to talk to that person plan at least the beginning of what you want to say. This may only mean the first few sentences but you want to be careful not to start off on the wrong foot.

Talk to the person one-on-one. Do not bring your supporters with you and do not do this in front of others even if they know the whole story. This is the principle for any of these kind of confrontations as instructed in Matthew 18:15.

Certainly at first, only confess that which you did wrong if, in fact, you did do anything wrong. You can save reproving him until your wrongs are addressed. You do not want to give the impression that you are at this meeting only to impeach him. Rarely is a conflict 100% one person's fault. Most of the time it is closer to 60/40 at worst. So do not sit there ready to pounce, "I guess I did this wrong, BUT YOU DID ALL OF THESE THINGS WRONG!" Do not blame-shift. This probably cannot be said too many times but even if what they did wrong was more than what you did wrong; you still need to confess whatever wrong that you might have done. However, do not confess sins that do not exist on your part simply to appease the other person or to appear to be humble. To falsely shift blame in either direction is wrong.

Express your feelings from your point-of-view. Do not say, "What you said was really offensive." Rather say, "I was really hurt by what you said." They may be able to argue that what they said was not offensive, but they cannot argue that it did not hurt you. They may claim that it should not have hurt you but that is a different issue and still cannot deny that you were hurt. Whether or not you are overly sensitive can be discussed but in a mature manner.

If it is the other person who is confessing then let them finish. It is important for a person to fully confess their sin. If you jump in and tell them that you forgive them or that everything is OK they will probably feel unsatisfied. Confession is rehabilitative.

Do not try to bulldoze them. You are secure in God. God knows where you have been wronged. It is not usually necessary to dump years worth of wrongs all at once without giving either of you a chance to chance your breaths. Once you have done your part, let God work on them.

### 2) Understand both sides, especially the other person's

Listen first to what the other person is saying. James 1:19 says, "This you know, my beloved brethren. But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger." We always want to present our case first, thoroughly, and irrefutably. And when we are finished all that we want the other person to say is,



“Wow, I guess that I really blew it. Can you ever forgive me?” But the Bible says that we should listen first, ponder (Proverbs 15:28a, “The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer”), and then speak.

Another good verse is Proverbs 18:2, “A fool does not delight in understanding, but only in revealing his own mind.” Do you quickly jump in to defend yourself before even waiting to hear the person out? Do you blank out their words while you prepare your counterattack in your mind? Realize that rarely is everything that a person says completely wrong nor is everything that you say completely right. Do not cherish your rights or desires or expectations more than you cherish that person.

James 4:1-3 outlines why we have conflicts. “What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.” You can follow this passage through from verse one, which asks why we have conflicts to verse two that tells us that we crave something that we are having trouble getting and then finally to verse three, which gives the root cause. We have conflicts because we are selfish and focused only on ourselves. We are not getting something from God because our motive is to take and hoard and not to share.

When we get into a conflict we should ask ourselves, “Are we having this argument because I am wanting or expecting something that I’m not getting and that is making me mad?” Ask yourself questions such as:

- “Am I upset because I am demanding respect that I haven’t earned?”
- “Am I mad because the schedule or plans didn’t go the way that I wanted?”
- “Am I blowing this way out of proportion because I was inconvenienced?”

We may not be the one who is causing the brunt of the problem but we should always examine ourselves first.

Read Romans 14:15, “For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.” Substitute for “food” the phrase “your reputation,” or “your rights”, or “your desires.” Do you see what God is comparing here? Do you see what God is putting on the balances here?

- Your reputation vs. “for whom Christ died.”
- Your rights vs. “for whom Christ died.”
- Your desires vs. “for whom Christ died.”

When you hurt someone in this way do you see the enormous weightiness that you are placing on yourself? Do you see how much more important you are making yourself to be over God? In your arrogance you may consider yourself to be more important than this other person but the comparison is not between you and that person. God says that the comparison is between you and God. Once you realize that, all of your insolence and haughtiness should crash to the ground.

Something that may help you to understand the other person is to realize that many times when someone says or does something that hurts you they are doing it out of their own fear and their own vulnerability. People who seem to have very little say in how their own lives are going (because of severe health or financial problems for example) may overly try to control other people. This may be because they are trying to minimize even more pain in their lives. Or people who become stone cold when relationships get close might have been badly betrayed when they did become vulnerable to someone. These reasons, of course, do not make their actions right, but it may give you some insight into their motivations and you may not so much see a malicious, cruel person as much as someone who is weak and afraid.

### 3) Do not vilify that person

This topic is discussed elsewhere in more detail but it is important to mention it again. It is too easy to make the other person out to be so much worse or evil than they really are just to justify your own bad attitude. You start replaying everything bad that they ever said or did and, in doing so, mound heap upon heap of blame upon them. You may even “un-forgive” things that you had previously forgiven. The result is that someone who did a few wrong things is now being turned into the anti-Christ as far as you are concerned.

Be realistic with your evaluation of that person. If you have a bad attitude then repent of it. Do you really think that your phony justification will fool God? Do not play yourself entirely as the poor, misunderstood victim who is always getting stepped on and abused and the other person as a mean-spirited villain who spends all day scheming on how to “get” you.

### 4) Who initiates when sin is involved?

James 5:16, “confess your sins to one another...” If you have sinned against that person then you should go and confess your sin to him or her. This should probably only include sins that were noticeable or affected that person. This means that you do not need to confess every bad thought that you had to that person. The confession of those thoughts is between you and God.

Proverbs 28:13 tells us, “He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion.” Concealing your sins will cause you to not prosper on two levels. On the first level you may think that you are concealing your sins from others but you cannot conceal them from yourself. Therefore, your guilt will haunt you and to appease this guilt you may begin to justify your sin and usually the best way to do that is to further vilify the other person. Then your attitude spirals down into even more anger and blame. On the second level you can never hide your sin from God and God will not prosper someone who is in willful, continuous sin.

So if you have sinned then you must go and confess that sin to the other person because the person that will most benefit is yourself.

But suppose the other person has sinned against you. Should you wait until they come to you? Matthew 5:23-24 says that you should stop whatever you are doing and go to that person and be reconciled.

How do you do this? Do you go pointing a finger and making accusations knowing that you have got one over on him? Galatians 6:1 says, “Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted.” This verse in Galatians gives us three instructions when approaching that person.

- 1) We should be spiritual. That means that our motive must be right. We must not go in anger or judgment. We must not go with the attitude that we are going to prove that we are right and they are wrong. Instead, we must go with an attitude of restoration. That word “restore” is used elsewhere in the New Testament of mending fishing nets. The Greek word outside of the Bible is also used when a physician fixes broken bones. Both of these images carry the idea of purposeful and delicate work and that a hurried or insensitive fix may only make matters worse. So we are to go to that person with an attitude of mending or fixing what is wrong or broken in their lives by that sin. Some people say that the word “spiritual” is only referring to those who are mature Christians, but then this would restrict this verse only to those who have been Christians for a while. So if someone who is a young Christian sees someone sinning then they should not approach that person but should either ignore the situation or get someone else to do the deed. I do not agree with this. I believe that this verse is not referring so much to the overall character and experience of the person going as much as it is addressing their attitude.
- 2) There must be a spirit of gentleness. Go in humility. This precludes any pointing of the finger or harsh accusations. It means not bringing up any of this person’s past failures unless it is absolutely necessary. This prohibits belittling the person (“This proves that you’ll never amount to anything!”) or making sweeping statements (“I always knew that your heart was wrong.”). It means being willing to take the time to explain the sin and give a clear example rather than just hitting him with it like a hammer.
- 3) We must guard over our own thoughts and motives especially while discussing the sin with this person. They might not be very receptive to what we are saying and may be defensive or attacking. Even then we must be careful not to become frustrated or angry. Sin is always lurking at the door. Be slow to anger. Proverbs 12:16 warns, “A fool’s wrath is known at once.” Do not make everything into a major issue.

In any kind of situation like this what is important is not determining who has the greater percentage of sin or who has committed the worse sin, but to address any sin whether on my part or on his. The accusation of “Well, he sinned first” or “Her sin was much worse than mine” is not the issue. Even if I sinned 1% and he sinned 99%, I still need to confess my sin and then approach him regarding his sin.

- 5) Pray for that person and for the situation.

Job was taken to task by his three friends. He was falsely accused of many things and in his time of great pain he found himself defending himself rather than receiving comfort. Then in Job 42:7-8 God reproved these three men and told them to make amends for their false impression of God. But then verse

ten is curious. For all that God vindicated Job in the previous verses, it was only when Job prayed for his friends that God restored his fortunes.

To pray well for that other person is important. It demonstrates that our heart has forsaken any idea of revenge or vindication and is now more interested in seeing the person healed, if necessary, or mended. It means that we no longer want to triumph over the person as much as to see them become more like Jesus Christ. This attitude in ourselves honors and pleases God.

To put aside bad thoughts and attitudes towards that person is good, but that is not enough. God also wants us to wish well for that person. Then that is when God will truly bless us.

- 6) If the situation is not resolved on the spot then pray with that person for a humble resolution.

When it appears that you have both hit a roadblock then stop where you are at in the discussion. Everything does not need to be resolved or agreed upon at that time. Points of contention can be left to be mulled over by each of you and, hopefully, the Holy Spirit will be allowed to change the mind of whomever might be stubborn or wrong.

- 7) Don't quit on that person. God did not quit on you.

It says in Hebrews 12:14, "Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord." That word "pursue" is "used in classical Greek for an animal pursuing its prey, as a hound dog on the trail of a fox—pursuing all day!"<sup>11</sup>.

A similar verse is Romans 12:18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." In both of these verses is the similar idea of us making every possible effort to obtain peace even if that person does not, at first, seem willing to cooperate.

God plans, pursues, and removes every obstacle in His effort to be reconciled to us. 2 Samuel 14:14 tells us of God's planning, "For we shall surely die and are like water spilled on the ground which cannot be gathered up again. Yet God does not take away life, but plans ways so that the banished one may not be cast out from him." Ephesians 2:17 tells us of God's pursuing, "AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR." So if that person is important enough to God for Him to pursue peace then he or she is certainly important enough to you for you to pursue peace.

Then in Acts 16:31 in response to the question "What must I do to be saved" is "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved." This shows how easy it is to be saved; all that you have to do is believe. You do not have to go anywhere. You do not have to go on a quest to find God. He is right there waiting outside of the door. So do not make yourself difficult to find when that person wants to make peace with you. Do not force them to leave numerous messages on your answering machine. Be available when that person is ready to humble himself.

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<sup>11</sup> Ralph Earle, *Word Meanings in the New Testament*, op. cit., p 429.

Now, of course, there is a time when it is obvious that trying to reconcile with that person is like running your head into a brick wall and so it is time to stop. Even God does not pursue us forever. Sometimes it may be necessary to stop for a while and give the person a little breathing room and try slowly to work things out. However, there are other times when it is just best to stop all together and let God deal with him. But in either case you should be able to say that you had tried your best to work things out.

## Conclusion

It is crucial that we be reconciled to each other. All too often the church has more conflicts and people disliking each other than most workplaces and neighborhoods. This should not be. Jesus Christ made the ultimate sacrifice so that we might be reconciled to Him and then brought us into His family, the church. This is a family where we call each other brothers and sisters and as it says in Colossians 2:2 we should be “knit together in love.” Yet the reality all too often is that we bite each other and gossip about others and are glad when someone that we do not care for does poorly. Instead of welcoming others we form cliques. Instead of supporting and encouraging others we only look out for ourselves. Instead of creating a fortress of protection against the world we toss the wounded and different out over the wall.

We hold grudges and turn our face from other Christians because we do not realize how much this is hurting ourselves, how much it is hurting the church, and how much it is grieving God. Can we say with Paul “Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?” (2 Corinthians 11:29). Or do we say, “Whoever is weak do not let him slow me down. Whoever is in sin simply proves just how much better of a Christian I am than they are.”

As always, our most perfect example of how to resolve a conflict is God. From Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21 the Bible is all about God reconciling us to Himself. He is our model.

In the first half of Isaiah chapter one God tells the people how much they have sinned. Then in verse 18 He says, “‘Come now, and let us reason together,’ Says the LORD, ‘Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool.’” When we have sinned against God He tells us to 1) come together, 2) talk together, 3) reason together, and 4) when we do all of that we will be cleansed and our relationship will be restored. From verse four: “Even though you have acted corruptly, let’s talk.” From verse four again: “Even though you have despised Me, let’s talk.” From verse five: “Even though you have rebelled against Me, let’s talk.” All throughout God is saying, “Look, no matter how bad you are, no matter what you have thought about Me, and no matter how badly you have treated Me; let’s talk.”

- You may say, “But this person is a real jerk.” “Though your sins are as scarlet, come now, and let us reason together.”
- You may say, “But this person said some awful things to me.” “Though your sins are as scarlet, come now, and let us reason together.”

- You may say, “But he hurt me very deeply. You don’t know how awful it was.” “Though your sins are as scarlet, come now, and let us reason together.”

God is the God of new beginnings.

In Genesis 31 we read the story where Jacob had worked for 20 years for Laban and in exchange married his two daughters and was given much livestock. However, Laban had cheated him and in verse two we see that Laban was growing hostile towards Jacob. So Jacob was told by God to leave and go back to his land. So he left but without telling Laban. However, one of his wives, Rachael, stole Laban’s household idols. This was a significant act because Laban might have felt that his divine protection had been taken and also it was thought that whoever possessed the household idols had a strong claim to the right of the inheritance.<sup>12</sup> So when Laban found out that his idols were stolen and that Jacob had fled he pursued them and caught up with them a week later. Laban was probably predisposed to treating Jacob harshly so God had to warn Laban to deal rightly with Jacob (verse 24). So with the fear of God in his heart it is interesting to note how Laban approached Jacob in verses 26-30. He confronts Jacob head-on and presents his case. Laban tells Jacob what he had done wrong, why it was wrong, how he had been hurt, and then gave Jacob a chance to respond. Jacob’s response was typical for why many people do the things that they do—“I was afraid.” So many times people do what they do not because they are malicious or evil but because they are afraid. Once we can understand this we will not be as likely to quickly condemn and despise before talking to them.

Jacob then essentially answered that if Laban can prove his case then Jacob would ensure that all that was done wrong would be made right. Jacob did not just jump out and defend himself nor did he ignore Laban’s contentions and attack him in return. Jacob took what Laban said seriously and dealt with it. When Laban failed to prove his accusations Jacob then presented his case.

Ultimately, they both had to realize that each had done wrong and so they made an agreement that 1) God would be their witness and arbitrator and 2) that neither would harm the other. This second part applied today might mean that we will not gossip about or malign the other person, we will not bring up this incident again to attack the other person, or that we will ignore or treat the other person badly.

The final result was a sense of peace for both men. Jacob had a feast and Laban kissed his family. In the same way one of the final results of our resolution of conflicts should be a sense of peace and rejoicing. This is good for the relationship, it is good for the other person, and it is good for our own emotional and spiritual frame of mind.

There is one more example of the effects of conflict resolution that we should look at. Paul and Barnabas had spent a lot of time together evangelizing and ministering to the churches. They were in

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<sup>12</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis – An Introduction & Commentary*, Ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1967), p 165.

John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary—New Testament*(Colorado Springs, Victor Books, 1985), p 78.

Antioch when we read starting in Acts 15:36, “And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.’ And Barnabas was desirous of taking John, called Mark, along with them also. But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and departed, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.”

When Paul and his companions were in Perga Mark left them and returned to Jerusalem. Mark was Barnabas’ cousin and apparently had rejoined the group. Barnabas wanted to give Mark another chance whereas Paul thought that he had shown himself to be unfaithful. This was a case of whether to put individuals first or to put the project or mission first. Barnabas leaned towards the first whereas Paul chose the second. The result was a “sharp disagreement.” The Greek word for this comes from the idea of sharpening a blade.<sup>13</sup> It has the sense of irritation<sup>14</sup> and is a strong word. As a result of this quarrel over Mark, Paul and Barnabas split ways. Here were two close companions who broke up over a third person.

But Paul was not one to hold grudges. We do not see the actual reconciliation but we can see the results of it. In 2 Timothy 4:11 Paul says, “Only Luke is with me. Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service.” Paul who once had a big disagreement because he did not want Mark tagging along now desires his company. He saw Mark as vitality useful.

Then in 1 Peter 5:13 Paul refers to Mark as “my son, Mark.” This is a term of deep affection.

If Paul had been stubborn he would have lost Mark’s service and companionship forever. Instead, God was glorified and the Gospel was furthered. How much might any of us lose because we are stubborn and easily toss old friends aside?

God can heal pain. He can restore broken relationships. God is the God of new beginnings. He can replace sharp disagreements with deep affection. The question is never whether God will give us the strength or grace to do; it is whether we will be humble enough to take it.

<b>You are being kind if you:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Anticipate a friend’s need and can provide a timely fulfillment</li><li>• Are quick with a complimentary or encouraging word</li><li>• Approach the lonely</li><li>• Provide for the poor</li><li>• Can overlook a deformity or disfigurement and treat a person with the value that God sees in them</li><li>• Have compassion for animals</li><li>• Include the outcast, shunned, or ignored in your conversations and activities</li><li>• Know how to accept gifts gracefully in a way that makes the giver feel good</li></ul>



<sup>13</sup> A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament Concise Edition, Ed. James A. Swanson (Holman Bible Publishers, 2000), p. 307.

Ralp Earle, Word Meanings in the New Testament, op. cit., p. 111.

<sup>14</sup> Heinrich Seesemann, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Vol. 5, Ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), p 857.

- Make requests ("Can you please pass the salt") rather than demands ("Give me the salt")
- Can serve others without expecting or getting anything in return

### ***How to Heal from a Broken Relationship***

- You're in the midst of a great dating situation and you think that everything is going really well and that maybe "this is the one" when the other person tells you that he does not think that it is working out and that you should not see each other any more.

You are left sick with sorrow. You feel like a 20-foot boa constrictor snake is wrapped around your chest. Three seconds does not go by during the day when you are not thinking about the situation and every time that you do you feel weak.

- You are married and those little disagreements gradually turn into long, intense arguments. Criticism is frequent and personal and what was once the love of your life has become "sleeping with the enemy."

You are angry. You are angry with that person—"How could they treat me like that?" You are possibly angry with God—"Couldn't You have worked this out?" And you are angry with yourself—"How could I have been so stupid to marry a jerk like that?"

- You are good friends with someone for quite a while and you have both shared a lot of intimate feelings and thoughts. But now the other person seems to be drifting away. She is calling you up less and finding more excuses not to get together. Eventually you find out that she has made a new "best friend" whom she is spending all of this time with.

You are left feeling that you cannot trust anyone anymore. From now on you are going to make other people initiate the friendship because you want to guarantee that they are truly interested in you and not just returning attention that you are first showing to them.

Most, if not all of us, have gone through situations like these or, at least, something similar. And we have felt as though our emotions, our opinions, and our dignity were thrown to the floor and violently rubbed into the dirt by someone's shoe. Or that they have been tightly twisted like a wet rag until all of the moisture has been wrung out of them and now they are left dry and deformed. So what do we do? Where do we go from here?

Earlier in this book we saw how God created us to have relationships. We saw how every aspect of what we are all point to fulfilling this need and goal. So why was looking at that important? What does that have to do with healing a broken relationship in my own life? It is because we must understand that who



and what we are created as centers around that pivotal point of relationships. And so when a relationship fails it affects all of what we are. Our emotions may run out of control. Our thoughts may become obsessed. Our physical being may become weak. Our dignity either becomes tattered or must be vigorously defended. Our spiritual life may be severely challenged with doubts of God's love or doubts of God Himself. And how we deal with this may either strengthen us or ruin our lives for years.

But to some, asking how "we" may deal with this may beg the question. After all, God is loving and God is sovereign, so why should "we" have to get involved at all? Why does not God just handle it? Why does not God take away the pain and anguish? He knows how weak and confused we are right now. Why did God even allow this to happen in the first place?

The answer to these questions is no simple task and the true answers will vary for each individual person. We can get a general answer but to do that we have to go back to the first few chapters of Genesis. In there God created a perfect world where all was in harmony and there was no sin. God had a choice. The world could either stay that way forever or it could fall. This choice was not out of God's hands. God is not the author of sin but He did allow sin to enter the world and the result was The Fall of Adam and Eve. This occurred because God permitted two things: 1) that we might have free choice and 2) that there might be an opportunity for us to choose sin. He did the second by planting the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and allowing it to be accessible. The result was that we took the opportunity and sin entered the universe. The relationship with God was severed. We now, on our own, could never approach God again nor could we have even the faintest of relationships with Him. We were lost. We were corrupted. Even God Himself had no quick and simple solution. We seemed to be doomed. But that did not mean that God had no solution at all.

That solution was for God to incarnate as a man, live without sin among us, and then be crucified on a cross to pay for the sins of all of mankind. God knew before Creation that this would be the only solution to the problem of sin's separation of Himself and man and yet He still allowed the choice of sin. This decision meant the alienation of all mankind and the potential of guilt, loneliness, fear, pain, meaninglessness, chaos, and horror for all people who would ever live. It also guaranteed the greatest anguish possible for God Himself when He had to become the sins of all people and suffer the infinite wrath of a holy and just Father.

So, again, why is this important and what does this have to do with healing broken relationships? It is because the choice of sinning was better than the non-choice of forced perfection. It is because the possibility of redemption is greater than the state of a painless creation. It is because the triumph of good over evil is better than the absence of evil all together. So what does this mean to us? It means that God, in a wonderful wisdom that surpasses any of our comprehension, has deemed it better for us to experience sin, pain, and suffering followed by the triumph of grace than to lead a carefree, painless life without grace, without mercy, and without redemption. So in a way that we might never understand this side of Heaven, that torturous breakup that crushes us with self-doubt and sinks us into a quicksand of misery may be better for us than having no problem relationships at all. God is not in the business of making the Christian life

carefree; He is in the business of making the Christian more like Himself. He does not promise to remove the mountains as we skip through life on a cobbled path; instead He has promised to give us the strength to climb over those mountains as we encounter them throughout our lives.

That does not mean that God caused the breakup. It does not mean that He enjoys seeing you in anguish. And it certainly does not mean that you should go around destroying relationships just so that you can experience grace and redemption. But what it does mean is that this breakup can be used in your life to make you more like the person that God wants you to be.

We are going to look at some right attitudes that we need in order to be healed and some wrong attitudes that will keep the blood trickling from the wound. Finally we will see that we have hope. Though it may seem otherwise at the time God never abandoned us; He never left us twisting; our cries never echoed unheard in the darkness.

## Wanting to be healed

The key comes back to us. What do we really want? God will give us the strength to do what is right and He will heal us but He will not heal us against our will. Now that may sound strange. Why would anyone not want to be healed? Why would someone want to stay in a state of turmoil and agony? There can actually be a number of reasons.

*Victimization.* Sometimes a person enjoys playing the victim. Since they may feel that they never do anything spectacular enough to draw fame to themselves then maybe people will center on them because they have sank so low. People notice extremes. The average, mundane life does not distinguish itself from others. But a life either of prominence and glory or of pain and oppression does draw onlookers. Most people cannot achieve the first so only by the second can they occasionally stand out. It is an attitude of preferring to writhe in agony surrounded by a crowd than to melt away in obscurity.

*Needing to feel something.* Occasionally someone welcomes the negative emotions. Feeling bad is oftentimes better than feeling numb. Of course, they would prefer feeling well but that might take too much work. It is easier to sink than to climb. That leads to the next possible reason for not wanting to be healed.

*Unmotivated.* Some people do not want to make an effort to feel better. Sin is almost always easier than righteousness. If that were not true then we would certainly sin less. But to do what is right we have to battle against our three biggest adversaries: the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life (1 John 2:16). We must choose to do what is right. We will never drift into obedience. Hosea 6:3a says, “So let us know, let us press on to know the LORD.” Choosing to do what is right is like rowing a boat upstream, if we do not press forward then we will drift backwards.

There are a number of reasons as to why someone would not want to make an effort to be better. They might feel defeated and so do not believe that they will ever triumph in anything and so why bother? They might feel abandoned by God and by others and so feel too puny and alone to tackle such a large problem. But, of course, all of this is wrong. There are no defeated people in the Kingdom of God. 2 Corinthians

2:14 says, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place.” There are three things to notice in this verse. 1) The triumph comes from God. Of course we must participate and cooperate but we do not have to manufacture it on our own. 2) It is God who leads us. We do not have to first venture out into dark waters alone while God urges us from behind. 3) He *always* leads us. This is when we are doing well and when we are struggling tremendously. Our triumphs do not have to be rare and isolated; they can be continuous.

*Revenge.* Sometimes a person does not want to let the other person off of the hook that quickly or easily. She may want him to see how badly she has been hurt. Or she may want to exact some kind of revenge. Or she wants to shake her fist at God a few more times. By starting the process of healing she may realize that forgiveness and mercy may be part of that process and she does not really want to forgive right now since it will quench any desires of revenge.

*Depression.* Of course a person in this situation may simply be depressed. She may be morose and unable to do anything other than struggle through each of the day’s activities. Trying to do something new and different may be too much to handle.

Usually the first step to healing is an easy one. That is acknowledging that there is a problem. The pain, the heartbreak, and the confusion are usually too obvious to deny. But sometimes the second step can prove to be a difficult one and that is being willing to want to make an effort to be healed. You must be willing to realize that this healing may take a long time and it may require a lot of effort. You may not have been responsible for the breakup but you are responsible for how you response to it. It may require forgiving where forgiveness needs to be given and repenting where repentance needs to be done. Sometimes these last two may prove to be a formidable barrier. But, if the willingness to do what is right does not exist in the beginning of the process, it may become stronger as time goes on. This is not like a NASCAR race where everything must be in place and ready to go at the very beginning. God gives us the leeway to grow and change. Oftentimes it is not where we are at but where we are going that matters the most.

In John 5:6 Jesus addresses a sick man, “When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had already been a long time in that condition, He said to him, ‘Do you wish to get well?’” This may seem rather obvious—of course he wanted to get well. But that is the same question that Jesus asks us when we have been shattered by a broken relationship, “Do you wish to get well?”

## God’s healing

That God will give the grace needed to heal is not in dispute. We can easily see in Scripture many places where God has promised healing.

**Psalms 147:3**, “He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds.” The Hebrew word “binds” is the same word used to bind or wrap a turban around your head. In the same sense God meticulously wraps up our emotional wounds and protects them and heals them.

**Isaiah 57:15**, “For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, ‘I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.’” God is not confounded by the depth of our sorrow. He is not rendered ineffective because our pain is great. Our tragedies do not perplex Him. It is because God is great that we can be healed.

**Isaiah 61:1-4**, “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to prisoners; to proclaim the favorable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to grant those who mourn in Zion, giving them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. So they will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified. Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, they will raise up the former devastations, and they will repair the ruined cities, the desolations of many generations.” This verse on healing begins with the Trinity. It speaks of “The Spirit of the Lord GOD” who would be the Holy Spirit, “the LORD” who is the Father, and “me” who is Jesus Christ. We know the last one to be true because in Luke 4:18 Jesus reads this passage in reference to Himself. So we see that healing involves the entire Trinity; it commands the entire attention, grace, and power of all of God Himself.

Jesus came not to gather the strong, the influential, or the ambitious. He was anointed to come to the afflicted. The word “anointed” in the Hebrew is not the word normally used with the anointing of kings, priests, and prophets but is a word that means “to pour over; ...to overflow with... seems also to imply a penetrating power.”<sup>15</sup> When God heals He does not merely treat the symptoms but He overflows our wound with grace and He penetrates right to the deepest part of the hurt.

The “brokenhearted” has the idea of a ship in a storm that is being battered to pieces. God lovingly takes those shattered pieces, puts them back together, and wraps them until we are whole again.

A captive is someone who has been forcibly removed from the comfort of their surroundings and brought into a hostile environment. A broken relationship can be like that. We were in a comfortable situation when suddenly it has been destroyed and we are now being yanked every which way by our emotions. We now cannot sleep, we cannot eat, we feel sick, our mind is confused, and we are reeling. God can free us from the horror of that and return us to normalcy. We can be comfortable again even though that person is now gone. The doors of our depression or anger are open and we can be free to enjoy life.

God will comfort, sympathize, and console those who mourn. This word “mourn” “is used of the loud wailing customary in the East at the time of burial and for thirty days after, during which they abstained from the ordinary occupations and comforts of life.”<sup>16</sup> In death, when all seems ripped away and we feel that life will never be the same God is there.

The word “garland” (or beauty in some translations) and the word “ashes” in the Hebrew differ only by one letter. The concept that God may be conveying here by choosing these particular words is that the part

<sup>15</sup> William Wilson, *Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies* (Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers), p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> William Wilson, *Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies*, op. cit., p. 280.

of our life which may seem burnt and destroyed and flying away with even the slightest wind may be turned into something full of splendor and beauty without needing a great deal of change. Hope may not require years of counseling or a great cutting away of who we are. It may only need a small change of attitude or perspective or a fuller understanding of who God is. Healing does not have to be radical; sometimes even the subtlest change can make a world of difference.

God can give us gladness and joy instead of sorrow. He does not just give us praise but He covers us with praise instead of being weak and fainting. And He will strengthen us like oaks or terebinths with deep roots so that we will be better able to withstand and cope with any further trials.

Finally, where our lives were ruined and devastated, when we felt desolate, God will rebuild our lives and raise us up and we will be more splendid than before. And then God will be glorified because it will be clear that the work was accomplished by Him.

Of course we can look at scripture after scripture of how God can heal us when we are brokenhearted, but when we are in the midst of such a trial sometimes that healing looks very far away. These verses are nice but I am hurting, I am in pain, I am sick with sorrow. Are they nothing more than nice platitudes or can they really make a difference where I am at now? The answer is that God's promises are always backed by God's grace and power and with a resounding "yes" they can make a big difference in your life. We are going to look at how in the following sections.

What is crucial is not God's willingness to heal but our willingness to cooperate and allow that healing to occur. A physical trauma can wound us brutally and it may take a long time to even partially recover. But soon after the initial impact the body will start to heal itself and, unless there is an infection, it will generally continue to improve until as close to a full restoration is completed. A traumatic emotional event can also cut us deeply. But soon after the initial shock the mind and spirit will start to heal themselves in order to bring about as complete a healing as possible. But all too often we can use a psychological hammer to continue to beat ourselves well beyond the initial trauma. This will not only prevent us from beginning the process of healing but may, in fact, deepen the hurt even more.

Therefore, how we react to a broken relationship is crucial. We are first going to look at what a broken relationship can do to us and some of the improper ways that we can respond.

## What a broken relationship can do to us

The loss of a relationship can devastate us. Our emotions can make us feel as though someone is digging through our insides with a garden tool. What are some of the emotions or attitudes that we can have after a breakup?

*Rejection.* This is nearly universal. Even if we are the one who initiated the breakup we can still have a sense of rejection. We can easily question ourselves—"Is there something wrong with me?" A profound sense of rejection can sink us lower than we ever thought possible.

Someone who has a strong self-image will not necessary struggle quite as badly as someone who has experienced frequent rejection and has an unhealthy self-image. A common symptom of rejection may be anger or depression.

When we are suffering with rejection we should, as in all things, look first to God. 2 Timothy 2:13 says, “If we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself.” We must find comfort in knowing that God does not accept us because of what we do (“who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.”—2 Timothy 1:9) or because of how we look (“Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”—1 Samuel 16:7) or because of what we have (“And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’”—2 Corinthians 12:9) but because of His grace alone. Just as we cannot do anything to win God’s grace there is nothing that we can do to lose it also. Deuteronomy 31:6 reassures us, “Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the LORD your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you.”

We can read in the Scriptures how many of God’s people failed, and some astonishingly, and yet how God stayed faithful.

Once we are convinced of God’s faithfulness to us regardless of how other people treat us, this will help greatly in overcoming a deep sense of rejection.

Talking to close friends or spiritual leaders who know you can also benefit you greatly. Oftentimes your sense of rejection has developed because of an exaggerated evaluation of what really happened. Another person may be able to give you a proper perspective.

*Feeling unlovable.* We can start by feeling unlovable to that one person. Then it expands to feeling unlovable to all people. And finally we cannot believe that even God can love us. We feel that we are not good enough for anyone.

We can become obsessed with comparing ourselves to everyone else and consistently finding ourselves deficient. We are almost trying to feel inferior. One person, who was older and never married, would sit in meetings at work and count what percentage of people were married to those who were not. Since most older people either are or have been married this was only further proof to him that he was far below average in desirability.

Once again we need to look to God. God tells us in Jeremiah 31:3, “I have loved you with an everlasting love.” In Ephesians 2:4 we can read, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us.” And perhaps one of the greatest verses proving God’s love for us—Romans 5:8, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

Of course we may be convinced of God’s love for us but still be depressed thinking that nobody else could ever love us. Then we must realize that the deepest attractiveness that a person can have is a cheerful, loving, and godly spirit. This is what 1 Peter 3:3-4 is all about—“And let not your adornment be merely

external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God.” The most beautiful person will be the one who radiates the love of God. And since this is true it is also true that you can grow more attractive each and every day of your life no matter how old you become as you are changed more and more into the character of Jesus Christ.

*Loss of trust.* You have probably shared many intimate and personal feelings and stories with that other person. You may feel that he stole away from you valuable months, maybe even years, when you could have been with the one who was really meant for you. Now you have to start all over again. But at this point you are even wondering if it is worth it. You may think, “I’ll never trust anyone ever again.” And this loss of trust only deepens the more it happens. This first time that a relationship falls apart you may excuse it away by thinking that he was just a jerk. But after this has happened a number of times you can easily think that maybe everyone is like this. However, this is not true.

Yes, everyone will let you down at some point or another. Only God can claim that He will never disappoint us (Romans 10:11). This is because only God will love us with a pure and unconditional love. Only God knows every desire of our heart. And only God knows what is the best for us. But God does work through people and if we want to experience all of God’s blessings then we will have to have close, working relationships with other people. You will have to learn to expect that people will fail you at times just as you have disappointed other people at times also. But even still, many people have good hearts and only want to do the best for you.

You may have to start slowly but you can learn to trust people again. But you must be careful not to expect a perfect record from everyone at every time or else you will give up completely. Allow others to fail just as you expect others to let you fail.

*Loss of God’s leading and direction.* You may have believed that you knew God’s will for your life concerning this person. You may have felt that it just seemed “right.” Now you do not know what to think about God’s plans for your life. You may begin to doubt if you ever correctly recognized God’s will in anything.

Many of the Bible’s greatest heroes misunderstood God’s will. When Jesus was being betrayed by Judas, Peter attacked the crowd with his sword not recognizing Jesus’ many previous references to His necessary death. Abraham was told to leave his home in Ur of the Chaldeans and go to the land of Canaan. He did, but then he kept going and wound up in Egypt for a while.

If your confidence in knowing God’s leading in your life has been shaken then go back to the basics and study how God leads people. Maybe you have been over emphasizing signs. Maybe you were taking every little thing that went positively and used that as a sign from God that this was His will. What you may not have realized is that you were filtering and coloring those signs through your own wishes. I knew one woman who thought that she and this other guy were destined for each other because he said hello to her at a party. When she found out a few weeks later that he was engaged to someone else she was confused.

Maybe you were over emphasizing your emotions. Just because you felt good around him does not mean that it was God's will for marriage. A sense of "But we seemed made for each other" does not mean that it was a match made in Heaven.

Maybe one evening you blindly opened up your Bible, pointed your finger to a verse and then used it to somehow confirm that "this is the one." Believe me, God's will is usually not that easily determined.

There are many ways that you can interrupt or spin God's will to match what you want. However, this does not mean that you have completely lost all ability to hear God's voice. What it may simply mean is that you got overly caught up in just this one situation.

Did you want to regain your confidence in knowing God's will? Then spent a lot of time each day in prayer, in reading and studying God's word, in worship, and in meditating. Also, do not neglect going to church, from serving, and from fellowshiping with others. These are the things that will bring God close to your heart.

*Feeling of having been taken advantage of.* You gave your time, your emotions, your hopes, and possibly even your love to this person and now he has jettisoned you. And what do you have to show for it? Most of the time you feel that you are left empty handed and wondering why you are such a giving person. But in most relationships both sides have given to the other. In this breakup both sides have lost something; you are not the only one. But during and through the relationship both of you have gained something also. It is futile to try and determine who gave the most or who lost the most. The relationship is over. It is time to learn what you can from it and move on.

In some cases you may have given far more to the relationship. Maybe you were dumped for someone else and now he is enjoying someone else's company and you are alone. Even then, if you try and get your pound of flesh from him it will only result in your own destruction. Do what is right, obey God, and He will bless you. The issue is not what he is doing but what you are doing. In John 21 Peter became overly concerned about what another one of the disciples was doing. He asked, "Lord, and what about this man?" Jesus' rebuke in verse 21 was, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!" In the same way after a broken relationship we may ask, "Lord, look how much I gave and I wound up empty and hurt and he is doing well. What are you going to do about it?" I believe that Jesus' response would be the same, "If I allow him to be blessed, what is that to you? You follow Me!"

*Denial.* There are two major ways that you can be in denial. One is to deny that the break up ever occurred. You may insist in your mind that he really did not mean it; that he was crazed at the time and will shortly regain his senses. This is dangerous because it prevents you from dealing honestly with the situation and moving on. I knew one person who, after being told that there was no interest, still hung on for years thinking that God will miraculously change his heart. She believed that God told her (supposedly) that this was His choice for her. She reasoned, therefore, that God would do whatever was necessary to bring him around to his destiny. First of all, we must be careful when it comes to God speaking to us regarding our destiny with another person. Can we be absolutely positive that it was not God speaking to us but simply



our own wishes and desires? Secondly, even if this was God's choice the Bible nowhere states that God will force someone to become interested in another person.

If one person has ended a relationship then it is reasonable to wait for a short time to see if maybe he did make a mistake. Maybe he had some undue pressure on him from his job or school and felt a bit overwhelmed at the time and so made a foolish and rash decision. Or maybe he got a sudden case of cold feet but then quickly overcame it. Or maybe someone gave him some false information about you that he acted too quickly on but then discovered that it was wrong information. There can be a number of reasons as to why someone may break up with you but then realize his folly and want to restore the relationship. But this waiting period should be short. How long that waiting period should last may depend on how long you were together and how prone he is to this sort of behavior. But it should not go on for months. At some point you need to realize that it is indeed over and you need to heal.

The second major point of denial is to deny the pain. As a Christian, especially, you may think that it is more spiritual to simply "Praise God" for His perfect will in delivering you out of a potentially bad situation and cheerfully move on. There is nothing unspiritual about feeling hurt and pain. Anguish is not necessarily wrong. Sorrow is not necessarily a punishment from God. The first step to healing is to be able to say "I hurt."

*Desperation.* We have just been given the boot and now our self-esteem is in the dumps. A sense of desperation may be especially acute if the other person has already started dating or is marrying someone else. We may then think that the quickest way to recovery is to get someone else to fill that spot. This is rarely a good idea. We first need to heal and put away any wrong attitudes from that broken relationship. If you think that your "ex" was poison and you have not forgiven him then you will bring that poison into your next relationship.

Desperation will also lead to making foolish mistakes. You want or "need" someone quickly and so you will lower your standards just to broaden the selection process. And so you will settle for a non-Christian ("he does go to church!"), or you propose to someone that you hardly know, or you become a "wolf" and hit on practically any woman that you meet. You have become less interested in meeting the right person as in just meeting someone at all no matter what the cost.

It is important here to step back and take a deep breath. Get yourself together first and then you will be ready to make wise decisions. If you are still reeling from that previous relationship then a new one will most likely only add to the chaos. You are not yet who you really are; you are still someone who is in pain and might be confused as to how to handle the next relationship. It is better to wait and to be able to present the best person that you can be to someone new.

For any of these above attitudes, if you are struggling deeply with them and they are profoundly affecting your life then you should seek Christian counseling. This is especially true if you have been wrestling with them for a long time.

## Improper ways to respond to a broken relationship

### Anger and Frustration

Why might you feel anger over a broken relationship? It might be because you feel that you have just been treated wrongly and that you deserve to be treated better than that. It might be because you feel that you have invested a lot of time and emotion into that relationship and now it appears that it was all a waste of time. It might be because you have had your hopes and dreams shattered into millions of shards of glass. And sometimes it might be because it helps you to avoid self-examination.

So now you are angry. But anger must have an outlet and probably that other person is out of your life or is not around enough to absorb all of your scorching rays. So your anger starts hitting other members of your family or friends or people at church or at work.

How might this anger be manifested?

- You do not take anything that is said or done in a good way; everything is quickly analyzed to be an attack on you. An innocent remark that a few months ago would have been overlooked now conjures up the thought, “What is that supposed to mean?”
- You take less time to consider a response to someone; you’re more likely to snap back. This may manifest itself in explosive outbursts.
- Unrealistic expectations may be applied to people as to how they should act around you or what they should say. There is a sense of demand or obligation. And if these expectations are not met then you become highly critical of that person, which may manifest itself through facial expressions or gestures or unseemly words.
- You may find yourself being more aggressive and confrontational.
- And you may be more frustrated. Catching a red light can always be annoying; now it is a catastrophe possibly invoking many curses. The slightest annoyance produces a gnashing of teeth or a clenching of the jaw. And if anything does not go perfectly well then its proof that the whole world is against you.

Something bad happened to you (as you see it) and now you are taking it out on everyone else. That one relationship has adversely affected all of your other relationships.

There is, of course, a righteous anger that is aimed at sin. This anger is generally short-lived. The anger that we are dealing with here exists more because someone has hurt us rather than because some terrible sin has occurred. In their hurting us they may have sinned but this is not really why we are angry and we need to be careful not to deceive ourselves by justifying our anger because there might have been some sin involved. The truth is that we are mad because a key relationship has been severed.

The Bible clearly speaks about this wrong kind of anger. Notice what it says the solution is.

- Psalm 37:8, “Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; Do not fret, it leads only to evildoing.”

- Ecclesiastes 7:9, “Do not be eager in your heart to be angry, for anger resides in the bosom of fools.”
- Colossians 3:8, “But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth.”

The Biblical injunction is clear. Simply stop being angry. Learn to hold your tongue. And when your thoughts are becoming critical towards another person learn to ask yourself, “What am I doing? I’ve got to stop this.”

The anger that we are talking about is one that was created by a broken relationship and is not one that may have been built up by years of ongoing trauma or is caused by alcohol or drugs.

Notice how anger is equated to a fire in the Bible. In Proverbs 15:18 anger is synonymous with being “hot-tempered.” In Proverbs 29:8 it is similar to setting a city aflame. Anger may start off smoldering like coals but if left unchecked it will destroy a person like a fire.

## **Applying inappropriate blame**

There are two ways that we can inappropriately apply blame.

### **Blaming the other person completely**

One is vilify the other person by placing all of the blame for the broken relationship on them. In your mind, everything that went wrong was because they blew it.

- He was the one who was critical.
- She was the one who was nasty.
- He was the one who was unwilling to resolve the problems.

It was not your fault.

- You were the one who was insensitively thrown aside.
- You were the one who only did what was right but was taken advantage of.
- You tried everything that you could to salvage the relationship. You were simply the victim.

### **Why do we blame the other person?**

One reason is because, in our insecurities and arrogance, we do not want to admit that the mistake was ours; that we caused a big part of the problem. We all want to be accepted and loved. We all want to be well thought of. But how can that happen if we are full of faults?

Another reason might be a resistance to accepting responsibility. To say, “Yes, I was wrong at this part” means the need to change there and possibly to ask for forgiveness. The first may be difficult because when someone is brokenhearted the last thing that they want to do is think about changing some aspect of their lives. All that they might be concerned about right now is survival. But to see wrong in something that you have done does not mean that you must immediately sit down and draw up a project and a schedule for how to implement this change. God understands that you first may need to heal.

As for asking for forgiveness; that is never easy and can be quite grating especially if the other person was the aggressor and initiator of the split. But we must seek forgiveness not so much for the sake of the other person but for our own selves.

The American Cancer Society that says that the five deadliest words in the English language are “Maybe it will go away.” This is because if you have a terrible disease and are complacent about it then it will most likely grow and become worse. Then you, and everyone around you, will suffer even more.

Well, the five most deadly words in Christianity might be, “It is not my fault.” Why? If you are not a Christian then this will prevent you from coming to God. Salvation requires an admittance of sin. If you think that you have no sin then you will not think that you need a Savior. If you are a Christian, then this will hinder your fellowship with God.

You may also think that since you feel badly that someone must be to blame and since it should not be you then it must be the other person. But sometimes there really is not anyone to blame. Sometimes the best course to take in breaking up a relationship will require unavoidable hurt and will not be the fault of either party. Just because your heart has been broken does not mean that the other person sinned against you.

Sometimes it is true that one person is more to blame than the other. One person may have had a hidden problem with anger or with alcohol or gambling. That situation will require forgiveness and healing. But most of the time it is closer to something like 60/40. Proverbs 18:17 says, “The first to plead his case seems right, until another comes and examines him.” That applies when you are listening to others and when you are listening to yourself.

If you think that broken relationships are always the other person’s fault then you will 1) become a mistrusting and critical person. That is because you will sharpen your eye to watch for the bad in others. And 2) you will rarely change for the better because you will rarely see the wrong in your own life.

Perhaps the most obvious Biblical case of inappropriately applying blame is seen in Genesis 3 after Adam and Eve committed the first sin by taking the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In Genesis 3:12 we read, “And the man said, ‘The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate.’” The first person that Adam blamed was Eve. The first words out of his mouth were “The woman.” Then the second person that Adam blamed was God. He said, “The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me” implying that God should have known better. There was a third person present but Adam does not even mention him. That is because it was himself.

So when relationships break up often, but not always, the order of blame is 1) the other person, 2) God, and finally 3) ourselves.

Then in verse 13 we read, “Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this you have done?’ And the woman said, ‘The serpent deceived me, and I ate.’” So Eve blamed the only other creature left; the serpent.

Consequently, God set the record straight by acknowledging that the man, the woman and also the serpent were to blame.

Blaming yourself completely

The second way to inappropriately apply blame is to blame yourself for everything. This attitude can be just as deadly as placing all of the blame on the other person. Some people rather than lashing out at everyone else will instead beat and condemn themselves. This can produce or amplify a feeling of self-loathing. It is often accompanied with the thought of, “I can’t do anything right.”

This improper self-guilt will only deter the healing process because you will focus all of your attention on what a louse you are instead of seeking the grace and forgiveness of God.

It also makes change more difficult because instead of only one or two areas of fault that need to be changed there is the person’s entire character. This would be such a daunting task that a feeling of defeat would be more prevalent than a determination to initiate a process to change.

Again, it would be highly unlikely for one person to be wholly to blame. A much more successful course of action would be to truthfully determine what it is that you did wrong and then to set a course of action to learn from it and to change. If you are having difficulty determining this then have a friend or counselor who is familiar with the situation help you to correctly pinpoint what, if any, you did wrong.

God may have broken up that relationship because He knew to what disaster it was headed towards. But maybe God did not have anything to do with the breakup. God is not to blame for everything. Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” Notice that the verse does not stop after “And we know that God causes all things.” If tent caterpillars eat the leaves off of a tree we do not say, “God sent those caterpillars to kill that tree.” Instead we say that caterpillars ate the leaves. Many things happen because God has set in motion a universe governed by natural and supernatural laws. Unfortunately, sin has perverted many of the effects of those laws and so bad can occur with the good.

It will only serve you best to think rightly about what happened that caused the breakup.

- If you wrongly blame the other person then that will only lead to anger and bitterness.
- If you wrongly blame God then you know little of His love and concern.
- If you wrongly blame yourself then you will feel helpless because you cannot change that which does not exist.
  
- But if you rightly blame the other person then you can forgive.
- If you rightly blame God then you can rest in His wisdom for the situation.
- And if you rightly blame yourself then you can change that which exists and become more like Christ.

**You need work on being a better friend if you:**

- Find most if not all of your friendships ending quickly.
- Think that other people are privileged to have you as their friend.
- Choose your friends solely on what you can get with no consideration for what you can give.

- Gossip about one of your friends to another one of your friends.
- Think of all of the negative characteristics and actions of your friends when you are away from them.
- Are bored and distracted whenever you are around your friends.
- Always think of excuses for not being able to help out a friend.
- Share the secrets of a friend to others.
- Expect your friends to always do what you want to do or you get mad.
- Insult, belittle, or verbally or physically abuse or annoy those whom you are with.
- Bother with your friends only when it is convenient for you.
- Feel that everyone else should pay your way.

## **Applying sin where no sin is involved**

This is slightly similar to the previous point.

Sometimes in order to hold a grudge you have to believe that the other person did something wrong otherwise you might seem petty and stupid even to yourself. So you try to force sin into the other person's actions and motives when, in fact, there was no real sin involved. All of this just makes you seem more the victim and they to be more the villain.

If you are prone to doing this then heed seriously Isaiah 5:20, "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; Who substitute bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!" God does not take lightly those who fabricate sin in other people's lives.

## **Revenge or trying to hurt the person**

Why would you want to do this? One reason might be because they hurt you and so you want them to feel the same pain.

There are many things that you can do to try and hurt the other person. We will take a quick look at three of these ways but there are many others. However, keep in mind that these are not listed here to give you ideas to try out.

*Spreading vicious rumors.* You might go to the pastor or staff at church and tell them bad things about the person. These will usually be something that is a character flaw but which you have exaggerated to seem more insidious than it really is. The question is, if these things were so bad then why did not you go to the staff with them when the relationship was going well? The obvious reason is because now you are just being malicious and hurtful.

Or you might tell too many people about what he did to you and how insensitive he was and so on and so forth. You are hoping that other people will take your side and turn against him. In your mind, if he so callously pushed you aside then he deserves to lose all of his friends. Then he will see how he likes it.

Exodus 23:1 says, "You shall not bear a false report; do not join your hand with a wicked man to be a malicious witness." Notice that this verse speaks not only about not spreading a false report but not even listening to one. Also, even a report that is partially true but which has been exaggerated is still a false report.

*Destroying his belongings or sabotage.* You may still have some of his belongings. The right thing to do is to return them possibly using a third party if necessary. The wrong thing to do would be to destroy some of those belongings and dump them on his front porch or to throw them away.

You may also want to damage his car or his house or something else that he values. This is wrong. Even if he was completely to blame for the breakup and was horrifically insensitive in how he did it, it is still incumbent upon you to be gracious and do what is right. Romans 12:21 says, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” That evil that you need to overcome is not only the evil that he might have done but also the evil in your own heart and mind that you want to do.

*Wishing him to suffer harm.* When you hear that something bad happens to him then you are glad and feel that it is God rightly punishing him for how he treated you. But if something good happens to him then it only increases your bitterness or proves to you even more so that life is unfair. This vengeance is not one of action but of attitude. However, that attitude can destroy you. It forces you to obsessively watch the other person’s every move and then to overanalyze the results. This person should not be your enemy but either way Proverbs 24:17 applies, “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles.”

*Violence.* You may become so angry that you feel that the only justice to the situation is violence. This violence might be physical, verbal, or emotional. Whatever the case, this is always a terrible thing to do. If you feel that you must attack the other person in any way then you must see a counselor as soon as possible. If you proceed with the violence then you will find yourself face-to-face with the wrath of God and possibly even the police.

*Stalking.* This may involve actually following that person around. Or it may be calling up many times using different phones and always hanging up when he answers. Or calling at all hours of the night. Or leaving threatening, anonymous notes all over. There are many ways that you can stalk a person. They are all wrong. If you have these urges then you need to tell someone who will hold you accountable and you need to seek counseling.

## **Unwarranted Hope**

This one can be the most tricky because people do break up and then get back together again and then everything works out great. But there are also times when one hangs on to hope that does not exist and spends months, if not years, wishing for a reunion that will never come. In the meantime other opportunities are lost and much despair and heartache is maintained rather than released. Proverbs 13:12a describes this condition with the usual Biblical vigor, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick”

How do you know when to let go of hope? Unfortunately that will vary greatly depending on the circumstances and the people involved and so no one can give a definite checklist. However there are some general principles that we can consider.

- One principle that might help is to seek the advice of others to see what they think or from someone who knows the other person. Of course people can easily misread a situation or another person's heart and motives and so you must always be careful.
- Consider that even if you did get back together would the relationship be so damaged that it would take a lot of mending to even bring it back to the way that it was before and is it worth that much effort?
- Are you holding on because you think that the two of you are perfect for each other or because you do not think that anyone else would ever want you? If the latter then that is a wrong reason.
- Determine if your hope is even reasonable. If she married someone else or moved away and is not maintaining contact then I would strongly suggest moving on.
- If moving on to other opportunities does not destroy the potential of the two of you getting back together then why not see how you match up with others? Locking your eyes on only one person may mean not seeing other opportunities that may be even better. Just because you have always fished at one pond, by trying out a different lake does not mean that you cannot come back to the original pond.

But realize that even if you do move on that does not mean that you are necessarily putting to death any chance of getting back together again. What it does mean is that you are opening up yourself to other relationships including that one.

## **Ignoring the person**

This is very common and is often invoked because of one of four possible motives.

- 1) One is that you do not want to deal with the person because often that is too painful. This can certainly be legitimate to a degree. Talking to that person or even seeing that person can bring back yearnings that stab at your heart.
- 2) The second is that you want the other person to know how much you are hurt. You want them to see how much their decision affected you and how miserable you are now because of it.
- 3) The third is because you want to hurt the other person in return by treating him like a dog. You feel that he kicked you out of the way and now you want to return the sentiment, so to speak.
- 4) The fourth is that you want to show him that you do not need him after all and that you can easily eliminate him from your life.

Though the first reason does have some merit since there is nothing saintly in self-torture, even here you should be careful in going too far. Though you do not have to hold conversations with him there is no need to be unfriendly.

But for the last three reasons I would say that these are probably sin and should not even be entertained for a moment.



If your hope is to win that person back then acting like a jerk certainly will not accomplish that and if you have truly moved on then there is no reason to demonstrate your confidence.

## **Playing the extreme victim**

You had a relationship that you thought was going somewhere but now it is over and you feel ripped up. And now you are going to make sure that everyone knows just how badly you feel and how rotten he is for making you feel that way. So you tell your story and you get a few sympathetic ears, but the response is not as extreme as you had hoped.

- No one fell on your shoulders and wept bitterly for your anguish.
- No one spit venom every time his name was mentioned and then viciously ground it into the floor shrieking invectives.
- No one sat on the edge of their chairs and after every sentence threw their hands up into the air and screamed “I can’t believe this! Go on!”

So you had to juice it up a bit. You became more and more the innocent victim who was left practically for dead while he sneered and cackled and seemed to almost revel in your pain. But you must not play with the facts simply to suit your own purpose. You need to realize that it could be possible that you simply overly analyzed or misread some circumstances.

- That he went out with you more than once did not mean that he led you on.
- That he sent you some cutesy notes was not necessarily his way of telling you that he was head-over-heels in love with you.
- That he held your hand or maybe even kissed you was not a promise of eternal fidelity.

If you must exaggerate the situation then that should show you how much you are making a molehill into a mountain. This is not to be glib about your emotions because emotions are always valid. But what you are probably doing is enflaming those emotions by these acts of exaggeration. If you deal with reality then you, by the grace of God, will find a solution to it. But if you deal with exaggerations and fantasies then it is no surprise that you are not getting over this any sooner because God will not necessarily give you the grace to heal yourself from your own self inflicted wounds.

## **Hardening your heart**

C.S. Lewis in his book “The Four Loves” said this:

Even if it were granted that insurances against heartbreak were our highest wisdom, does God Himself offer them? Apparently not. Christ comes at last to say “Why hast thou forsaken me?”

There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no

one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.<sup>17</sup>

You may wish to guard your heart against hurt but in doing so you will also block it from joy. It is far better to have your heart broken a thousand times from love than to callous it once, forever. The problem with trying to guard your heart from feeling hurt is that you will keep it from feeling at all.

Mark 5:25-26 says, “And a woman who had had a hemorrhage for twelve years, and had endured much at the hands of many physicians, and had spent all that she had and was not helped at all, but rather had grown worse.” Here was a woman who had a terrible condition. She tried many times for a solution but instead had “endured much.” Those two words have the meaning in the Greek of suffering pain. The treatment for an enduring hemorrhage as described in the Talmud was quite painful. So she had pain not only from the condition but from its treatment also. Yet, she persisted. It also says that she had spent all that she had. This condition cost her everything and so she had no more money to try anything else. Seemingly, she was defeated and without hope for a cure.

But then we read verses 27-29, “after hearing about Jesus, came up in the crowd behind Him, and touched His cloak. For she thought, ‘If I just touch His garments, I shall get well.’ And immediately the flow of her blood was dried up; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction.” In God she found a cure.

This story is not about relationships but the principles can be applied. A person may be unmarried and desperately wanting a family. She may try everything and only comes away with hurt and anguish every time. She may finally come to the end of her rope where all of her emotions are spent and she loses all hope. But even then, God can come through. God does not need robust emotions to work. He does not need our money to accomplish His purposes. He is not discouraged by our failures for a cure. He can accomplish great things even when we have nothing left. But what He does desire is for us to try. That woman would never have been cured if she had given up and simply watched Jesus walk by.

What this story is not saying is that we must come to the end of our rope before God will step in. It is not saying that we should disregard physicians for health problems nor should we ignore counselors for emotional problems. Nor is it saying that, ultimately, God will always come through and give us exactly what we want.

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<sup>17</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*. The Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis (New York, Inspirational Press, 1994), pp. 278-279.

## **Purity**

This is a story of endurance and hope. It is a story that tells us not to give up because we eventually might be blessed with what we desire.

Many times I have heard people say, "Once you stop trying then God will give you a spouse." I believe that this is not Biblical. God does not reward sloth nor does He reward a lack of effort.

Let us take a look at Exodus 14:10-17.

10 And as Pharaoh drew near, the sons of Israel looked, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they became very frightened; so the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD.

11 Then they said to Moses, "Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you dealt with us in this way, bringing us out of Egypt?

12 "Is this not the word that we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

Here was the situation where God had miraculously delivered Israel from the oppressive hand of the Egyptians and brought them out of there. But then Pharaoh got his chariots together and pursued them to the edge of the Red Sea. The people were frightened so what did they do? Did they quote promises of God's protection and love? Did they pray? Did they ask Moses for counsel? No, they accused God of playing games with them. Suddenly God was the cause of all of their problems and their conclusion was that their lives would have been better if God was not in the picture.

Have you ever been like that? Did you ever think with disgust, "Why is God doing this to me?" Then you have been like that. After feeling particularly spiritual and then having things go wrong did you ever say, "I've tried to be really good and I've done everything that I think that I should and this is the reward that I get?" Then you have been like that.

What was Moses' response to this? It is important that we see what happens here.

13 But Moses said to the people, "Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the LORD which He will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will never see them again forever.

14 "The LORD will fight for you while you keep silent."

Moses told the people to step back and let God take over the situation. It sounds like our "Let go and let God." This is how we all want it to happen. We just want to be able to step aside and let God solve the problem completely. Is not this our usual expectation of God when we are in a crisis or a difficult time? "OK God, I'm stuck here. Now it's your turn. You saw that I've done my best and it didn't solve the problem so now you're going to have to fix it. I'll just stay out of your way."

But read verse 15 and look at God's response to this.

15 Then the LORD said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the sons of Israel to go forward.”

God is saying here, “Don’t think that it’s going to be as easy as you stepping aside and expecting Me to do all of the work. You’ve got a part to play here also. I do not want you to step aside; I want you to go forward.”

What was forward in this case? It was the Red Sea. God does not want us to “Let go and let God.” God wants us to “Move forward and let God.” All too often nothing is improving because we have only done one or two things, if even that, to solve the situation and when that does not solve everything then we want to throw it all into God’s hands and if God does not come through then it is His fault.

16 “And as for you, lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, and the sons of Israel shall go through the midst of the sea on dry land.

17 “And as for Me, behold, I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen.”

Do you notice what is going on here? God is assigning everyone a role. The Israelites had to move forward. Moses had to lift up his staff. And God had to work on the hearts of the Egyptians. God will be patient and God will be merciful but God will not honor quitting or laziness. Sometimes when we are blaming God it is because we have not done what we are supposed to and are expecting God to do practically everything.

- “God, I’ve lost my job and I’ve been unemployed for quite a while. Have you lost Your touch?”
- “God, my health hasn’t been the greatest lately and I’m not getting any better. Don’t You care?”
- “God, this relationship fell apart and I’m suffering. Why aren’t You making me feel better?”

If we know God we will know what He promises and what He does not. We will know what God expects us to do and what He will take care of Himself. The more that we know God the more we will be convinced that God has good plans for us. Our response then will be to trust Him even more.

## **Bitterness**

Bitterness is often the culmination of many of these previous attitudes. It is broader and more encompassing than any one of the above conditions. It is also deeper and more destructive. Your anger has become quicker. Your blame is more absolute. It can lead to many additional wrong attitudes such as:

- You are never wrong or sinful. You will always have an excuse for your behavior. If someone says that you are angry you will claim that you are just tired. If someone points specific things that are wrong you will claim that they just do not understand what you are going through. And if

someone does actually catch you in the wrong and you are without excuse then you brush it aside claiming that you have too much to think about right now.

- You can develop paranoia. You think that everyone is just looking to stick it to you and that includes God. Every little thing in life that does not work out perfectly well is simply another example of how God wants to oppress you; even if those things are common, everyday occurrences that happened to you frequently in the past.
- You become overly critical. The pastor now seems to be full of himself. Or church is now doing everything wrong. The worship songs are too slow or too fast or too predictable. Complaining about other people has become your favorite pastime. Your job is a mess, your family is annoying, and on and on. And the deeper that the bitterness becomes the more biting our criticisms will be.
- You begin losing friends and family. Either they start staying away from you or you refuse to deal with them anymore. The latter could be spurred by something simple such as they said or did something that was not the utmost to your liking and so that somehow proved that they do not really care about you anymore. What you are doing is making everything that people say or do to be a test of their loyalty and utmost sensitivity to your situation. And if they fail, even if what they did was perfectly reasonable, then away with them. To you, they are no longer caring and worthy.

Hebrews 12:15 says, “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.” This verse harks back to Deuteronomy 29:18. What flows from the root flows into the entire plant. So if the root is spewing poison then the entire plant from its fruit to its leaves will be poisonous. Many sins can be shallow, but bitterness always runs deep. Bitterness will always affect everything that we do.

There is only one power that can wash deep enough to get even to the roots and that is grace. Light can shine on the surface of the plant but it cannot get to the roots. Grace is similar to water. It can not only wash the surface but it can also run deep into the soil to the roots. But as long as water hits something that does not have a hollow in it the water will keep going. Water will never gather in an object that is already full or already full of itself. Grace is the same way. Psalm 81:10 says, “Open your mouth wide and I will fill it.” Grace will never force its way in. We must open ourselves up to it and receive it. God does not want our lives to be empty but He does want us to get rid of those things that fill up the hollows that grace should fill. Those things may be sins such as lust or jealousy or any of the deeds of the flesh as described in Galatians 5:19-21. Or they may be things that may not necessarily be bad in themselves but which done to excess can deplete our time and our focus. They might be excessive television watching, an obsession with sports, or giving your life to your job.

To overcome bitterness we first need to recognize it and realize how much harm it is doing to us and to those around us. Then we need to pray to God for the grace and power to repent and do what is right. In

some cases that may require some apologies or restoration to others. It may be a hard process but God's grace is sufficient.

## **Addiction**

When we have lost a key relationship usually we have a huge hole in our lives. This emptiness will probably encompass areas such as our social life, our emotions, our psychological well being, our thoughts, our plans, and our spiritual life. Because of the way that we were created we find it difficult to exist with such large gaps. Matthew 12:43-45 is interesting. It reads, "Now when the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places, seeking rest, and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came'; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order. Then it goes, and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. That is the way it will also be with this evil generation." This passage is dealing with removing an unclean spirit or a sinful habit from our lives and not replacing it with something positive. But the main principle that Jesus was teaching here also applies to relationships. Notice the key word in verse 44—"unoccupied." When we expel or lose something important in our lives there is a gap and that gap will be filled with something. If we are not careful then something worse will fill in as in the example that Jesus taught. And this is true for relationships.

Sometimes when we lose someone special we are unable to cope properly with the loss and we fill that hole with something wrong. This may be alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, pornography, sexual promiscuity, or perhaps something like frequently going to bars, binge or constant eating, extravagant shopping, or watching mind-numbing television. These activities may help us to forget our pain for a time but ultimately they will strangle our lives like ever tightening cords. And the longer we maintain this behavior the harder it will be to break.

If you are already caught in the vise of one of these additions then you need to become involved in Christian counseling and in a support group. Gaining control over any of these sins is beyond the scope of this book. However, it is necessary for you to realize ahead of time that this is one of the potential pitfalls of a broken relationship and so to recognize it before you fall into it. If you know that you are prone to any of these then try and do your best to remove the temptation. If you are tempted to drinking then remove all alcohol. If you are tempted by pornography on the Internet then give your keyboard to someone to keep for a while. Learn to take walks or call up friends until the temptation passes.

God wants to fill that hole with something wonderful that you probably have never had before; do not obstruct His goodness with the trash of the world.

## **Replaying the situation**

If you are anything like me then when something like this happens you will replay every event, every word, and every possible course of action until you are almost crazy. Unfortunately, as time goes on, many of these memories will distort more and more to our favor whether that is to make him look more like a

louse or you to be more the victim. What was once innocent, playful talk is now seen as mixed signals. The time when he was a few minutes late now appears to be an indication of severe disrespect.

There is a benefit to pondering what happened in order to see possible warning signs, consider words or actions from you that were wrong, or better ways to have cushioned the ending. It is good to evaluate the situation. But this exercise is for us to learn and grow rather than to attribute greater blame.

You can easily find yourself picking at every little thing that he said. All of a sudden you are discovering lies upon lies on his part. Maybe this is true in which case you should now be more sensitive to what is being said in the next situation rather than being blinded by charm. But if it is not true and you are simply trying to valid what a dirtball he is then you need to stop.

You may have a thought such as, “He started holding my hand on the second date. Obviously, he was never interested and he was only leading me on.” Maybe you should not put a negative and horrific spin on everything that he said and did and consider what may even be the more obvious truth. In this case maybe he was sincerely interested by the second date but as time progressed he felt more uncomfortable with how he viewed the relationship and so felt the need to break it off. So his holding your hand on the second date was not some malicious setup but rather an overly eager show of sincere interest.

Replaying the situation over and over again will only lead to either deeper anger or an extended pity-party. You can try and destroy him in your mind but what you will ultimately do is only destroy yourself.

Philippians 3:13 says, “Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead.” We will never become better while we are stuck in the past. We will never grow and become more like Christ if we are obsessed with what is over and done with rather than what lies ahead. We will never heal while we pick at the scab.

A similar problem is trying to determine who hurts the most. This is futile. It serves no purpose. Even if you are able to determine that you are suffering worse than he is then this will probably only further deepen your anger and bitterness. But if you somehow conclude that he is taking it worse than you are then what useful purpose is that? More than likely you will think, “Good, he deserves to suffer.” Besides, the truth is that you cannot get into someone else’s head. There can be ten different and valid reasons for why something was said so how can you determine which one was the correct one anyway? Besides, more than likely you will choose the one that best suits what you want to think anyway. Expending thought and energy on this will only delay your healing.

## **Conclusion**

So here we looked at some possible improper responses to a broken relationship. These are things that can easily send our spiritual, emotional, and psychological lives into a tailspin. These responses differ in many ways but in them all we can see one common thread and that is that God is no longer being sought and trusted and that the person’s emotions are allowed to be the master of their lives. If we let them, our emotions can rise and fall with the fury of a storm on the sea while we are just a small ship being yanked to

and fro with no control going wherever we are taken to. Or they can be like water in a basin that can be used and controlled by us.

But we must realize that if we do respond in any of these wrong ways it is not because we were forced to. Sin is never thrust upon us as an irresistible force. We are never allowed to say, “Of course I was bitter, wouldn’t you be?” These attitudes need to be quickly recognized and quickly dealt with. Any one of them are destructive and as long as we maintain any of them the healing from that broken relationship will only be delayed.

### **What are some of the proper ways that we can react to a broken relationship?**

Just as improper behavior and attitudes will delay healing so right behavior and attitudes will quicken healing. Listed below are some of the proper responses that will open us up to God’s grace and healing.

### **Do not isolate yourself from God or from others for too long of a period**

This is perhaps the key point. As we have previously discussed, we were created for relationships and when one relationship has hurt you badly you do not want it to happen again. So you have a tendency to withdraw from other relationships so as not to be hurt by them also. But ultimately, this is the worst thing that you can do.

Because John the Baptist and Jesus were close relatives they grew up together and were probably best friends. Herod put John into prison because he did not like John’s accusations of Herod’s adultery. Then on Herod’s birthday (the only birthday party mentioned in the Bible) John was beheaded. We can see this event in Matthew 14:10-14, “And he [Herod] sent and had John beheaded in the prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl; and she brought it to her mother. And his disciples came and took away the body and buried it; and they went and reported to Jesus. Now when Jesus heard it, He withdrew from there in a boat, to a lonely place by Himself; and when the multitudes heard of this, they followed Him on foot from the cities. And when He went ashore, He saw a great multitude, and felt compassion for them, and healed their sick.”

When Jesus suffered the loss of a close relationship He went off by Himself. And when you suffer the loss of a close relationship God does not expect you to simply shrug it off and go on with your life. You are allowed to grieve privately. There is nothing unspiritual about being alone with your emotions. Even spiritual giants when they get the boot do not think, “I just got dumped. Well, praise God. Now that leaves me more time to serve. What ministry should I join next?” No, they grieve.

But notice that Jesus did not stay alone for very long. I am sure that He was still hurting when He came back. He would have had shallow emotions indeed if it only took Him a few hours to completely get over the death of His friend. That time alone did not solve everything. But He did come back even though He was still hurting and we can see in verse 14 that when He came back He saw a great multitude that had followed Him. People were probably yelling, “Jesus, Jesus, over here. Come help me.” Now if this was one of us what would we have done? We probably would have said something like, “Oh come on! Do you have



to follow me everywhere? Look, my best friend just had his head cut off. Can't you people just leave me alone for once?" Then we would probably have used the opportunity to tell them just how bad things were going for us.

But look at Jesus' response. He "felt compassion for them, and healed their sick." This is the heart of God. He put aside His burdens, His grieves, His problems and He ministered to others. His heart was instantly filled with compassion for them. And He healed them. Probably most in the crowd were not having as bad of a day as He was. But He did not weigh His day versus their day. He did not weigh His problems versus their problems. He did not think of how annoying they can be. Instead, He emptied Himself for their sakes.

This is not saying that when you lose a relationship that you should never talk about it. But what it is saying is that at some point after you have grieved alone that you need to come back to life and be with other people. This is a key to getting over a destroyed relationship. You may need more than one day, but the criteria for coming back is not that you are completely over it. You should come back even when you are still hurting. You must not isolate yourself for too long; you should help others and let others help you.

Philip Zimbardo in his article "The Age of Indifference" in *Psychology Today* said

I know of no more potent killer than isolation. There is no more destructive influence on physical and mental health than the isolation of you from me and of us from them. It has been shown to be a central agent in the etiology of depression, paranoia, schizophrenia, rape, suicide, mass murder, and a wide variety of disease states.

Proverbs 18:1 says, "He who separates himself seeks his own desire, He quarrels against all sound wisdom." To separate yourself from others for too long is unhealthy. If we translated the first half of this verse as the Hebrew implies we could write, "He who breaks away from people seeks to possess and enjoy only himself." The more that you isolate yourself the more you will become self-focused and the less likely you will enjoy the blessings of God and of other people.

Yes, it is good to be alone; to gather your thoughts and your emotions, but that should not go on for days and weeks and months. You need to come back and return to others. The best way to heal from a broken relationship is not to remove other relationships but to draw strength from those that you do have including God's.

## **Pray**

### **Pray for yourself**

Prayer is essential to a complete and peaceful healing. Without prayer we will feel left alone. We will tend to think that God is out to get us because we have severed ourselves from His loving and reassuring

fellowship. We will be struggling to overcome something terrible in our own strength and cunning. Any of these will lead to anxiety.

At all times we should pray but especially when we are in a crisis. Philippians 4:6 says, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” This verse contains all four New Testament Greek words for prayer. So what God is saying is that when we are feeling anxious we should pray, pray, pray, and pray. This is God’s solution.

When we pray we will be comforted by God’s presence. We will be given power to save us from our thoughts and emotions. We will deepen our faith to trust in God’s love and concern.

### Pray for the other person

Usually breaking up with someone causes you to harbor ill feelings towards that person. As was discussed earlier, you can have feelings of bitterness, anger, revenge, hatred, maliciousness, and so on. These wrong feelings may eat you up even worse than the initial emotions that you felt when you first broke up. If you do not learn to master your thoughts then your thoughts will become the master that holds the leash and then they will drag you and pull you and twist you in whatever direction they choose. Uncontrolled thoughts will be like a herd of deer in your vegetable garden; they will destroy everything. Or as Song of Songs 2:15 puts it, “Catch the foxes for us, The little foxes that are ruining the vineyards, while our vineyards are in blossom.” Our emotions can be like those little foxes.

Perhaps the crucial verse in the Bible on controlling our thought life is 2 Corinthians 10:5, “We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.” What is perhaps the best way to control ill thoughts towards another person? Whenever you start to have those thoughts then pray good things for him or her. Eventually learn to pray good things for that person even when it is not initiated by some bad thought.

It is good to realize that you do not even have to be completely wholehearted about your prayer. That is the best, of course, but God does not ask for wholehearted obedience only. He is willing to settle for even mere obedience. But is this Biblical? Is there anywhere in the Bible where God says that He accepts obedience even if it is accompanied by wrong motives? Philippians 1:15-18 reads, “Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice, yes, and I will rejoice.” So even though these people were preaching the Gospel with wrong motives Paul still rejoiced because Christ was being proclaimed. Too many people say that they are not going to do something until their heart is right or because their motives are not right. Well, you know what? Do it anyway and the right motives will follow.

Psalms 111:10 says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments; His praise endures forever.” What does this verse say? Sometimes the

understanding will come after the obedience is done. If you cannot pray good things for that person from a right heart; then do it anyway.

When you are sick you go to a doctor and you generally take whatever pill or injection he gives to you trusting that he knows what he is doing and this will help cure you. Most people do not first examine every medical journal and dictionary about the cure before taking it. Most people trust that the doctor knows what is best for you.

When your car is broke you bring it to a mechanic trusting that he will know what to do to fix it. Most people do not first break out a complex automobile book and study in detail how that entire broken system works before bringing their car in. Most people will trust that the mechanic will know what is best for their car.

By the same token, when God tells you what is best to do in some circumstance you should just do what He says trusting that He knows what is best for you. It is not necessary for you to first study every line in the Bible on the subject and then to get your heart and motives all lined up properly. So when you are struggling with your attitude towards someone then pray for him. This will do wonders for your attitude and will be much more pleasing to God than what you might otherwise be thinking about them.

## **Forgiveness**

If you have been treated wrong or sinned against then you must forgive that person. But the first word of the previous sentence is crucial in this step. Just because someone hurt you this does not mean that you were treated wrongly. Also, just because they did not end the relationship in the manner that you might have preferred this still does not mean that the way that they did do it was wrong.

Why is that “if” so important? Because too many people who are hurt in relationships carry around a chip on their shoulders because they feel that they have been treated so badly and that the other person was terribly cruel in what they did. So they grow bitter and angry. People tell them that they need to forgive the other person and get over it, but they cannot seem to be able to forgive the other person and close that whole relationship for good. Why is that? It could be one of two reasons. 1) Maybe they just do not want to forgive the person. Maybe they prefer being mad and bitter. Maybe they really do not want to go on with life or consider other possibilities. 2) Maybe the other person did not really sin against them and so there is no need for forgiveness. This is the point that is being made and this is key.

If another person has not sinned against you then you will not be able to forgive that person. Why? Because true forgiveness is an impossible task on our own. We need God’s grace to forgive. But if the other person has not sinned then there is no need to forgive and so God will not give you the grace to forgive when it is not called for. God does not dispense phony grace. He does not give us grace for situations that only exist in our own minds and not in reality. In this case God will not give us the grace to forgive, but He will give us the grace to alter our thinking from being the misused and sinned against victim to someone who was simply hurt.

How can we tell if we have been truly sinned against? Try to step back from the situation yourself and examine what really happened. If you think that you were sinned against then be able to clearly define that sin and provide Scripture to back up your contention. If that fails then go to someone who is spiritually mature and objective and tell him the situation as neutrally and factually as you can and see what he says.

But if we were, in fact, sinned against we do need to forgive the other person even if they do not admit to that sin. Why should we do that? Because if we do not forgive then we will carry that situation and all of its baggage into every future relationship of ours. And if you are unable to forgive the person from a previous relationship then you are not ready for another relationship. This is because you will bring that person into every new relationship and he or she will taint that new relationship.

### **Let it go; move on**

We can be tenacious creatures. How many of us have kept a houseplant in a container long after it had withered and turned brown? We even keep watering it and hoping. Or we keep those leftovers in the freezer thinking that some day we will get to them. God knows that we are like this so He said in Ecclesiastes 3:6-7, “A time to keep, and a time to throw away. A time to tear apart, and a time to sew together”

There are times to plant and times to uproot what is planted. There are times to wait and times to move on. But at some point when nothing is happening, it is time to move on and see what else may lie along your path. When you are just sitting on the side of the road you will only see what passes you by. But when you are walking down that road you will see much more.

Knowing when to hold on to a severed relationship and knowing when to let go is the difficulty. But as was stated earlier, letting go does not necessarily mean that the previous relationship cannot be restored. But what it does mean is that you are open to whatever doors may open now before you. You may be running your head into a brick wall with that one relationship when, just a few feet away, God has a door already opened for you.

### **People have the right to choose who they want to be in a relationship with and whom they do not**

In all of your own relationships you feel that you have the right to choose what relationships to maintain and how deep to go with them. In fact, you would probably resist any attempt by someone to force more intimacy into their friendship with you than you would want. Well, other people have that same right also.

If he dumped you because he did not think that the situation would work out then, even if he was wrong in that evaluation, it was still his right to make that decision. You are not the master over everything that touches your life. Other people have legitimate parts to say and control and you must allow them that right just as they should allow you that same right.

Why is this important? Because too often the cry is heard, “How could he do this to me?” as though you were the only one allowed to make any decisions. But if the shoe had been on the other foot and

someone said to you “How could do that to her?” you would have replied that you did not think that it was going anywhere and so you felt that it was best to end it there rather than to drag it out. You would have felt that to be a very legitimate and understandable response. After all, why try to patch a boat that is sinking? But what you allow yourself you must allow for others.

This is important because we sometimes need to see the arrogance behind the attitude of “It’s all right for me to dump him but it’s not all right for me to be the one that is dumped.” This kind of attitude will prevent grace from healing.

## We can heal

Our emotions can be like a precious and delicate tea set. When we first meet someone we may give them one of our smaller pieces. If he treats it with care then we might give him another more important piece and as he is tender and careful with the pieces that we have given to him then we will give him our more fragile and important pieces. But if he takes the pieces that we have given to him and he smashes them to the floor then we will be shocked and hurt as they are destroyed.

In time we may be able to repair the broken pieces. But the next person that we meet we will be more hesitate to share our more delicate pieces. In time we might have shared all of the same pieces that we did previously but it probably took longer to get to that point and we might have been more suspicious. But if this person also smashes our set to the floor then we will again be sick and devastated and have to start the process of repair.

Each time that this happens we will become slower and more untrusting of each person that we meet and wants to share our emotions. This is understandable but we must be careful that we do not lock them away in a dark and hidden cupboard where no one will ever find them again.

The horror of broken pieces is not greater than the joy of sharing with someone who cares. Finding all of the broken pieces of porcelain and gluing them together in the right places is not easy. And putting our lives back together after a critical breakup is not easy. But it can be done.

Matthew 14:22-27 tells the story of how, after feeding five thousand people, Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and go across the Sea of Galilee to the other side. While part way across the winds picked up and the boat was battered by fierce waves. The disciples thought that they were going to perish as they struggled for hours to control the boat. Finally somewhere between 3:00 and 6:00 AM Jesus came walking on the water. The disciples thought that it was a ghost, a sign of impending death, and cried out. All seemed lost. But it was Jesus and He said to them, “Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Here the disciples were in their own environment, they were fishermen, when a crisis hit. The waves were beyond their ability to handle and after a long and terrible struggle they felt that the end was imminent. But then on the very waves that were crushing them walked Jesus Christ. And in our lives, Jesus Christ will often come to us on the very trials that are tearing us apart. When all seems hopeless and we seem overwhelmed Jesus Christ is faithful.

Do you want to know how to forget what is in your past? Philippians 3:13 says, “Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead” Do you want to forget what lies behind? Then reach forward to what lies ahead. When catastrophe hits, you should analyze it to a degree to see what might have caused it, to see if there was any sin involved on your part or on another’s part, and to try and understand what you are able to. But this does not mean beating it to death for months or years. It does not mean trying to dig every last piece of meat out of every dried bone. It means understanding what you can and then learning from it.

To heal properly we must rely on God. We must believe that God cares, that He has the power to heal, and that He will heal. Therapists and counselors can definitely help but only if they point to God. The Song of Solomon 8:5a says, “Who is this coming up from the wilderness, leaning on her beloved?” When we are heartbroken we are in a wilderness; our lives are dry, without direction, and empty. The only way to come out of that wilderness is by leaning the greatest support that we can ever have—our beloved Jesus Christ.

A broken relationship can change your life in several directions. It could make you bitter and untrusting or it can change your life so that it becomes more like Jesus Christ’s. You alone are responsible for the outcome. Other people may push you towards one result or the other but only you can decide the final response. No one can make you sin.

Recovery is neither neatly packaged nor is it easy, but it is always possible. Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”

<b>You are gentle if you:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Can answer a harsh comment with a gracious response</li><li>• Are able to discuss a sensitive area with someone and not hurt their feelings</li><li>• Can point out people’s sins or shortcomings and generally have the reproof accepted</li></ul>

## Saving your Best—Purity

My mother. If there was an international championship of one-downmanship she would be world class. She is the Jesse Owens of devastating tales, the Winston Churchill of disastrous situations and the '27 Yankees of cataclysmic circumstances. If you are tired she is exhausted unto death. If you have terrible sunburn she thinks that she once had flesh-eating bacteria. If you had to walk one mile to school she had to walk five miles to school in the snow on a peg leg. "But Mom, you have both of your legs." "Well then it must have been the crutch. I just remember it being terrible. The kids would laugh at me constantly." "You once broke your leg? I never heard that story," I replied. "If only it was just a broken leg. It was some kind-of horrible, disfiguring disease; something affecting the bones. I can't remember the details anymore. I think that my mind erased all memory of it because it was so painful." "You had a bone disease?" "I told you that my mind erased the details. It's a miracle that I can even walk. I think that all of the bones in my leg were eaten away." I wanted to reply that it sounded more like lions, but at this point I realized that it is better to quit while she is still only just a bit behind. In another few minutes she will be so far behind that General Custer will look like a winner.

My mother has this incredible ability to make her every effort seem gargantuan while everything else that others do seem so pedestrian. "Your father doesn't do anything around the house. Just yesterday I made him breakfast." Here she slows down to a drag with an emphasis on each action verb, "I had to get out the bagels, toast them, get out the knife and butter, spread the butter on the bagels, rip off two paper towels, bring them to the table, and put them down." The pace quickens, "What did he do all day? –he fixed a pipe on the toilet." "Mom, it took you more time to describe making breakfast then it did to actually make it. And to fix that pipe he had to cut off the old one, cut the new one to fit, solder it on and so on. Each step took like 30 minutes. The whole task took half the day." She would narrow her eyes, "Do you always have to pick on everything that I say?"

- "If we love each other and are engaged then why can't we have sex?"
- "As long as we don't actually have sex what's wrong with heavy petting?"
- "As long as the lust stays in my mind and doesn't affect anyone else then I guess that it's OK."
- "We aren't having sex, she just stays over every once in a while. What's wrong with that?"

Why is purity such a problem? It could be because sex or any of the events leading up to it are usually pleasurable and, if both parties are consensual, then it does not seem like it is doing any harm. It seems like

such a simple, enjoyable thing. The media makes it out to be so offhand and fun. How come so much is made about it by Christians?

In this sensual world Christians can easily feel like an outsider. We are thought to be puritanical, antiquated, and repressive. We can mention that we go to church or read our Bibles every day or that we do not believe in getting drunk or using foul language and most people will think that is nice. But mention that we do not believe in sex outside of marriage and we are suddenly ridiculed or snapped at.

Purity is important. It is not simple. It is not offhand. And it can do harm—much harm. We are going to examine purity as relating to three areas: the eyes, the thoughts, and actions. “The body is the soul’s image; therefore keep it pure.”<sup>18</sup>

### ***Purity of the eyes***

Impurity can enter into us in many ways but probably the most common is by what we look at. Our mind can replay images over and over again.

One of the most significant scriptures dealing with impurity and our eyes is Job 31:1, “I have made a covenant with my eyes; How then could I gaze at a virgin?” It is significant that Job uses such a powerful word as “covenant.” A covenant was an agreement or a binding relationship between two parties. It usually could not be broken except by the death of one of the parties.

There are two possible roots from which the word “covenant” was derived, both of which are interesting. The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology says, “The original meaning of this word was probably ‘fetter’ or ‘obligation,’ coming from a root *bqr*, ‘to bind.’”<sup>19</sup> When we stare at something or someone that conjures up a lustful response that image will stay with us and bind to us. The word “fetter” is very appropriate. A fetter is a chain that is used to restrain movement. It is used by someone stronger that has captured someone weaker and is used to force the weaker one to do the stronger one’s bidding. Usually the weaker one was a slave. Lust is a demanding master. It will grab us and bind us and, without the saving grace of God, it will yank our eyes to wherever it wants us to look. Quite fittingly Proverbs 5:22b says, “And he will be held with the cords of his sin.” The context of this verse is regarding sexual impurity. Every time that we look sin will throw another cord around us and each time those cords will become tighter and tighter. In this case we could paraphrase the first part of this verse as “I have bound myself with my eyes to a provocative image and now I am enslaved.”

The second possible root is discussed in Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies, “There is great probability that this word is derived from” a Hebrew word that means “to eat.”<sup>20</sup> When we eat something it goes inside and becomes a part of us. Likewise, an arousing image that we are scrutinizing will bury itself deep inside of us. But unlike a good meal that will eventually pass out of us no matter how many times we think about it, an inflaming image will only entrench and solidify itself the more that we think about it. We

<sup>18</sup> Ed. Frank S. Mead, 12,000 Religious Quotations, op. cit., p. 363.

<sup>19</sup> G. L. Archer, Jr., “Covenant” Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, Ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1984), pp. 276-278.

<sup>20</sup> William Wilson, Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies, op. cit., pp. 99-100.



can paraphrase the verse using this root word as, “I have consumed with my eyes a provocative image and now it has entrenched itself within me.”

It either case, the word “covenant” carries with it a lasting effect. The usual way to release ourselves from that image is for one of us to die. The more acceptable would be to kill the image through repentance and the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit.

What is one of the results of this sin? It is said well by Job, “How then could I gaze at a virgin?” Once we develop the habit of looking with lustful eyes then nothing will be pure again. The more that we look and lust, the more everything will become twisted and perverted. If you have been down this road or are currently on it then you know how awful this can be. Proverbs 27:20 reads, “Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied, nor are the eyes of man ever satisfied.” This verse can apply to many things: possessions, wealth, popularity, and so on. But it is deadly true when it comes to lust also. Our eyes will never be able to take in enough. We will never stop leering when we have reached some quota; we will only stop looking when we have repented.

As many have said, “The first glance is free; the second one will cost you dearly.” If we are passing by a store with a sensual display we must turn our head and pray. When a man or a woman is wearing seductive clothes we must divert our eyes. It seems as though temptation is crouching at every turn. It may be on TV, the movies, magazines, the Internet, in malls and even in our churches. But the person who can learn to look away is one who will keep himself or herself from becoming enslaved to the covenant of impurity.

#### **You have self-control if you:**

- Are able to abstain from something that is pleasurable but harmful to you (Example, food, pornography, alcohol, drugs, excessive shopping, gambling)
- Can faithfully maintain a (daily, weekly, etc) schedule of something that is beneficial such as Bible reading, prayer, exercise, etc.
- Can keep silent when you know that what you want to say you will regret later or should not say at all
- Can stop doing something when it has gone on long enough such as playing a computer game, watching TV, practicing golf, tinkering with the car, and so on
- Will only eat to satisfaction and not to gluttony or to “just finish up what’s left”
- Can refrain from buying something that you do not really need or want even if you have the money
- Are able to say “no” to going out with friends when you know that you have something more important to do
- Can restrain your own wants and desires for the sake of someone else
- Can ration something so that it lasts longer rather than quickly using it all up

### ***Purity of thoughts***

Lust is a sin that can easily take hold of us and once the thought is put into our heads we can easily spend long periods of time dwelling on it. For this reason God tells us in Ephesians 5:3 (“But do not let

immorality or any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is proper among saints”) not to even discuss the subject in a flippant or causal way. Because once we do broach the subject then our minds can slither all over the topic.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:27-28, “You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY’; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.” This does not mean that looking at a woman lustfully is the same as committing that act with her. But what it does mean is that God can see beyond actions and into our minds and that lust carries with it dire consequences.

God knows that lust does not just go away on its own. He knows that once our minds have grabbed onto some image or illicit fantasy it will not easily or quickly shake it loose. Rather, we will have a tendency to develop that thought and run with it. God describes this scenario well in James 1:14-15. “But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.” Our impure thoughts can come frequently and with much variety.

In the great book of Philippians Paul gives many exhortations and lays out some tremendous doctrines. But in chapter 4 verse 8 near the end of the letter he gives one final major command, “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.” That word “dwell” has the connotation of focusing on so as to make it a habit. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries has this word meaning to “take into account (*logos*), reflect upon and then allow these things to shape your conduct.” What we think about will determine what we do. We do not choose sin out of a blank mind nor do righteous acts emanate from a vacuum. “For as he thinks within himself, so he is,” (Proverbs 23:7a).

To keep our thoughts from mastering us and from whipping us back and forth we must learn to master them instead. 2 Corinthians 10:5 admonishes us to do this; “We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.” How do we take our thoughts captive? The first way to control our thoughts is to control what starts them. If we do not guard what we see then what we see will be the seeds of our thoughts. Staring at wrong things will produce poisonous thoughts.

But no matter how hard we try those thoughts will come anyway. The best action to take then is to cut them down quickly. A garden that is constantly weeded while the weeds are young and small will be easier to maintain than one that is left untended. Then the weeds will grow tall and spread out and the garden will soon be overrun. That one bad thought or fantasy will sow seeds for other wrong thoughts and imaginings.

So how do we destroy these impure thoughts? For one we need to cut them down as soon as they pop through the surface. The more they are allowed to develop the harder they will be to kill. We can do this by quoting scripture that we have memorized, by praying for someone, or by meditating on some topic that is righteous. We can also ask God to help us destroy that thought. And if one thought is persistent then we

need to be even more persistent. We must determine to never let our thoughts get control of us. It is not easy and victory will never be permanent but it is a battle that we must continually strive to win.

One sobering passage on how severe God views impure thoughts is in Job 31:27-28, “And my heart became secretly enticed, and my hand threw a kiss from my mouth, that too would have been an iniquity calling for judgment, for I would have denied God above.” First notice the word “secretly.” The original stimulus is something that, if known by others, would be shameful and embarrassing. Instead, it is accessed furtively. Maybe it was a sideways glance or an Internet site in the privacy of our house. Then we see a progression, first of our heart being enticed by something that we should not be looking at or thinking about and then that leads to an act of seduction. God says that this is iniquity or sin. But why such a harsh call for judgment? And why is this denying God? Possibly because this seduction momentarily replaces God as the source of all that is good and perfect and replaces Him with something whose only value is sexual. The superlative is replaced by the sensual. The living God has been pushed aside for an idol. God is forgotten and our own lusts reign supreme.

<b>You are falling into a spiritual slide if you:</b>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Are a “Bedside Baptist” (i.e., you do not attend church but “attend” services on the TV or radio)</li><li>• Have stopped reading your Bible because you do not have time or are not getting anything out of it</li><li>• Find yourself thinking more about how people can help you out rather than how you can help others</li><li>• Do not think that you have any problem areas in your life to work on</li><li>• Go to church and think more about what was wrong then what can draw you closer to God</li><li>• Ignore correction or reproof (“They just have a bad attitude” or “They don’t know what they are talking about”)</li><li>• Think more about how you can make more money than how you can develop godly character</li><li>• Are willing to compromise the Bible or your own conscience in order to “get ahead”</li><li>• Watch pornography, drink alcohol, take drugs, or smoke to feel better</li><li>• Think that you are better than most Christians</li><li>• Consider “things” as more important than people</li></ul> |
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### ***Purity of action***

“Premarital sexual relations are always a mistake... The Bible condemns sex outside the bonds of matrimony. The fact that immorality is rampant throughout the nation doesn’t make it right!” – Billy Graham.<sup>21</sup>

In the Bible, most translations will use four words used to describe wrong sexual behavior. They are immorality, adultery, fornication, and sensuality.

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<sup>21</sup> Ed. Charles G. Ward, The Billy Graham Christian Worker’s Handbook (Minneapolis, World Wide Publications, 1984), p. 215.

Immorality is the broadest of the three. It can mean fornication, adultery, homosexuality, pedophilia, prostitution, incest, and bestiality.

Adultery is defined as a married person having sex with someone other than his or her spouse. Both people would be guilty of adultery even if one person is unmarried.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines fornication as “sexual intercourse between a man and woman not married to each other.” Webster’s Dictionary defines the difference between fornication and adultery by saying fornication is “voluntary sexual intercourse between an unmarried woman and a man, especially an unmarried man. Fornication is the act of incontinency in single persons; if either party be married, it is adultery.”

Sensuality carries with it an excessive indulgence in sexual activities. It is characterized by lewdness, debauchery, and shamelessness. An example of this might be some street carnivals where nudity and sex are brazen and flaunted.

The use of these words is not always consistent among translations. However, this does not lessen the impact of what God is telling us regarding purity.

One of the most widely used passages against immorality is 1 Corinthians 6:12-20.

12 All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.

13 Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food; but God will do away with both of them. Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord; and the Lord is for the body.

14 Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power.

15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? May it never be!

16 Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a harlot is one body with her? For He says, "THE TWO WILL BECOME ONE FLESH."

17 But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him.

18 Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body.

19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?

20 For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.

This passage rebukes some of the arguments that people use for having sex outside of marriage.

- “Isn’t Christianity supposed to free us from rules and regulations?”
- “Besides, if I do mess up there is always forgiveness.”

- “We’re only to going to do it a few times and then we’ll stop. It’s not going to get out of hand.”

Verse 12 addresses these kinds of questions. Yes, according to Christianity we do not have to work out our salvation with good deeds. Yes, it is true that our salvation is fixed in Heaven and nothing can take it away. However, there are commandments that should be obeyed. We obey them for God’s glory but for our own good also. God will bless us when we do what is right but we will stumble along or even be opposed by God when we do wrong. The world is difficult enough; God’s grace helps us make it through. But when we despise God’s commands it is like trying to walk through life waist deep in wet cement.

Certain things will be harmful to us or to others. Immorality is one of them as we shall see. We may be able to do anything that we want but we must always keep in mind the stern warning in Galatians 6:7-8, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life.”

Also, most sin is addictive but immorality even more than most. If you get into a little pornography and do not repent then you will eventually be into a lot of pornography. If you have pre-marital sex every once in a while and do not repent then you will eventually be having it a lot. Immorality can soon become our master. We will look for opportunities to satisfy that lust and it is one sin that can consume us. At one of my previous jobs I went into the men’s restroom and an older guy was just coming out of a stall with a pornographic magazine hidden within a folder. He did not know that I was there and he was startled and nearly dropped the folder and its contents. He then rushed out of the bathroom all frazzled. Immorality will follow us to work, to the Internet, to church, and everywhere else that we go. If we do not repent from it then it will put its leash on us. Jesus said in Matthew 6:24 that we cannot serve two masters. If lust or immorality has mastered us then we have relegated Jesus Christ to a place that is lower than our sin.

- “God knows that I have needs. If He didn’t want us to satisfy those needs then why did He give them to us to begin with?”
- “God created us with a capacity for sex. Sex is a natural act. Therefore there is nothing wrong with having sex.”
- “When I’m hungry, I eat. When my hormones are raging, I have sex. What’s the difference?”

These were some of the arguments that the Corinthians were probably using to justify their immorality and they are the same arguments that are still being used. But what Paul does here is to introduce four lines of reasoning as to why they are wrong.

For the first, Paul in verses 13 and 14 raises the sex act to a higher level than the base need for food. He points out that since we are not just evolved bags of chemicals everything cannot be reduced to the satisfaction of primitive urges. Eating food and having sex are simply not two sides of the same coin. Our stomach was created to do one thing and that is to aid in the digestion of food. It has a very mundane purpose. Our bodies, on the other hand, were created to serve and glorify God. They have been sanctified or set apart. They have a potentially much more noble purpose. However, we have the choice of giving our

bodies over to unrighteousness or to God. This is what Paul is referring to in Romans 6:19, “I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.” We can allow our bodies to be degraded and debased or we can use them to serve God.

Two craftsmen went into a shop to buy some steel. The first man brought some steel home and out of it he lovingly formed a beautiful cross. This cross was placed in a church and those who walked by it were reminded of the beauty and grace of God. The second man brought his steel home and formed it into a knife. Using this knife he robbed and stabbed people. The blade became dirty with blood and was kept hidden in the back of a closet so that no one would find it and link the man to his crimes. At one time both pieces of metal were the same but one was sanctified and used to glorify God. The other was used to steal from others and satisfy only one man’s purposes. God has given us a similar choice in how we use our bodies.

In the second line of reasoning in verses 15 – 17 Paul discusses how when we eat we do not become one with the food. Food is eaten, digested, and eliminated. But when two people have sex a mystical union is formed. This concept dates back to the first discussion in the Bible about men and women in Genesis 2:24. It is similar to the union that Christ has with the church. Each Christian is a member of the one body of Christ and we are all joined together in some supernatural and mystical way. To commit immorality is to disrupt this union as if to push aside Jesus Christ and put in His place a prostitute. Paul says emphatically, “May it never be!”

In the third line of reasoning in verse 18 Paul states that the sin of immorality and only this sin comes from within and is committed against our own bodies. Other sins will usually affect only certain parts of us and that affect may be shallow. Immorality, however, not only originates from deep within but its effects will violate us back down to that same depth. Immorality will corrupt and rot every part of our being from our personality to our soul. It cannot be contained. Many sins will cut us like a knife but that wound should eventually heal. Immorality is like drinking poison. It will spread throughout our body and destroy us from every which way. The only way to stop this corruption is through repentance and the cleansing grace of God.

The fourth line of reasoning that Paul uses in verses 19 and 20 is that each of our bodies is a temple of the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament times the Holy Spirit would come upon people for a particular purpose and then leave once that purpose was accomplished. But in the New Testament the Holy Spirit is given permanently to all believers and resides within all believers. This is the “He who is in you” mentioned in 1 John 4:4. This makes our bodies a temple of God. “Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16). All but the most corrupted person would find it difficult to have sex with a prostitute in a church sanctuary. There would be a sense of God’s presence or holiness that would be violated. Yet each of us are in fact the true temple of God. God resides

not in a building but in people. So there should be that same sense of violating God's presence and holiness when we commit acts of immorality.

The key command in this passage is in verse 18, "Flee immorality." Tyndale New Testament Commentaries states, "The present imperative indicates the habitual action, 'Make it your habit to flee'. That is the only way to treat it. It cannot be satisfactorily dealt with by any less drastic measures. The Christian must not temporize with it, but flee the very thought." In the Old Testament when Joseph was directly confronted by this sin he did not reason with it or pray about; he ran out of the room. If we happen to be in a place with someone of the opposite sex and the situation is tempting then we must quickly leave or the two of us move to a less tempting (usually defined as "more public") location.

## Reasons against immorality and some of its effects

Immorality can devastate us. It has destroyed marriages and it can haunt us to our graves. Yet many do not see what is so wrong about it. To them it might be just an act of love or even just an act of pleasure between two people. The following are some of the reasons why we should, at all costs, avoid immorality.

*God commands against it.* In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 God lumps fornication and adultery in with idolatry, stealing and swindling and refers to all of them as unrighteous. In 1 Corinthians 6:18 God tells us to flee from it. In 2 Corinthians 12:21 Paul tells us that we need to repent of immorality, "I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced."

*It is stealing.* Even if you have a devalued view of your own purity that does not give you the right to take someone else's. Unless you are married to that person their purity does not belong to you. You may say, "But it is consensual. We are both agreeing that this is what we want to do." Even if the other person is willingly consenting to sex that still does not mean that it is not stealing. If you know that it is wrong for another person to give you something and you allow it to happen then you have still stolen from that person. A thief may be able to replace the object that he stole but once you have stolen another person's purity you can never replace it. In 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6 Paul states this. "For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you." The key here is that if you are sexually immoral then you are defrauding that other person; you are taking advantage of him or her. It carries with it a sense of trickery or swindle; of unlawful gain.

*God equates it with idolatry.* Colossians 3:5-6, "Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. For it is on account of these things that the wrath of God will come." Idolatry is essentially the replacement of God with something else. Why would these five sins, the first three of which are sexually related, be equated with idolatry? It is because sexual impurity, like no other sin, can consume us and take over our eyes, our

thoughts, our actions, and our plans. We go to church thinking not about worshipping God but who we will see. We watch shows or movies based on who will appear and in how few of clothes. The VCR gets extra use. We set aside and plan time to sin. It becomes our first thought of the day and our continuous thoughts throughout the day. God is left behind.

*Immorality will prevent the blessings of God.* This was discussed earlier under 1 Corinthians 6:12. God will allow us to do wrong and His wrath may not be immediate but that does not mean that He has necessarily brushed it aside and forgotten about it. Even if God does not discipline us for immorality we can be assured, though, that His blessings will be withdrawn. If we want to seek for our pleasures apart from God then He will generally let us but then we should not wonder why we are not receiving His grace when we need it; we should not wonder why our lives are unfruitful. “Things just aren’t going well for me at work. I just don’t know where God is.” “Aren’t you living with your girlfriend?” “Yes.” Then no wonder. We just do not flaunt God’s laws and wave them in front of His nose and then expect or even demand that He respond in the way that we want Him to. That relationship may continue on into marriage but, unless there is repentance, it will have to be maintained without the blessings of God. Relationships are difficult enough, so why push away the One who can give the greatest hope for success?

*It will enslave us.* We saw this also in 1 Corinthians 6:12. Sex, especially immorality, is addicting and the more that we give in to it and seek after it the more that we want. We will never be satisfied. The degradation will only become more coarse and vile. 2 Peter 2:18-19 confirms this, “For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved.”

Perhaps the most sobering story about how immorality can destroy us is found in the person of Samson. He was a judge in Israel who delivered his people from oppressors time and time again. But he had a great weakness and that was that he was addicted to sex. This addiction caused him to rebel against the commands of God, against his parents’ wisdom, and was used to defeat him. The verse that best summarizes his ultimate fall is Judges 16:21. It reads, “Then the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes; and they brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze chains, and he was a grinder in the prison.” This sin of immorality first blinded Samson, then it bound him, and finally it ground him down. Immorality will do the same to us: it will blind us, then bind us, and finally grind us.

*Immoral sex degrades what God created us for.* This was expanded upon earlier under 1 Corinthians 6:13-14. God created us to be wonderful creatures raised in power to the glory of God. Immorality lowers us back to the level of animals. If we only knew what we were sacrificing we would never be so tempted. Ravi Zacharias said this, “Ultimately it is the person behind the relationship that provokes wonder because of the divine image stamped upon the human personality. If the person is a means to an end, then the greater has been destroyed by the lesser.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ravi Zacharias, *Deliver Us From Evil* (Dallas, Word Publishing, 1996), p. 156.



*Sex forms a mystical union and is not merely the fulfillment of a base appetite.* This was discussed earlier under 1 Corinthians 6:15-17. Having sex has greater repercussions than other activities such as eating. Eating improperly once is easily undone. Having immoral sex even just once will have lifelong implications.

*Immorality will corrupt our entire being.* I Corinthians 6:18 tells us how the sin of immorality will bore itself right into our core like a beetle into the heart of a tree. It is a sin like no other. It is not necessarily worse than all other sins but it is a sin that affects more adversely and deeply than other sins. Even murderers will usually kill only once but rapists will seek for victim after victim. Immorality will take over our lives unless we repent.

*Immorality defiles the temple of God.* God saved us to be holy and He takes up residence in the body of each believer in the Holy Spirit. When we are born-again we become the temple of God. Therefore to be immoral is like having illicit sex on the altar of a church. It is profane and terrible.

*It is putting the sensual above the spiritual.* The passage in Galatians chapter 5 that contrasts the spirit to the flesh starts out in verse 19 by saying, “Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality...” Romans 8:6 further defines this contrast, “For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.” We can choose the passing pleasure of immorality but in doing so we will sacrifice life and peace and the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

*Immorality forces us into secrecy and lies.* Except among the most corrupt, adultery is not well received. The great majority of people still consider it to be a disgrace. Unfortunately, fornication does not carry with it the same stigma anymore although in most Bible-believing churches it is still considered to be shameful. But any of these related sins can drive people into deception and dishonesty. I have seen businessmen park their cars at fast-food restaurants, get into the cars of young women, and then speed off. Others have lied about staying late at work. Still others will downplay any suspicions with the comment, “We’re only friends. There’s nothing going on.”

*It is almost always nothing more than lust and not love.* Take a look at two events in the Bible. In 2 Samuel 13 there is the story of Amnon and Tamar. It says that Amnon loved Tamar but he could not get anywhere with her physically. So he devised a scheme by which they could be alone and then he would take advantage of her. That situation came but Tamar would not cooperate because she knew that such an act would be disgraceful. She even suggested that if he would be willing to wait that her father, King David, would allow them to marry. Whether or not she was sincere in offering this solution or was using it as a way to escape is irrelevant. Amnon had no desire to wait so he took her by force and lay with her. The key comes in verse 15, “Then Amnon hated her with a very great hatred; for the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her.” Lust cannot wait. Lust wants its pleasure right now no matter how much it will adversely affect the other person. Lust says things like, “If you really love me you’ll do this for me” or “We both love each other, why should we have to wait?”

Now let us look at a different situation. Jacob, whose name was eventually changed to Israel, was a schemer. He was someone who was always looking for an advantage. After escaping from his brother Esau

whom he had tricked he wound up at a relative's house, Laban. Jacob fell in love with Laban's daughter, Rachel and asked to marry her. Laban agreed but Jacob had to work for Laban for seven years before he could marry her. The key to this passage is in Genesis 29:20, "So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her." Love can wait. Love is able to delight in all of the rest of the other person and is unwilling to lead him or her into anything wrong.

Lust is impatient. Love can wait. Lust sees only its own pleasure. Love puts the other person first. Lust craves for the sexual part of that person. Love delights in the total non-sexual part of that person. Lust sees time as dragging because it is being denied. Love sees time as flying because other aspects of the person are fulfilling it. Lust justifies. Love considers.

*Immorality tempts others.* At one time or another most people struggle with doing what is right. Temptation is always swirling around us beckoning us to do its bidding. In Proverbs 9 the woman of folly tempts those who are near by assuring them that sin is sweet and pleasant. We are all weak and as Christians we must stand with each other and support each other. But when one person falls into sin, especially if that person is in a position of respect or authority, then temptation can use this as a wedge to crack open the door for someone else. Sometimes the only thing keeping someone from falling is a good justification. The fact that someone else fell, no matter how wrong this is, may be all the justification that this person needs. "Well if he can do it then why can't I?" Or it may push the subconscious prodding of someone needing any kind of excuse, "If he couldn't resist then what makes me think that I will be able to?" Because we are all in the Body of Christ we cannot sin in isolation. In 1 Corinthians 5:6b Paul says in response to a man who was immoral, "Do you not know that a little leaven [sin] leavens the whole lump of dough [the church]?"

*You will be telling non-Christians that you are no better than they are.* Non-Christians put Christians under a microscope. We try to let them know that we are different; that God has changed our lives and we are urging them to allow God to change their lives also. So they watch us. They watch our language. They watch to see if we easily become angry or frustrated. They watch our ethics. And they watch our behavior. But if they see no difference then has God done anything? An immoral Christian has essentially destroyed his testimony to non-Christians. And though grace can certainly abound over sin there may be people who will be pushed away from considering God because His people have not distinguished themselves from even the lowest of sinners.

*Immorality creates guilt.* Repentance and forgiveness can wash away any guilt completely and forever. However, until that point is reached the guilt of an immoral Christian can be overwhelming. There can be a deep sense of failure, thoughts of lost salvation, and a despair of never being able to be in God's good favor again. Of course, God does forgive. Of course, no sin is greater than God's love. Of course, God can raise up even the most defeated of sinners. But even if we know all of this we may still feel as though we have to prove something to God to make up for our great sin. Then we may become legalistic and works oriented. We try to become super-Christians. But it is all in vain because, though God does want to see deeds becoming repentance, He does not want to see us try to gain His favor through good works.

*Even in repentance and forgiveness you may always have this stigma.* God can take any sin that we commit and bury it in the deepest sea. Unfortunately, people are not always as forgetful. If you have been immoral and you have humbly repented of it then God has washed you clean. You can inform others of this, but you cannot force them to think as God thinks. You may lose friendships. You may be forced out of serving in some ministry. You may even be forced out of your church even though you have truly repented. This is yet another cost that must be considered before you do something stupid. Is it worth it? Never!

*Immorality makes one vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases.* Two married people who have never had sex with anyone else have a nil chance of sharing a sexually transmitted disease (STD). When you have sex with another person you are having sex with all of their partners too regarding disease. Two people who abstained from immorality will only be having sex with each other.

*Immorality can lead to abortion.* Abortion can be a tremendously volatile subject, but I firmly believe that it is murder. The vast majority of abortions are the result of immorality.

Here was listed a number of reasons to flee immorality. Yet the person who is determined to have sex outside of marriage will be able to justify away all of them even if many of these justifications are simply ridiculous. To avoid immorality we must be honest with ourselves. Will we choose lust or will we choose love? Will we choose God or will we choose self?

## An example of someone who fell to immorality

The Bible is full of people who lusted and fell. Even some of the greatest Biblical heroes, such as David and Samson, were overcome by this sin. We can easily study many of them and find tremendous insights into what went wrong and how they dealt with it. But instead we are going to look at an anonymous man as described in Proverbs 7:6-23

6 For at the window of my house I looked out through my lattice,

7 And I saw among the naive, I discerned among the youths, a young man lacking sense,

“Naïve” or as some translations put it “simple” does not mean someone who is dumb or of less intelligence. It means someone who is “foolish, easily enticed and seduced, credulous, inexperienced.”<sup>23</sup> The fact that he is a youth only implies that the young are more likely to be seduced by sex because their hormones are on a racetrack and because they probably have not learned the power and deceit of sin quite as well. However, immorality is a sin that anyone, no matter how young or old, can fall into. Just because a person is older does not mean that they should be confident of their ability to resist such temptation.

8 Passing through the street near her corner; and he takes the way to her house,

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<sup>23</sup> William Wilson, *Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies*, op. cit., p. 395.

This does not mean that he was deliberately going to her house. But what it does imply is that he knew that the temptation was there and he still went near to it. He may not have initially set his heart to commit sin but he may have deliberately put himself into temptation's way. Sometimes we do that because then we can blame our weakness and the fact that the temptation overwhelmed us. It is like saying, "God knew that I was weak in that area. He should have kept me from that temptation." Another common way of justifying this sin is, "I tried really hard to avoid it but then it was right there in front of me and I couldn't do anything about it." There are two scriptures that answer both of those. The first is in James 1:13, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone." God gives us the discernment to usually recognize and avoid evil.

But even if we are placed into that situation because of no fault of our own then God is still there to help us. "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it." (1 Corinthians 10:13). If we fall into temptation then it is no one's fault but our own. If you and your girlfriend or boyfriend have been getting closer and closer to the edge while making-out then it is not God's fault if you are left alone in the living room and you fall to immorality. You should have gotten out of the house and went for a walk.

9 In the twilight, in the evening, in the middle of the night and in the darkness.

Here we see the slow transition to complicity with sin. There is an overworked analogy but it is still applicable here. If you want to boil a frog, if you put it directly into hot water then it will jump out. But if you put it first into cold water and then slowly turn up the heat then it will eventually cook. If you asked Christians a year before they committed immorality what they thought about their chances of falling like that many would reply that it would have been inconceivable then. That was a sin for those who had cast God behind their backs or who might not have really been Christians after all. There might have been strong repulsion and indignation at the very thought. But then circumstances changed. Maybe a lot of that person's friends got married and there was a deepening sense of loneliness or desperation. Or maybe this man or woman showed up who was very open to the physical aspects of a relationship. Then what was yesterday's sin becomes today's activity. And what is today's activity becomes tomorrow's habit. And so on until finally there is nothing left. The foundations have crumbled and all indignation is lost.

Sin should be caught quickly. This is why it is good to set up boundaries and make a firm determination not to stretch those boundaries no matter how innocently it may seem at the moment. It is even wise to write down those boundaries just to make them concrete and not

some nebulous concept such as “I’ll never touch her inappropriately.” Instead write down something like “I’ll never touch her from the chest down.”

But even if the activity has gone beyond what was initially acceptable, it is still not too late to stop and re-establish a sense of morality.

10 And behold, a woman comes to meet him, dressed as a harlot and cunning of heart.

11 She is boisterous and rebellious; her feet do not remain at home;

12 She is now in the streets, now in the squares, and lurks by every corner.

Here is how this immorality came. She was dressed to entice. She knew what buttons to push. She does not wait for the wicked to come to her but goes out looking for the gullible.

But temptation does not have to necessarily start out dressed like this. She can be dressed normally, but once the mood becomes heated and the blouse comes off then she is now dressed as a harlot because she is now seductive.

13 So she seizes him and kisses him, and with a brazen face she says to him:

With immorality someone must take the initiative, it does not just happen out of the blue.

14 "I was due to offer peace offerings; today I have paid my vows.

This may seem like a rather odd thing to say to someone if you are trying to seduce him. But there may be one of two motives behind this. One is that she is trying to put on that she is a religious person and that he has nothing to fear. We must always be careful not to be fooled by someone. I know someone who went to a dance party. There was no alcohol and the guy that she danced with was very nice. At the end of the evening he asked her for a ride home. She figured that there would not be a problem because they had such a good time together and he was so nice. He raped her, disappeared never to be seen again, and now she has his child. It is always better to be careful and safe and not assume that you are a good judge of character.

Her second motive might have been to get him to her house with something enticing. After a peace offering there was oftentimes some meat left over. This would have been taken home and since there was no refrigeration it would have had to be eaten quickly. Having a meal together was just a cloak for her real desire of sex. Today this can come in many forms. “If you loved me then you would be willing to go to bed with me.” The real desire is sex; the cloak is love. “We both want it so what’s the problem?” The real desire is sex; the cloak is wanting to satisfy your own pleasures. “You’re so beautiful I can’t keep my hands off of you.” The desire is “I want to have sex,” the cloak is that you are irresistible.

15 "Therefore I have come out to meet you, to seek your presence earnestly, and I have found you.

Temptation sucks us in with flattery. “I want you.” “I need you.” There is nothing wrong with honestly expressing your feelings unless it is to get the other person to do something that you know that they should not.

16 "I have spread my couch with coverings, with colored linens of Egypt.

17 "I have sprinkled my bed with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon.

18 "Come, let us drink our fill of love until morning; let us delight ourselves with caresses.

Here temptation lays out just how wonderful the experience will be. All five senses will be satisfied and delighted. Sin will always appear pleasurable. If that was not the case then none of us would have any trouble being righteous. But notice how sin describes the experience only until it is over. In this case it is until morning. There is never any thought to future consequences. We must see both sides of sin; its pleasure and its ugliness. Lamentations 1:9 says, “She did not consider her future; therefore she has fallen astonishingly.” Once we can take our eyes off of the immediate satisfaction and see the longer agony then we would be more hesitant to fall. Sin fools the man into saying, “As long as I’m rich and happy now I don’t care if I go to Hell later.”

19 "For the man is not at home, he has gone on a long journey;

20 He has taken a bag of money with him, at full moon he will come home."

Here we see the harlot assuring the young man that it is safe, that there will not be any repercussions or problems because her husband is away for several days. Sin and especially immorality is never without a cost to pay. Yes, God is merciful and patient but only as He determines when it is best. We can never expect or demand God’s mercy or patience. The husband may not have caught the young man but God knew.

21 With her many persuasions she entices him; with her flattering lips she seduces him.

Here he makes a big mistake; he allows the woman to continue to talk to him. Instead he should have ran away. We may not give in to temptation the first time but why take a chance on the second or third times? Eventually it will wear us down and we will give in. Get away the first chance that you get. If you unnecessarily stay around temptation then either you really want to commit the sin and are just letting yourself be seduced or you are a fool who thinks that you are stronger than you should think (“Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall”—1 Corinthians 10:12).

Notice again the mention of flattery. If the only time that someone compliments you is when he wants to have sex with you then watch out because he is a flatterer. This is a person

who will say whatever he has to in order to get whatever he wants even if he does not believe it. Do not be sucked into this deceit.

22 Suddenly he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as one in fetters to the discipline of a fool,

23 Until an arrow pierces through his liver; as a bird hastens to the snare, so he does not know that it will cost him his life.

The temptation may sneak up on us and gradually seduce us, but the choice to sin is sudden.

Notice the five descriptions or results of immorality. 1) He is as ignorant of the consequences as an ox that is stupidly walking into a slaughterhouse. 2) It will enslave him as one who is in chains. Chains restrict movement and prevent us from doing what we should. In the same way immorality will prevent us from becoming the kind of person that God wants us to be. 3) The liver was referred to as “the passion of sensual love, according to the ancients.”<sup>24</sup>. In this case, immorality did not arouse passions of love but rather cut him with a severe wound. This was not Cupid’s arrow but an arrow of poison. 4) A bird was designed by God to soar. A trap will, instead, force it to flutter helplessly. Immorality will prevent us from being the person that God created us to be. 5) The consequences of immorality are terrible. Through disease it can literally cost someone their life. But it can also destroy a person’s desire to follow God. In this case it has cost someone their spiritual life.

So here we have an example of someone who fell into immorality. We can see the progression of his foolishness. It is clear that he was not diligent to avoid temptation but, rather, allowed himself to stare it in the face. He then lingered long enough to be deceived by its flattery and then he suddenly gave in. The results were devastating.

We do not have to wander through darkened streets to find it. We can wander through the Internet or through magazines. We can wander through movies and some TV shows. We can wander through our office or through our neighborhood. Unfortunately, we can even wander through our church and sometimes find it. But we do not have to learn only from our experiences. God gave us this example to show us how something like this can happen and what it can do to us. Why should we be so stupid as to make the same mistakes as this simple, young man?

<b>You are possibly depressed if you:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Worry about every little thing and usually expect the worst to happen</li><li>• Feel like you cannot do anything right</li><li>• Cannot seem to initiate anything and lack motivation</li></ul>



<sup>24</sup> C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Book of Proverbs. Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), p. 170.

- Are unable to focus
- Have no interest in much of anything
- Shy away from time with friends and family
- Feel worthless, helpless, or excessively guilty for no reason
- Are constantly sad and lethargic
- Have trouble sleeping
- Feel worn out and beaten down
- Snap at people often and are more cranky or irritable
- Feel like no one cares or understands
- Feel lonely and isolated

### ***How to minimize the temptation to us and from us***

Temptation can come from two different directions. One is from others that tempts us and the other is that we can be a temptation to others. In either case we must be diligent to do all that we can to flee or eliminate all temptations.

We are going to take a look at some of the ways that we can do both of these. Of course everyone is different and what is a temptation to one person may be repulsive or indifferent to another. In any case, you know when you are being tempted and it is your responsibility to get away from it.

#### **Men**

- Be careful where you look. Those furtive glances can take in a lot of information. Another shameful aspect is that other people can easily see where you are looking. They will not say anything to you but behind your back you will develop the reputation of being a lecherous dog.
- Avoid filthy talk or jokes.
- If you used to be sexually active do not use that as a badge of bravado, it is not. Those women were not conquests; those were acts of sin and shame.
- Do not have your shirt unbuttoned down the front.
- Do not fondle, caress, rub or pat a woman's breasts (whether clothed or not), buttocks, or pelvic area no matter how close to marriage you are.

#### **Women**

- Do not wear shorts that are too short. That does not mean that they must be touching the knee or any such rule but you will know when they are too short.
- Be careful how you bend over and who is standing near to you when you do so.
- Avoid too much perfume.
- Do not fondle, caress, rub, or pat a man's buttocks or crouch.
- Be careful how you sit when you are wearing a dress.



## Both men and women

- Memorize scripture and review it in your mind when you are being tempted. Psalm 119:11 gives us some good instruction, “Thy word I have treasured in my heart, That I may not sin against Thee.”
- Do not put yourself in a position of temptation. As we saw while looking at Proverbs 7 the young man did not avoid temptation but even seemed to flirt with it. Stay away from private places with your boyfriend or girlfriend if you are prone to falling. I would not go so far as to say that the two of you should never be alone together. Some would say that if the woman lives alone in an apartment and you are going to pick her up, she should meet you at the door and then both of you go somewhere public. I believe that if you are both mature there is nothing wrong with being in the same home together. But if there is temptation or things are getting too close to the edge then only being in public places is the way to go.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:22, “abstain from every form of evil” or as the King James Version puts it, “Abstain from all appearance of evil.” I knew one woman who lived with her mother. She got engaged and the man moved in with the two of them until they got married. I felt that this was wrong. Their claim was that nothing ever happened and that the mother was there most of the time. However, what would the neighbors think? They said that their neighbors all knew the situation and also knew that nothing was going on. But then what about the neighbor’s neighbors? Or what about the mailman? If you say to most people, “Yes, we’re living together but nothing is going on,” their outward response might be, “I believe you.” But their inward response is probably more like, “Yea, I bet.” I do not think that any situation is valid for Christians of different genders to be living together. If money is tight and that is your excuse for moving in together then get a second job or trim the wedding plans or maybe even get married sooner. But do not move in together.
- Some say that you should never touch the other person anywhere from the chest down. This might be good advice but since the Bible does not explicitly say this then we cannot make it a hard and fast rule. I would just say that there are certain parts that should not be touched and I think that we all know what they are.
- Avoid tight fitting clothes.
- Read reviews before you see a movie. If nudity is mentioned then avoid the movie even if it is wildly popular and all of your friends have seen it.
- If you are watching a movie and a raunchy or tempting scene comes on then fast-forward to the end of it or close your eyes if you feel that the dialogue is somehow important.
- By all means, do not buy pornography in any form and if you have any then destroy it immediately. If your friends have some and want to show it to you then decline. Tell them that you are not interested. If they hound you about it then tell them, “If you have to pay for it then you don’t deserve it.”
- Do not go to “pick-up” bars or other similar places.

- Do not flirt. If you are interested in someone then be courageous enough to be direct and honest with him or her. Do not feed your ego on the reactions of people whom you care little or nothing about.
- Do not call sex hotlines even as a joke or as curiosity.
- If you find yourself struggling greatly and are encountering defeat after defeat then find someone whom you can be accountable to. Tell him or her to ask you at least once a week how you are doing in this area.

## Some gray areas

There are many areas of purity that are easily argued over. Both sides can make good points and can probably give examples of people who did or did not do such-and-such and how it proves their point. The reason why these areas are gray is because the Bible does not address it directly and how it affects people may vary greatly. Therefore, using the experiences of yourself or of other people does not make for a convincing argument.

Ultimately, the fact that God did not see the necessity to clearly mention it in the Bible is evidence enough that we should not make any rule about it. We may make suggestions and lay down some principles but we must be careful not to present our opinion as God's rule or commandment. For example, some churches may say that women cannot wear shorts above the knee or they cannot wear anything that is the color red since that is the color of arousal. God never says either of these things. In fact in Exodus 26:14 God wanted part of the tabernacle to be red. We must be careful not to add to God's Word or to give the impression that what we are saying is a commandment or principle in scripture.

*Kissing.* Some Christians think that premarital kissing is absolutely wrong and that the first kiss should be at the altar. I see this as overly restrictive. Perhaps the best scripture refuting this is in The Song of Solomon (a.k.a. The Song of Songs in some versions). This is perhaps the most difficult and wildly interpreted book in the Bible. But I will accept one of the more common outlines as described in The Bible Knowledge Commentary. "Many evangelical scholars interpret the Song of Songs as a lyric poem which has both unity and logical progression. The major sections of the Song deal with courtship (1:2-3:5), a wedding (3:6-5:1), and maturation in marriage (5:2-8:4). The Song concludes with a climactic statement about the nature of love (8:5-7) and an epilogue explaining how the love of the couple in the Song began (8:8-14)."<sup>25a</sup> If this is the case then we read in chapter 1 verse 2, "May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine." This would be in the courtship phase of the relationship, which was certainly before marriage.

I believe that kissing while dating or courting or whatever style you use is acceptable. However, I do think that kissing is an intimate form of bonding and commitment and should not be done too early in the

<sup>25</sup> John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, The Bible Knowledge Commentary—Old Testament (Colorado Springs, Victor Books, 1985), p. 1009.

## What Does the Bible Say About Dating, Courtship, Betrothal, and Divine Manipulation?

relationship such as the first or second time together. In some ways the longer that you wait the more wonderful it will be. The difference would be like flinging open a treasure chest and showing everything at once versus pulling out a jewel one at a time and admiring each one sufficiently.

*Masturbation.* This is a gray area because the Bible does not address it. Therefore, it can be argued that its permission or prohibition is uncertain. There is much that can be said about this subject and I do not intend to give a complete or final word. But I would like to discuss a couple aspects of this act.

In order to perform this act there usually must be some sort of sexually stimulating fantasy providing the arousal. So even if the act itself is not addressed these types of fantasies are. In Philippians 4:8 we read, “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.” One would be hard pressed to assert that these fantasies do not violate this verse.

Also, in order to feed these fantasies a person must keep his or her eyes open for additional stimuli or material. As we discussed earlier, these images will expand in our minds and oftentimes our thought life can become out of control. None of this is glorifying to God.

## **Conclusion**

Purity is an issue that can destroy a person and it can destroy a church. How many Christians have hung up their spiritual lives because they insisted on living with their girlfriends or boyfriends? How many men have fallen into guilt and despair because they are addicted to pornography? How many churches have been torn apart or distracted and stalled because their pastor fell into adultery?

Purity is a lifelong struggle for most people. It is one where, if we let down our guard ever so slightly, lust will shove one hairy claw into the door and before we know it our thoughts are dwelling on things that not too long ago we would have found disgusting. Only now we find them enticing and arousing.

Impurity is never a private sin. Even if the lusts are only in your mind they will affect other aspects of your life. In 2 Samuel 11 David should have been out in battle as was the duty of kings. Instead he stayed home. Likewise when we are not doing God’s work but are idle and bored we will be more likely to fall into sin. So David, being bored, wandered up to the roof of his house and from there he saw a woman bathing in the privacy of her yard. For one, he should not have been looking into other people’s private places. And two, once he realized what he was seeing he should have quickly turned away. Instead, he watched. This, I am sure, caused him to fantasize or at least think long and deeply about this woman because he then needed to know more about her. He was unable to stop at his own private lusts; he had to involve others. He then took her and lay with her.

Lust is never satisfied; it is never quenched. One look is never enough. Then one fantasy is never enough. Then one action is never enough. Instead of meditating on God and His word we are now fantasizing about men or women in an impure way. Instead of a life that is honorable and transparent we

are now dishonest and secretive. Instead of them being our sisters and brothers in Christ they are now objects to feed our lusts.

Maintaining a heart of purity will be hard. It will be life long. But it is vital that we set our hearts to be pure. We must make it a habit to look away when our eyes are tempted, to pray when our mind is tempted, and to run when our body is tempted.

<b>You have a problem accepting responsibility if you:</b>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Can never admit that you are wrong</li><li>• First try to think of how you can justify or excuse your behavior when you are reprovved</li><li>• Consider other people lucky if you do something for them</li><li>• Quit on something the first time that something goes wrong</li><li>• First look to blame someone else when something goes wrong</li></ul> |
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## Getting There—What Does the Bible Say About Dating, Courtship, Betrothal, and Divine Manipulation?

There are two areas that everyone claims to be good at. The first is that that they are a better than average driver and the second is that they are a good judge of character. I've never heard anyone say, "I'm just terrible at figuring out what a person is really like." Even the woman on her third husband will insist that she is a good judge of character. The problem is always that "he changed after we got married."

I am different. I admit that I am only an average driver. Right there you know that I am more honest than most people. So on that basis you have to believe me when I tell you with conviction that I am a good judge of people. Within a couple of minutes of meeting someone I can tell you what their top major flaws are and I am right every time. And this does not just apply to character. I can listen to a sermon and at the end of it I can tell the pastor every grammatical mistake he made and after any church event I can pinpoint to the leaders everything that could have been done better.

But this ability is not something that I can take credit for. I truly believe that it is a gift of the Holy Ghost and I want God to get all of the glory. But as with anything that comes from The Lord there is certain to be persecution. I'll give you a couple of examples.

After a message on how to evangelize I took the speaker aside and humbly pointed out how his delivery was stiff and that he left out four major points that should always be included in any presentation on evangelism. He then had the audacity to tell me that I had a critical spirit. I was stunned. Here I was full of the Holy Ghost and being as gentle and humble as anyone could ever be and he turns around and insults me. Well, I put him in his place. As quick as a whip I shot back at him that he is clearly prideful and unteachable. He just stood there in silence like someone hit him with a big rock right on his forehead. I bet that he went home that night with something to think and repent about.

Another time I told a husband that he needed to control his wife better because she wears too much red and her shorts are several inches above her knees. He got so angry that I thought that he was going to hit me so asked myself what Jesus would do and then I put my hand on his shoulder and closed my eyes and prayed out loud that "God would take away the sin of anger from this man's life and to convict his wife of her sin of being a seductress." I guess that the Holy Ghost spoke in a very loud voice through me because when I opened my eyes everyone in the room was staring at me. I'm sure that they were adding their "amens" to my prayer.

I just don't think that people really understand that I am only trying to help them to be better people. It is only those who care the most who are willing to go up to someone and help them

understand their flaws. Most people are so afraid of conflict that they are willing to let others wander around merrily committing the same sins over and over again. But not me. I have a Holy Ghost eye for what is wrong and I'm not one to let God down when it comes time to using it. If God has given you a talent then you should use it every chance you get. That's what I believe with a faith that can pull down mountains and cast the dust into the sea. But it's a gift don't forget; I claim no credit for it. I can only point my finger up to God.

Lately, in Christian circles there has been a bandwagon of condemning dating and purposing courtship or some other method as a means for Christian men and women to get together for marriage. Kevin Offner in the newsletter *Life Matters* wrote "And my conviction is that American dating needs more than fine-tuning or gentle corrections—instead, dating should be abolished."<sup>26</sup> Joshua Harris wrote a popular book called *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*.

Why does something like this anti-dating campaign strike a chord among us? Probably because we have all been hurt because of some dating situation and we would not mind a pain-free way of achieving the same end. It seems especially appealing when we can be convinced that this way is actually Biblical and, therefore, has God's stamp of approval on it. The result has been Christians developing a method of relationships and then trying to validate them as being Biblical. But what does the Bible say about how men and women are to get to know each other in a way that might lead to marriage?

There has been a spate of books on this topic that have come out in the last few years and it seems as though everyone has their own opinion on what is the "right" way to meet another person.

But why is this even a concern to us? Unmarried people can read any number books or articles on how advantageous being single can be. Five of the more popular advantages are:

1. Freedom. You can generally do what you want, go where you want, spend your money however you want to and so on.
2. Time alone. If you need time alone it is not hard to find.
3. Productivity. 1 Corinthians 7:32 is usually referenced. "But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord." The thought is that singles have more time and so can be involved in more ministries and in serving other people.
4. Friends of the opposite gender. It is certainly more possible to do something with someone of the other gender when you are single than when you are married.
5. Less responsibilities. If you lose your job you do not have a family to worry about. There is less stress being concerned about providing for only one. You can get by with much smaller living quarters.

These are all true and good. And yet, for most single people, no matter what they do or how they try and alter their thinking, there is always that tugging at the heart; that gnawing feeling that something is

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<sup>26</sup> Kevin Offner, "Dating vs. Courtship" *Life Matters*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Spring 1997), pp. 5-6.

missing. You can try and suppress that feeling by serving your guts out and being very, very busy, but it is still there lingering. It may shoot to the surface when you pass a young married couple with a newborn or when you are lying alone in bed trying to fall asleep.

So what does the Bible say about this feeling and what should we do about it? Philippians 4:11 says, “Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am.” Paul said that he learned to be content in whatever circumstances he was in and since singleness is a circumstance we should learn to be content in it—Right? And yet, for the most part, it is a real struggle. No matter how hard we try to be content that loneliness and lack of fulfillment keeps creeping back in.

1 Corinthians 7:9 is an interesting verse. It says, “But if they [referring the unmarried mentioned in the preceding verse] do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.” Notice what this verse does not say. It does not read, “But if they do not have self-control then they should learn contentment.” What is God’s solution to a burning desire to marry? It is not forcing yourself to become content. God’s solution to a burning desire to marry is to—What? Marry! We should be content in all things as it says in Philippians 4:11. But contentment is not the solution to an overwhelming desire to marry. In fact, the phrase “let them marry” is a command and not merely permission. Paul did not consider the suppression of this desire to be more spiritual, as some people may say.

This does not mean that we should use this as an excuse to become desperate and hit on every woman or every man that we come across and then marry the first one that says “yes.” There must be a degree of waiting and patience. But there must also be an attitude of availability and trying. Dr. Diane Langberg, who is a Christian psychologist and author, writes, “waiting on God doesn’t necessarily mean doing nothing. It’s more an attitude that says what God wants is more important than what you want so you’ll constantly seek him in your choices.... While it’s hard to long for something and have no idea whether it will ever happen, everyone lives with uncertainty in life. None of us knows what awaits us tomorrow, and many people long for things in life they never get. Ultimately, the only certainty any Christian has is knowing the God who sees what tomorrow holds. God continually asks us to trust him—even in the midst of uncertainty.”

Nor is 1 Corinthians 7:9 an excuse to allow lust to run rampant. Any sin, no matter what the cause or reason, is wrong and must be repented of. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, said in Matthew 5:28, “but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

1 Corinthians 7:9 does not give anyone the freedom to be obnoxious, rude, desperate, annoying, lustful, or whiny.

### ***Four possible methods of meeting other people***

As best as I have been able to determine, there are four general methods for how we might meet a potential mate.

1. Dating
2. Courtship

3. Betrothal or Arrangement
4. Divine Manipulation

We are first going to define each of these and then we will take a look at each one using the Bible as the reference. All of these methods have variations and hybrids, but we will try to define and utilize the most general understanding.

## Definitions

### Dating

With dating the intentions are clear from the beginning that you are both interested to some degree in each other and want to see if there is any potential for marriage. Dating usually begins when one person approaches the other and asks for a time out together or two people who are friends may mutually decide to take the relationship one stage further. It is basically a trial relationship. There is generally a feeling of exclusivity in that neither party would likely go on a date with someone else. Fairly early on there may be some physical intimacy such as holding hands or kissing. If all goes well then at some point a proposal is made and, if accepted, then the couple is engaged. The engagement period generally ends with marriage unless they break up, of course. For the most part, it is expected that the man pay for all of the expenses.

So there is generally three stages: dating, engagement, and marriage.

This is the most common means of people getting together for marriage in Western countries. It has been observed by historian Beth Bailey, that dating, as we know it today, is a fairly recent phenomenon. In the past, if a boy wanted to get to know a girl, he had to wait until she invited him to her home. Then between 1890 and 1925 young women began moving from the farms to the cities. With many women possibly living together in one apartment it was no longer practical for a woman to invite a man into her parlor (or living room). As a result, ‘a good time’ became identified with public places and commercial amusements.

Bailey says that the move from private parlors to public dance halls “fundamentally altered the balance of power between men and women.” Men no longer had to wait for women to invite them into their homes. Instead, women now waited for men to invite them on dates. This “moved courtship into the world of the economy. Men’s money was at the center of the dating system.”<sup>27</sup>

### Courtship

Here is what seems to be most people’s definition of courtship. A particular man and woman work hard at being good friends. This develops into being serious, deep, and sacrificial friends. There is no exclusivity or physical involvement. Since this is not dating both parties share in expenses. At some point the man determines that this relationship is headed towards marriage. So he gets counsel from his parents,

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<sup>27</sup> Cited by Rob Marcus, “Kissing Nonsense Goodbye” [www.ChristianityToday.com](http://www.ChristianityToday.com) (June 11, 2001).



pastor, friends, and other significant people in his life. If they all give the “OK” then he goes to the woman’s parents or guardians and tells them his intentions. If they also give the “OK,” then he informs the woman that they are to begin courting. Sometimes the woman must also give her approval before the courting is begun. After courting for some variable length of time they would then become engaged which would, usually, result in marriage.

There are generally four stages to courtship: friendship, courting, engagement, and marriage. Throughout this whole process there is always a community of believers that supervises and guards this relationship.

Some of the advantages of courting are billed as follows:

- 1) The woman is protected from giving herself too emotionally and, in some possible ways, physically to a man without any commitment on either of their parts.
- 2) It forces men to be responsible to think through the consequences of their actions before he vows his commitment.
- 3) It keeps the relationship within a group of people who can supervise and watch over the couple.

## **Betrothal or Arrangement**

This is the most common type of marriage setup in the non-Western world. These two terms are basically synonymous.

The Encarta Encyclopedia says, “Betrothal is defined as engagement or formal agreement to marry, which may take the form of a verbal promise or a written contract between two individuals. The betrothal is an ancient custom dating from biblical times when marriages were arranged by one’s parents or guardians. During the Middle Ages arranged betrothals were used to strengthen royal dynasties, establish diplomatic alliances, and increase estates and fortunes. Until recent times, it remained common for parents to arrange marriages in much of the world, especially the Eastern and Muslim countries. In some societies, the custom still exists.”

The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology says this about arranged marriages in the Bible. “Marriages were frequently matters of convenience for the family and rarely a concern of the heart. They were arranged by parents, and in some cases were even considered invalid if parental permission was lacking. Discussions concerning the marriage took place between the parents without the presence, consent, or frequently the awareness of the prospective bride and groom.”<sup>28</sup>

In some versions of betrothal there are no friendship, dating or courtship stages. A man gets permission to marry a woman first from his parents, then from her parents, and then he goes and asks her to marry him. If she says, “yes” then they are engaged and cannot break it off without getting the equivalent of a divorce and only for infidelity since they both consider engagement to be as binding as marriage. Jonathan Lindvall in his article “Youthful Romance: Scriptural Patterns” says that God’s best is for people “not to allow

<sup>28</sup> H. W. Perkin, “Marriage, Marriage Customs in Bible Times” The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, op. cit., pp. 690-693.

themselves to cultivate romantic inclinations toward anyone until they know God has shown them this person is to be their life-long mate.”<sup>29</sup> In his own experience before marrying his wife, Connie, he said, “with my parents’ blessing I visited her parents and asked their permission to marry her. I had to explain that we had never gone on a date, I had no idea of Connie’s interest, and that Connie was completely unaware of my interest... I began to get a bit excited when they gave their blessing.”<sup>30</sup>

This form is rarely used in Western cultures anymore although some Christians do teach it as being more scriptural.

## **Divine Manipulation**

This is basically where neither person makes any effort or, at the most, minimal effort to find a mate. The idea is to let God handle the situation and to let Him work on bringing the two people together. Some may describe this method as a triangle with God at the point at the top, the man at the bottom left and the woman at the other side on the bottom right. As both the man and the woman draw closer to God they will be drawn closer to each other also. Eventually they will be brought together as a couple. Usually there is minimal or no dating or courtship involved although there probably would be a good friendship.

A verse that is sometimes used is Proverbs 18:22, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD.” The analogy is drawn in that you are walking down the sidewalk doing whatever business you are supposed to be doing when you suddenly see a twenty-dollar bill on the sidewalk. You were not looking for money on the ground, but since it is there you fortuitously pick it up and it is yours. In the same way, the claim is made, as you are obeying God and doing what God wants you to do, He will put the man or woman that He wants you to have right in front of you even though you were not looking for it.

The clear benefit to this system is that it takes no effort, no chances, probably no hurt, and you are guaranteed that it is God’s best. Those are all rather good things.

## **What about each method?**

Those were some quick, basic definitions of the four ways that a man and a woman can meet with the hope of leading to marriage.

Let us take a look at each of these in more detail by examining advantages and disadvantages and, especially, what does the Bible say.

## **Dating**

The current bandwagon among many Christians is to discourage or even abolish dating. Don Raunikaar in his book *Choosing God’s Best* says, “Dating has a self-centered focus” and “Dating quickly leads to emotional and physical involvement without development of a deep, lasting friendship.” And, yes, dating can oftentimes be nothing more than an ego-trip for some people.

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Lindvall, “Youthful Romance: Scriptural Patterns” [www.boldchristianliving.com](http://www.boldchristianliving.com) (1997).

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Lindvall, “The Dangers of Dating: Scriptural Romance—Part 1” [www.boldchristianliving.com](http://www.boldchristianliving.com) (1996).

In the current war against Christian dating here is a definition of dating from someone who is opposed to dating and is proposing betrothal. Jonathan Lindvall defines dating as a “Temporary romantic relationship focused on current enjoyment/pleasure without future commitments; usually one of series of relationships.”<sup>31</sup> What is wrong with this definition? He is presenting his opponent’s argument in such a way as to make it very easily defeated. Generally this involves exaggeration, omission, or misstatement of the other’s argument. This is called setting up a straw man and this is a good example of one.

Is all dating temporary? Certainly not since many times the people do get married.

Is it necessarily “focused on current enjoyment/pleasure”? Many are but certainly many simply involve two people who are honestly trying to determine if they are right for each other and if there is enjoyment or pleasure involved then so much the better. Christians are not (or should not be) stoics who believe that all joy and pleasure is bad.

Is dating “without future commitments”? Many people are dating for the very purpose of hoping that this will lead to the future commitment of marriage.

This example shows the kind of dishonest rhetoric that is out there on this topic. As we examine this subject we must be careful to cut through the misrepresentation and hyperbole and examine the issues from a neutral starting point using the Bible as the ultimate guide.

Of course, many people “recreational date” where there is intimacy without commitment. These are people who date because they like having a boyfriend or a girlfriend. They genuinely like the person but marriage is not even a distant consideration. Oftentimes these people just want companionship. Unfortunately, though, the other person may be hoping for more than that and may be devastated and feel used when nothing more comes of the relationship. Many times this relationship ends with the “I just want to be friends” assertion.

Some people “sport date” where the motivation is usually something egotistical like wanting to be seen dating the best looking or most desirable person. The goal may be nothing nobler than to make as many people as possible envious. This person is using people to fulfill his or her own desires with little regard for what the other person is feeling. They may even think that since this person is so attractive anyway they should have no trouble finding someone else and so it is no big deal to drop them whenever the “game” is over.

There is also “revenge dating” where someone has developed a hatred for people of the other gender and so will do whatever he or she can to hurt those people. This may involve dating people just to break it off at a particularly painful time. Or it may involve flirting just to turn the person down when he or she finally asks. Revenge dating can also occur when one person wants to get back at someone else. For example, a guy hurts a good friend of yours and so you date him just to mess around with his emotions. Revenge dating is always wrong. It starts with a motive of hatred and wanting to deliberately inflict hurt oftentimes on someone that has done you no personal harm.

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<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Lindvall, “Comparisons of Dating, Courtship, & Scriptural Betrothal” [www.boldchristianliving.com](http://www.boldchristianliving.com) (1997).

Recreational dating and especially sport and revenge dating are wrong. They are both focusing on self and are not sensitive to the other person's feelings. If the other person is hurt when the relationship ends then often the justification is something like, "Well, I never said that we were serious."

We are going to take a look at some arguments against dating and discuss them.

1) Dating focuses on the potentiality of marriage rather than on being friends.

The first assumption to challenge is who says that there must be a "friendship" stage? All of us can probably think of many couples that skipped the "friendship" phase of dating and are still together after 20, 30 or more years of marriage. It did not seem to hurt them. The Bible never states or shows by example that there must be a friendship stage before marriage.

Also, there can be a big glitch when two people become great friends and that is when, if at all, to pull the trigger and discuss moving from the friendship to the courting phase. I know of several situations where a man and a woman were great friends for years and then he became more interested in her than just as a friend, but he was afraid to initiate bringing up that next step for fear that the friendship would be ruined if she was not interested. So he never did and they never moved beyond being just friends.

Another problem is the situation where you are interested in someone whom you normally never have contact with and you are not in touch with any of his or her circle of friends. How then do you become friends with that person? You would have to maneuver into his or her circle of friends to really just become friends with that one person. Is not that a bit manipulative and deceptive? And if you just walk up to someone and say, "Let's be friends" how much different is that from asking them out on a date?

Dating can be manipulative, confusing, frustrating, and painful. But then so can a friendship if one person is trying to maneuver it to courtship and the other thinks that it is just a friendship and nothing more.

Being friends first may work out great for a lot of people, but since the Bible does not list this as a necessary prerequisite then neither should we. In fact, many of the marriages in the Bible did not start out with the two people being friends. Isaac and Rebekah were not friends before they got engaged.

2) Dating brings people together but does not necessarily encourage commitment

This tends to be the big bug-a-boo that is causing many Christians to disparage dating and oftentimes it is a big concern. This point is what is causing many to say courtship is better than dating. In courtship, there are two phases before engagement. The first phase is friendship where there is no physical or emotional intimacy. Both people are really just good friends. The second phase is courtship where marriage has already been determined and so intimacy is allowed. So what makes this method superior to dating? It is claimed, and rightfully so, that most of the time two people become intimate in dating before there is any commitment and so if the relationship breaks up, as many times happens, there is greater pain and heartache. In courting there is no intimacy until the commitment is made and by then it is less likely to

break up. Therefore, less pain is likely because the emotional depth is not developed as quickly as it does in dating.

This is well and good but there are a few points to consider.

a) In the friendship phase of courtship, would it not be true that as the friendship deepens into something more than your run-of-the-mill friendship that emotions can be just as strong as in dating? In fact in the period just before the commitment phase should not the emotions be rather involved and developed? The big difference is that in courtship these emotions must be suppressed or denied because, after all, it is only a friendship. Yes, it is true that emotions can develop more quickly when things become physical as they might in dating or there is not that restraint of “remember, this is only a friendship.” But it is not true that dating forces emotional intimacy whereas courtship necessarily manages them nicely. So emotions are going to be strong in both dating and courtship. The difference is that in dating they are more in the open whereas in courtship they are more suppressed.

b) Is developing intimacy before commitment such a bad thing? Just because two people are great friends that does not mean that they will be great spouses. Marriage just is not two good friends now living together after a ceremony. Intimacy is an important part of marriage. There is intimacy in communication, intimacy in emotions, intimacy in encouragement, intimacy in admonishment, and so on (physical intimacy is not included here and should not be explored). Would it not be wise to know if the two of you are compatible in these deeper levels of intimacy before a commitment is made?

c) Dating will often end in pain but then so will other types of relationships. There is a thought that dating should be abolished because it leads to hurt. But all relationships once they reach a certain level are going to cause hurt at some times. That hurt might be because the relationship has ended. Or, if the relationship continues, there will disappointment, insensitivity, selfishness, and so on. If you want to avoid hurt in relationships then you would have to avoid relationships.

Think about the One who knows how to form the greatest and most perfect relationships. That would, of course, be God. Has God eliminated hurt from His relationships or was He willing to endure the greatest hurt because of relationships? In order to have a relationship with us, God was forced to make the greatest sacrifice and endure the infinite pain of becoming sin on the cross. You may argue that that was a one-time event due to extraordinary circumstances. But even today, God is still enduring hurt in order to maintain intimacy with us. Ephesians 4:30 says, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”

3) People who are dating often isolate themselves from other people and relationships.

Kevin Offner says in defense of courting and against dating, “The couple is unashamedly a public ‘item’ (none of this sneaky individualism where the community at large is intentionally kept in the dark).”<sup>32</sup>

This isolationism is a legitimate problem no matter what the relationship is. Even a married couple can foolishly isolate themselves from other people. The Bible tells us that it is important to be with other

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<sup>32</sup> Kevin Offner, Ibid.

people, to minister to others and to seek counsel from others. Any relationship that takes you away from other people needs to be revised. Dating can do this. Courtship can do this. Marriage can do this. And if the only relationship that you have is with yourself and you are isolating yourself from other people then that is also wrong.

But it is important to spend time alone with each also. Many Christians propose that all dating should be done in groups or with at least a few other friends so as to prevent the possibility of wrongful physical involvement. This is a valid concern, but when two people are married most of their time will be spent alone together and not in groups. So if you want to see how you respond to each other you will need to be alone. This does not mean that you have to be alone in a house or in a living room; it could be in a park or in a restaurant. But how someone reacts to you in a group is going to be different than how they react to you alone. This is important to understand. And besides, the Bible never says that two people who are contemplating marriage should never be alone together.

But notice how dishonest Offner's definition is. Is dating necessarily sneaky? Are other Christians always "kept in the dark"? Most of the people that I know have dated openly with no shame or guilt about doing so; other Christians were aware of the situation and counsel was gladly sought and accepted. Once again we see a straw man.

#### 4) Dating generally focuses on the here and now and not for the future.

First, where in the Bible is there a distinction between the tasks of young adults and other adults? Titus 2:3-8 is about the only place that discusses a difference between old and young. "Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, *to be* sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored. Likewise urge the young men to be sensible; in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, *with* purity in doctrine, dignified, sound *in* speech which is beyond reproach, so that the opponent will be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us."

First, in all of these cases this is dealing with developing character; something that should occur all throughout our lives. But notice that even here for young women it is not telling them to be single and not date and prepare for the future. On the contrary, it is assuming that they are already married and have children.

Second, in Bible times people generally married quite young. The minimum age for boys to get married was 13 and for girls it was set at 12. To be married at 15 was not at all unusual. Some believe that Mary, the mother of Jesus, might have been around this age when she gave birth to Jesus. Of course, this is not something that I would advocate, but you will hear many people who try and use the culture of pre-marriage relationships in the Bible to validate their theory on courtship or betrothal ignore this little, inconvenient fact.

Third, what are two of the greatest tasks we can do but to know and serve God and to develop right relationships with other people? Dating certainly has its flaws but as we stumble through many of these types of situations it does help us to understand other people and to understand ourselves. It is certainly a great way to find out what a jerk we can be.

5) Dating can cause discontentment with God's gift of singleness.

This is in *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. I find this one to be odd since the only possible mention of there being a gift of singleness in the Bible is 1 Corinthians 7:7, "Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that." The general feeling of this verse from most commentators is that the gift of singleness means that you are not interested in getting married and, therefore, dating is not going to be an issue.

However, the probable intention of this argument is not discontentment with the *gift* of singleness as much as with the *state* of singleness. To answer this I would refer back to my earlier comments on 1 Corinthians 7:9, "But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion." The Biblical solution to a burning to be married is not to learn contentment but to marry.

6) There is a greater possibility of a physical relationship in dating substituting for love.

This is not a problem of dating; this is a problem of relationships in general. In any situation you must always be careful not to go beyond certain boundaries. That issue is not so much with the method as it is with self-control and purity. You can argue that this is more likely to happen in dating than in courtship where all physical touching is prohibited and that is most likely to be true.

In any situation we need to be mature enough to recognize that physical activity is absolutely no indication of how well any two people will do in marriage. The two of you may be great at holding hands or kissing but does he or she have the godly characteristics to make a marriage work? Is there trust, faithfulness, honesty, selflessness, respect, understanding, and a commitment to Jesus Christ? These are the things that will build a solid marriage.

How can you determine if your relationship has Biblical love in it? Compare it to 1 Corinthians 13 and see how it matches up.

If you are so shortsighted and immature as to think that romance or physical enjoyment are the keys to a successful relationship then you are doomed.

7) Dating creates an artificial environment for evaluating another person's character.

In *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, Joshua Harris further says, "People who sincerely want to find out if someone is potential marriage material need to understand that typical dating actually hinders that process." He also states, "They need to see each other in the real-life settings of family and friends. They need to watch each other serving and working. How does he interact with the people who know him best? How

does she react when things don't go perfectly? When considering a potential mate, we need to find the answers to these kinds of questions—questions that dating won't answer.”

Though what Harris says regarding the need to see how the other reacts in different situations is valid, I beg to differ with his accusation that dating hinders this. To restate what has been said before, intimacy is a key component of marriage. There is intimacy of emotions, intimacy of communication and so on (since compatibility of physical intimacy is not a pre-marital issue, discussion or experimentation it is not included in this list). It is probably advisable to know if you are compatible in these areas of intimacy before you decide to get married. It is unlikely that you are going to develop that just being friends and hanging around in groups.

Yes, it is true that when on a date people do tend to put forward their best side and may act artificially, but that is true in friendships also. I believe that the key is to date long enough to get a complete enough grasp of the key issues (see the section on “How to Know the Will of God in Marriage” especially regarding “Time”), and that will vary between couples. The longer you are together the harder it is to maintain a fake exterior. The true person will begin to crack through that mask eventually. The question is, “Are you willing to date long enough for that to happen?”

No, dating is not perfect. It certainly has its problems. People can use dating to stroke their own egos, they can turn dating into experiments rather than relationships, and they can use dating to hurt other people. Dating can more easily lead to physical intimacy quicker than the other three methods and dating, for some people, is nothing more than a means for physical or sexual intimacy.

But dating does have its pluses. The relationship is more clearly defined in the beginning; there is no pretense that it is something other than what it really is. The relationship can flow more to how the couple is relating to each other rather than through a perhaps forced and artificial set of stages (friendship then courting). The couple is able to get to know each other better in many different situations (alone together and in groups) before making a commitment.

## **Courtship**

While examining dating we have already looked at a number of aspects of courtship also.

Courtship is certainly more structured and stricter than dating but less so than betrothal. Courtship generally forces more input from family and friends into the relationship. This is a good thing. Too many couples make such an incredibly important decision of marriage without consulting anyone else.

Also, courtship tends to define and maintain emotional and physical boundaries better. When two people, especially when they are younger, are left to figure things out on their own there will probably be more experimentation, more stepping over wise boundaries, and more mistakes. Courtship starts at the base level of friendship and then carefully brings the couple through each new phase.

But courtship does have its problems. In his article “Kissing Nonsense Goodbye” Rob Marcus says, “People who courted were doing so because they wanted to be married. Under courtship systems, there was



never any agonizing about when to have that other most dreaded of dating talks—the ‘define the relationship’ (or DTR) conversation—because that’s how you began the courtship in the first place. If the relationship wasn’t defined as ‘likely leading to marriage,’ then you wouldn’t court. All those misunderstandings and hurt feelings were minimized by having them at the beginning.”<sup>33</sup>

Then he goes on to say, “However, the strictures placed on courting couples under these systems gave them little privacy to be open with each other.” And this is one of the biggest problems regarding courtship. By definition, courtship is touted as being superior to dating because it avoids romance, intimacy, and physical involvement before commitment. This is usually accomplished by not allowing the two people to spend much time alone and by discouraging any talk or actions that would be beyond a normal or typical friendship. But these supposed benefits are what force two people to commit to each other without having explored the advisable world of non-physical intimacy. Marriage is not just friendship with commitment. It is more than that. And as intimacy is developed while courting, the two people may be found to be incompatible and so the courtship may be broken off. Then, here too, there is much pain and sorrow.

Ultimately, people should deepen their understanding of who they are and who the other person is. If you want to go the route of friendship, courtship, engagement, and marriage then that is fine. Courtship can and does work. However, it is probably more useful for those who are in their late teens or early twenties. Older adults generally have a better feel of who they are and what they are looking for. For them it is probably not necessary to force them through phases. Of course, everyone, no matter how old, should always seek counsel and guidance from parents, guardians, pastors, and friends in something as important as marriage.

As we have seen under “dating” courtship can become awkward when one person wants to take the friendship to the next level but has no idea what the other person is thinking and so is afraid to push the button lest the friendship be possibly ruined.

Also, courtship assumes the easy accessibility of starting the friendship phase. However, that is not always easy and can lead to deceit and manipulation in order for one person to force the start of a friendship with someone that they are interested in for greater reasons.

Courtship has its place but it is probably more useful for younger adults who are still living with their parents or are only recently out of their house. It is also more beneficial for adults who may have problems with self-control or with making wise decisions.

Sometimes there is a bit of hybrid between dating and courtship. Two people may just naturally become good friends for quite a while. Then they may realize that their relationship is more than just being good friends so they start dating. Then they get engaged and marry. This can work well.

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<sup>33</sup> Rob Marcus, *Ibid.*

## Betrothal or Arranged

One may argue that there was one overall method of singles coming together in marriage that predominates the culture of the Bible and that was arranged marriages. And that would be right. But that was the method that the people in Biblical times used. However, we must not confuse God's commandments or methods with the customs practiced by the people during the Old and/or New Testament times. Our example of Biblical living is not the culture of sinful people who happened to live when the Bible was written. Our example of Biblical living is what God Himself tells us. We learn righteous ways from the Bible; not from the culture of the Bible's times.

This is a common mistake made by those who are proposing arranged marriages. So as we examine arranged marriages from a Biblical viewpoint we must separate what God says from what the culture back then did.

Arranged marriages can and do work. There is nothing necessarily wrong with them. The decision making process is certainly more skewed to relying on the experience and wisdom of older adults such as parents and pastors rather than the potentially impulsive choices of younger people.

In dating or courtship the newlyweds may have a tendency to rely purely on romantic or passionate emotions to carry them through the marriage. So when tough times hit and these emotions have left the room they may not be prepared to fight through the crises. But the bride and groom in an arranged marriage know from the beginning that they will have to work at making the marriage successful since the emotions initially may be embryonic or even non-existent. At some point a married couple must realize that the factors that determine a great, long-term marriage will not so much be emotions but, rather, will be an attitude of commitment, love, and faithfulness. In an arranged marriage this may be more obvious from the start.

An arranged marriage, since it was determined by the families, will oftentimes have more continual support from these same families then will be a marriage whose families were merely told of the engagement with little or no say in the matter. This can be of great benefit during times of struggle or crisis.

But in our Western culture where children, most of the time, move away from their parents, go to college, develop careers, and meet people that their parents have never met arranged marriages are not usually practical.

But there are several aspects of arranged marriages as characterized in the Bible that would not function well in most modern, Western societies. In Biblical times arranged marriages were generally kept within the tribe or clan. For example, Rebekah was Isaac's wife. Isaac's father was Abraham. Abraham's nephew was Rebekah's father. So Isaac and Rebekah were second cousins. In Genesis 29:12 Jacob told his future wife Rachel "that he was a relative of her father." It is interesting though, how anyone pushing Christian betrothal tends to either ignore this point or tries to spiritualize it by saying that the clan is now the church. However, no where in the Bible does it state that the Old Testament clan or tribe is now the New Testament church. Besides, whereas there was many tribes within the one nation of Israel there is only one true church. The analogy breaks down.

Many of the arranged marriages in the Bible were done for political reasons. Solomon married Pharaoh's daughter because of a political alliance. 1 Kings 3:1 states, "Then Solomon formed a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt, and took Pharaoh's daughter." Today most Christians would be rightfully horrified at the idea of marrying someone purely for the purpose of political, social, or financial gain. Yet this is what occurs in many arranged marriages even today.

We can also see at least one arranged marriage that failed. Saul gave his daughter Michal to David and eventually she came to despise David (2 Samuel 6:16) and then God made her barren.

Another problem with betrothal is that it relies heavily on parental suggestion and consent. Usually this is purposed as one of its advantages. But suppose that the parents are not Christians? In that case then they are not open to God's guidance and so there is no guarantee that their approval will ever be correct. And you cannot glibly claim that God will still guide them anyway even if they are not Christians because nowhere in the Bible does God ever give this promise. In this case you may try to substitute a Christian guardian or pastor instead of the parents but that is assuming that either of those exist for this person or know him or her well enough to make a wise decision.

Since arranged marriages do not rely on dating or friendship or courtship to determine compatibility this leads to another problem. Arranged marriages assume that all parties involved are accurately tuned to God's guidance and will. For such an important and permanent situation do we really want to rely on such shaky ground as knowing without a doubt what God just said without any other verification or support? Today, God does not usually speak out of winds or pillars of fire or by using the Urim and the Thummim or by drawing lots as they did in Acts 1. Nor does God walk among us like Jesus did. Today we must rely on recognizing the different ways that God might reveal His will regarding a situation. Most Christians do not even read their Bibles on a daily basis and pray less than five minutes every day. So should we bet the rest of our lives on them suddenly being completely in tune with the Holy Spirit regarding marriage? I would certainly be hesitant.

As with all of these methods arranged marriages have their pluses and minuses. However, in a culture where children move away from their parents and people marry later in life this method may not be as practical. Many parents may not know of a suitable Christian man or woman especially if they attend a church that is small or has a small single population. Also, many parents do not attend church.

## **Divine Manipulation**

Divine manipulation relies on a strong sense of God's leading. This may take the form of a distinct, unquestionable impression, an audible voice, some obvious sign, remarks by other Christians, or some other clear guidance from God. Some people thinking that they have heard the voice of God in this matter have become engaged within two weeks of meeting the other person.

A clear advantage to this method is that if God is giving such clear instruction then the relationship or marriage is bound to be blessed and supported by God. This is no small advantage. Marriages will succeed

or fail based on how much God is in them. A relationship that begins by God taking each person in one of His hands and then bringing them together is off to a tremendous start.

This method also relieves the two people of having to struggle through all of the time and emotional energy of initiating, dating, or courting. Those stages may take place but there is a greater confidence to the relationship.

There may be a greater commitment to each other since no one can ever do better than God's number one choices. If the two people are thinking about breaking up each will know that anyone else will be, at best, God's second choice.

The main thrust of this method is that Christians should not be out looking for a husband or a wife; that God will work it out and bring that ideal person into your life. Those who advocate this method will discourage people from attending Christian singles groups or will tell people not to seek out a mate. They will tell Christians not to strive or that when the person stops trying then God will bring them the right person.

As was stated previously, a verse that is sometimes used to validate this method is Proverbs 18:22, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD." The claim is that a person "finds" a wife in the sense of finding money on the sidewalk. One of the many problems with this is that the word "find" in the Hebrew means "to reach, to arrive at, to attain." It is the same word used in Proverbs 3:13, "How blessed is the man who finds wisdom." This is not a happenstance occurrence; wisdom was found because an effort was made or some activity brought you to it.

Some people use Genesis 2:18-24 as a Biblical reason for why Christians should not be out looking for a mate.

<sup>18</sup>Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him."

<sup>19</sup>Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name.

<sup>20</sup>The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him.

<sup>21</sup>So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place.

<sup>22</sup>The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man.

<sup>23</sup>The man said,

"This is now bone of my bones,  
And flesh of my flesh;  
She shall be called Woman,

Because she was taken out of Man.”

The logic is that this was the only perfect time in history and, with Adam doing nothing, God, knowing his need, brought him a wife. This passage would supposedly support the idea of Divine Manipulation. That would mean that while we are simply obeying God and doing His work He will then bring us a mate.

Here are six reasons as to why this verse is not valid to apply to finding a mate today.

1. Adam was the only created human being. He did not even know that such a thing as a woman existed. It would be ludicrous to expect him to go searching for something that he has absolutely no clue about. This would conjure up an image of him searching behind every rock and tree, scratching his head saying, “Is that what I’m missing?” Today, we know what someone of the other gender is.
2. There were no other human beings and there was no way for Adam to reproduce on his own. So there was absolutely no other way for him to get a mate other than for God to miraculously create one. We can reproduce today. There are other people out there.
3. God did not *bring* Adam a wife—as the teaching must be applied to today—God *created* Adam a wife just for him. To equate bringing with creating is to violently strain the text.
4. At that time everything was perfect, there was no sin. At the fall, everything changed. At that time God walked and spoke freely with Adam so God’s perfect and clear guidance could be known just by asking Him. There was no pain or sin or death. There was no need for a Savior. There was no confusion or need for purification or sanctification. Today none of that is true. You cannot take a situation that is totally different than it is today and decide that the way that something was done back then is the same as it should be done today simply because you want your pet doctrine to be true. That is simply bad theology.
5. God never says anywhere in the Bible that this is an example of how relationships should work today or at any time, for that matter, other than that one time.
6. This never occurred again in the Bible. So if God never used it again or even any semblance of it then why should we?

The conclusion that because the first marriage occurred while the man did nothing and God did all of the work should be applied today is nothing more than someone trying to find a Scripture, any Scripture, to turn man’s doctrine into Biblical doctrine. The fact that this is the verse that is used demonstrates nothing more than just how desperate and non-Biblical the theory is to begin with.

There is also a frequent teaching using this same passage in Genesis 2:19-24 that we must first go to sleep emotionally before God will bring us a mate. It follows along the same lines as “God will give you a spouse only when you stop looking.”

Here are six reasons why that is a wrong interpretation of this Scripture.

1. In this passage Adam simply went to sleep physically. To then say that this represents going to sleep emotionally is to twist the scripture into saying more than it does simply to try and give some kind of scriptural support to a pet theology.
2. In the Bible, Adam did not put himself to sleep; it was not a choice that he made in obedience to something. It was God who put Adam to sleep. Those who claim that we must put our emotions to sleep seem to conveniently forget that.
3. God put Adam to sleep physically because God wanted to remove a physical part of Adam to create the woman. To keep the analogy consistent what part of our emotions does God remove when we are emotionally asleep to bring us a woman? There is none. The analogy falls apart.
4. No where else in scripture, for all of the times that God brought people together, did God ever command or even recommend that they had to go to sleep emotionally first.
5. It contradicts 1 Corinthians 7:9 in that this verse does not read, “But if they do not have self-control then they should put their emotions to sleep.”
6. God does not give us a right and good desire and then tell us to spend energy trying to suppress it.

If this is the only verse that someone can use to support their case for going to sleep emotionally then it is a poor case indeed.

Another problem with divine manipulation is that it forces people to give up trying. By doing this many people will miss opportunities that God has provided simply because they were waiting for something spectacular rather than being willing to work for it. It is similar to the story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5. Here Naaman was the captain of the army of the king of Aram, but he was a leper. He was told that Elisha the prophet in Israel could cure leprosy so he went to him. In verses 9 - 11 we read, “So Naaman came with his horses and his chariots, and stood at the doorway of the house of Elisha. And Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, ‘Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored to you and you shall be clean.’ But Naaman was furious and went away and said, ‘Behold, I thought, “He will surely come out to me, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and wave his hand over the place, and cure the leper.”’” Here Naaman wanted something spectacular to happen, some great miracle of God. Instead, God told him to go do some mundane task. In the same way, we can want God to bring us someone in a spectacular and clearly miraculous way. But most of time God is saying, “Go down to that Singles Ministry,” or “Go serve in that ministry.” We would rather have hand waving than work. But usually work we must and that applies to relationships as well.

Oftentimes, there is a concept that goes hand-in-hand with divine manipulation and that is the idea that there is one and only one person out there for us. The Bible does not ever say this and so I think that should eliminate that theory immediately.

But also rubbing against this is the Biblical concept of God allowing people to go against His will. In Genesis 19 God wanted Lot to flee into the mountains but Lot begged not to have to go into the mountains and asked to go to a small nearby town called Zoar instead. God allowed Lot to do that. Of course disaster occurred, as it will when we do not listen to God. God has His perfect will and His permissive will. He will let us do things that go against His will. Relating this to marriage, if there is one-and-only-one person for you but because of rebellion he or she refuses to marry you and so goes against God's will, are you then stuck for the rest of your life being single because now God cannot work something else out with another person? I doubt it. All relationships require adjusting, compromising, and changing. I believe that there are many people out there that any one of us could have perfectly wonderful marriages with.

Yes, God can speak to people and clearly tell them His will for their lives. I believe that there have been times when this has occurred in the realm of marriage for some people. But for the great majority of people this will never happen. Why is this? Perhaps it is because for most people God would prefer a constant seeking of Him for His will regarding a relationship and a humble seeking of others for their counsel. Some people may get such a great revelation, but for most of us it is not this easy.

The Bible simply does not give any indication that we should wait for the miraculous. We can pray for the miraculous, but in the meantime we should work. The farmer must plant the seed, the soldier must prepare for battle, the athlete must train for the competition. Even in the spiritual battle Ephesians 6 urges us to put on the full armor of God.

I believe that divine manipulation or any other similar philosophy that may go by another name may work for a very few but is dangerous for most in that it discourages Christians from making an effort and relying on the miraculous instead. It is method that may be adopted by some more because of laziness or fear than because of any Biblical basis.

## How did it happen in the Bible

We just took a deeper look at each of the four main methods of how people might come together. But as with everything in life and death, the seen and the unseen we need to go to the Bible and see what it says, if anything, on this subject.

There were several instances in the Bible where God brought people together for marriage. Maybe we should then use these as our example of how we manage our relationships today. Let us take a look at some of them.

1. God spoke directly to Hosea and told him exactly which women He wanted Hosea to marry. Now that sounds like the way all of us would like to have it happen. But whom did God tell Hosea to marry? It was a prostitute named Gomer. And why did God want this? It was for Hosea to be an analogy of how Israel was acting like a harlot to God. Hosea 1:2 says, "When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, 'Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children

of harlotry; for the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the Lord.”” This was a Biblical way and reason for God bringing two people together.

2. In Judges 21 the remaining members of the tribe of Benjamin were told to hide in a vineyard and when some women came by to dance they were to run out and each one was to catch a woman for himself to marry. This certainly does eliminate a lot of the fuss that any of our four methods require.

3. We can see in Ruth 4 that if someone bought a piece of land that was associated with a childless widow then he must marry that woman so as to continue the name of the deceased. So in this situation if you bought a certain piece of land you got a wife along with it. This was Biblical. But, today, only the most desperate or the cheapest would see this as a good method.

4. In Deuteronomy 21:10-13 we see in God’s law that if you conquered an enemy and found a beautiful woman among the captives you could take her home, shave her head, trim her nails, give her new clothes and then marry her.

5. In Genesis 28 we see that if your brother dies childless you had to by law take his widow as your wife. Now that could be a problem today for some.

6. In Genesis 2:19-24 God put Adam to sleep and then took out a rib and created a wife for him. Convenient but certainly not practical for today as we have already seen.

7. In Genesis 24 we see Abraham sending out his servant to find a wife for his son. The servant set up a test involving specific words and actions and if any woman met this test exactly then she was the one for Isaac to marry. If we all tried to do that today to the same exact degree the human race would end rather quickly.

These are all legitimate ways that God brought a man and a woman together in marriage yet you rarely or never hear about anyone using any of them as a way for God to bring people together today. Why is that? They are all Biblical. They all worked. It is because they are all too impractical or too miraculous to tell the singles in the church to use today.

But there is a key point that can be learned from these stories. Certainly in the Old Testament, God did not have one and only one way of bringing people together. He used whatever method worked the best for the situation. In some cases the men had to go out and search for the wife. In other cases the wife was more-or-less brought to the man. In some cases the man and woman were brought together directly. In other cases there was an intermediary who determined who was to marry whom. The point is that you cannot propose a particular method of dating or courtship or whatever as being “the Biblical method” but ignore the cases that contradict your theory.

You do not see in any of these cases or in any other case God saying, “Go out and make friends with a woman. Then, when the time is right, commit yourselves to each other and start courting.” God did not say to Hosea, “You’ll find a prostitute down on the other block named Gomer. Go and make friends with her. Then ask her parents if you can marry her.” Nor did God say, “That prostitute that is down on the corner; I



want you to ask her out to a movie and a nice dinner.” None of those are what happened yet there are some people out there pushing their own method of singles coming together and acting as though that is the only or best Biblical way.

There is another passage of Scripture that can be misused and that is 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7.

<sup>3</sup>For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality;

<sup>4</sup>that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,

<sup>5</sup>not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God;

<sup>6</sup>and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you.

<sup>7</sup>For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.

The word “possess” in verse 4 literally means “to acquire.” Some say that “own vessel” is referring to a wife and so claim that this Scripture is giving some rules or instructions as to how we should obtain a spouse. The claim is that this verse could be translated as “that each of you [men] know how to acquire his own wife in sanctification and honor.” In this case the preceding verse and the following three verses give us some instructions of what to do and what not to do in this process.

The question is what does the word “vessel” refer to? There are two schools of thought. One is that “vessel” is referring to a wife. The second is that “vessel” is referring to your own body.

Examining at the first interpretation, you can say from verses three and four that acquiring a mate should be done with sanctification and honor. There must not be any sexual immorality and it should not be done in lustful passion. This is all certainly true.

But then coming to verse five the interpretation is that you should not acquire your mate like the Gentiles do. They claim that this means that we should not date since that is how the non-Christians (equating Gentiles with non-Christians) acquire their mates. There are several problems with this interpretation.

1. The verse is not saying that Christians should not acquire their mates the way that non-Christians do. What it is saying is that we should not acquire our mates in lustful passion as the Gentiles in Thessalonica did. The Greeks at that time were very sexually immoral. Prostitution was considered a priestly prerogative and sex was sometimes a way of worshipping a deity.
2. The Bible was not written only for modern Western culture where people date. It also applies to cultures that practice courtship and those that practice betrothal. So to apply this claim in a culture that practiced betrothal, Christians could not be betrothed and in cultures that practiced courtship Christians could not court. The whole thing then just becomes nonsense.

Following in this viewpoint in verse six some say that the defrauding is referring to flirting in that to defraud is to deceive and flirting is nothing more than temptation without being willing to fulfill the ultimate commitment. We will see as we examine the second interpretation of this passage why this application is wrong.

The second interpretation is the more likely one in that “own vessel” is referring to your own body. The word “acquire” or “possess” then means to gradually develop complete self-control regarding your body. We need to keep ourselves holy and flee lust and sexual immorality. This passage then has everything to do with personal holiness and nothing to do with dating relationships.

The defrauding in verse six then is referring to sexual immorality as originally referenced in verse three. When we do commit immorality with another person we are defrauding that person in that we are causing them to share in the wrath of God because of this act.

This second interpretation is much more consistent with the Greek words used and is smoother and less forced. So 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7 is not a passage that should be used to validate any theory of how God brings people together. It is not a set of rules or instructions on dating relationships.

## Summary

We looked at four possible methods of how God might bring people together. These were 1) dating, 2) courtship, 3) betrothal or arrangement, and 4) divine manipulation. We defined each of these methods and then examined each one in detail. Each one has its pluses and minuses.

We looked at statements of exaggeration and misinterpretations of Scripture from people who had an ax to grind about one certain method or who were heralding the glories of another. One thing that we have hopefully learned is not to quickly believe anything that someone says about this subject without first taking it to the Bible and also being careful to think it through ourselves.

I have a problem with Christian theories that are developed with the primary goal to minimize hurt. The goal in relationships is not to try and figure out a formula for the most pain-free ones possible. Any method of relationship building can have hidden landmines of confusion and hurt. Even the most perfect marriage, that of Adam and Eve, had terrible grief when their oldest son, Abel, was murdered by his brother.

Because we can be a stubborn people God uses trials more than anything else to shape us into His character. I would bet that if I asked any Christian what the worst trials were in their lives, nearly everyone would list something that was related to a relationship.

Of course that does not mean that we should seek out abusive relationships just so that we could grow to be more like Christ. But it does mean that we are going to have to expect these hurts to come. We are going to have to grieve over them, learn from them, and grow because of them.

To base the Biblical validity of pre-marital relationships on the litmus test of how pain-free it is seems to be an idea in search of Scripture rather than letting Scripture develop the idea.

Lindvall initially selected courtship over dating until he heard stories where people still got hurt while courting. He says while relating one situation, “She still experienced repeatedly what I call the ‘broken-heart syndrome.’ How could courtship not work?”<sup>34</sup> So he dismissed courtship simply because one person had her heart broken and now he advocates scriptural betrothal but notice his conclusion. “I submit the betrothal model as a more scriptural and much less hurtful pattern of youthful romance than the typical dating game.”<sup>35</sup>

Where in the Bible does God say that we are to base our theology on what produces the less hurt? If that were the case then we should not be godly because 2 Timothy 3:12 says, “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Persecution hurts.

We should not evangelize. In 2 Corinthians 11 Paul talks about being stoned, shipwrecked, hungry, thirsty, cold and so on. Getting knocked about with stones hurts.

And, of course, returning to our most glorious example of all, before God could make the church His bride He had to suffer the greatest hurt of all by becoming sin and dying on the cross. The real problem is not the emotional wounds as much as what we do with them. Will we let them simmer and become bitter? Or will we let God bind up our wounds and heal us as He promised?

One reason why so many Christians are getting up in arms over dating and even some over courtship is because our society is becoming more and more permissive and selfish. You do not have to watch too much TV before you realize how dating has become nothing more than a way to hop into bed with someone. There is a growing sense that dating is no longer primarily a way to possibly meet your future spouse but just an activity to keep you entertained. And if hearts are broken then so what? But just because the world takes something and corrupts it does not mean that as Christians we cannot take it back and redeem it. The goal is not to abandon what the world ruins but to show the world how it should really be done.

So why is any of this important? It is because too many people hear some teaching on dating or courtship or something else and then latch onto it as though it is the only right way; as though this is the method that God has chosen above all others. So then they lock into thinking that if a right relationship happens at all then it must happen this one way and only this one way and if it appears to moving according to one of those other methods then it cannot be from God and so it must be avoided. And so we have put ourselves into a straightjacket.

But what we are insisting on following is not God’s one and only method but some person’s one and only method.

God will not funnel Himself into man’s teaching no matter how sincere. God will do what He knows is best and if we are blinded because we are following man’s teaching instead of God’s then that is not God’s fault. God will not necessarily say, “Well, he’s deceived, but I’ll honor that deception anyway and do

<sup>34</sup> Jonathan Lindvall, “Dating? Courtship? Betrothal? Scriptural Romance—Part 2” [www.boldchristianliving.com](http://www.boldchristianliving.com) (1996).

<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Lindvall, “Youthful Romance: Scriptural Patterns”, op. cit.

### **How to Know the Will of God in Marriage**

things the way that he thinks they should go.” No. God is sovereign and if we are misinterpreting the Bible then the solution is not to expect God to conform to our deception but for us to align our thinking with what the Bible really says.

Many of us might have missed a good opportunity because we were too caught up in methods rather than just flowing with what God may be doing. This applies to relationships, to serving, to ministry, to prayer, to evangelism, and to anything else that pertains to God.

The final conclusion is that there is not just one way for two people to get together and then get married. God knowing full well what the future held regarding Western style dating still did not put into the Bible any “best” method. What it comes down to is what works best for you in your situation. If that is dating; then great. If it is courting; then go for it. If it is arranged or appears to be the result of some divine manipulation; then praise God. And if it is a mix of any of these or something all together different then that is great, too. Courtship is **not** better than dating. Betrothal is **not** better than courtship. And divine manipulation is **not** the best of all.

This next statement is worth repeating eight times, but I will spare you by writing it only once. The best method regarding a pre-marital relationship for you is the one that God is using in your life personally.

What is most important is not the method but whether or not God is in it and that you both conduct yourselves according to Biblical principles and exercise godly character. Ecclesiastes 4:12 says, “And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.” That third strand, of course, is God. Any relationship that is built on the foundation of the Bible with God as one of its members must succeed no matter how it started.

<b>You can respond properly to another’s grief if you:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Show genuine care and concern</li><li>• Listen with focused attention even if they are being repetitive</li><li>• Express sorrow regarding their loss</li><li>• Can adjust to their roller coaster emotions</li><li>• Do not belittle their comments at the early stages of grief</li><li>• Can reassure them that they are not to blame</li><li>• Can allow them to be alone when they need to be alone</li><li>• Do not use the deceased person’s old age to soften the blow</li><li>• Can touch, hold, or hug the grieving person</li><li>• Do not treat them as though nothing happened</li><li>• Do not determine how they should grieve based on how you would grieve</li><li>• Do not claim that you know how they feel unless you have gone through the same loss</li></ul>

## Is This the One?—How to know the will of God regarding marriage.

The hour was approaching quicker than a piano down an elevator shaft. It was set up by a friend whom I barely know and whose knowledge of my tastes and desires is as reliable as a broken sieve. But a date is a date. I asked another friend if she were me if she would go on a blind date. Her response with a gallingly loud and extended emphasis on the fourth word was, “If I were you, I would go on any kind of date.” Upon parting my confidence level was falling faster than the afore referenced piano.

This date is not only unknown but so is our destination. With a voice pleasant enough over the phone, he assured me that it would be fun and interesting. Fun is appealing unless his idea of a bawdy time is calculating the first 100 Fibonacci numbers. “Interesting,” though, leaves me a little too squeamish. It is a pendulum that slices through too many options. To some, art and music are interesting. The tones, the colors, the artistry are all fascinating. For others, spiders the size of dinner plates silently stalking up to the glass walls of the display case and staring them in the face sets them a twitter. No matter how hard I tried, my expectation of this “interesting” keep tugging my imagination into the latter category. “Spiders aren’t so bad,” I thought, “and besides, the glass has to be—what—six inches thick?” I just wanted to cry.

I don’t even know how to dress. Should I go stylish and casual? I put on a red babydoll chiffon top, white ruched leggings, and green pumps. I looked in the mirror and felt like the Italian flag. Off it came.

Maybe sophisticated would be ticket. I went with a black top, black ponte pants, black boots, and a black scarf. I went to the mirror. I looked like I was about to fly out the window and swoop down on a screaming soon to be anemic victim. Off it came.

Let’s try slinky. I put on my short, black cocktail dress. “Not bad,” I thought as I turned to and fro in front of the mirror. Then I thought about the insect zoo and what might happen if one of those monsters escaped and ran up my leg. Off it came.

I settled on white slacks with black flats and a black top. I touched it up with a red scarf. “Straightforward, simple, and loose enough to allow me to run fast.”

“You know,” I thought, “why am I going through all of this trouble when I’m going to spend the evening counting numbers and staring at things with more legs than my dining room set?”

My emotions were running the full gamut from dread to horror. I could write an encyclopedia article on what it is like to swallow a bowling ball...repeatedly.

I looked up at the clock. “It can’t be that late!” I thought that maybe someone snuck into my house, climbed up on the counter, pushed the minute hand forward, and then stealthily snuck back out all just to ruin my evening. I rushed to my car and drove to our rendezvous. I patted the

sweat off of my forehead and breathed deeply. “In a few hours it will all be over and I will be safely back at home.”

At our precise meeting time another car drove up and parked.

“He drives, I guess that’s a plus.”

The door opened and a man wearing black creased pants, a collarless shirt, and a gray blazer got out and confidently strode over to my car. He bent down to my window.

“So we meet.” He smiled perfectly. “For our secret evening I thought that we might have dinner at the restaurant on the hill, ‘La maison de l’élégance,’ and then take the ‘Cruise under the Stars.’ I hope that satisfies your expectations.”

I had to brace myself with my hand to keep from swooning.

- Marriage is the decision of a lifetime, how can I know for sure?
- Does the Bible give any guidelines to help me pick my potential mate?
- Should I look for signs?
- What if I make a mistake?

Because we know that God loves us and wants us to have a life filled with abundance (John 10:10) we all want to know what God’s plans are for our lives. Or to put it another way, what the will of God is in our lives. Romans 12:2 says, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” Do not we all want to do that which is good and acceptable and perfect? Whenever we know God’s will and follow it we can be assured that it is the best for our lives and that God will bless us and provide for us. That is a pretty good deal. Or to put it the way that God does in Isaiah 1:19, “If you consent and obey, You will eat the best of the land.”

There is only one problem. How do we determine the will of God for our lives? This becomes especially important in the area of knowing whom to marry. It is probably our biggest decision in life and just as it should be fantastic when we make the right choice it could be terrible if we make the wrong choice. So getting God’s input is very desirable.

Our hearts can be very deceitful. They say that love is blind and unfortunately that can be true. Relying on our own wisdom and instincts we can easily make a mistake. “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”—Proverbs 14:12.

There is one important principle, though, to keep in mind whenever the topic of God’s will comes up and that is described in Psalm 119:105, “Thy word is a lamp to my feet, And a light to my path.” God will lead us and guide us; He has not left us alone to stumble through the darkness. However we must realize that His guidance will rarely be for very far into the future. Lamps back in Old Testament times were not the halogens that we have today. Those lamps cast very limited light. It was enough to illuminate the immediate surroundings and guide a person safely through the path that they were on. But that lamp did not

shine far into the distance. In the same way, God will guide us through the immediate situation but He usually does not show us any events in the distant future. Therefore, unless you are currently in a great relationship that is “the one” you probably will not know when you will get married, who you will marry or even if you will marry.

We are going to look at several guidelines for knowing the will of God in your life and will examine them from the issue of knowing whom to marry.

In determining God’s will for your life there are two keys. The first is to pray much. We will not be able to know what someone is telling us unless we talk to him. God rarely does something so obvious as to put a talking donkey right in front of us to tell us what to do. We need to ask God for His guidance and then to pay attention to what He might be trying to say. The way that God answers may be through any of the ways that are listed below.

For something as important as marriage it would probably be a good idea to do some praying and fasting. Fasting helps to rid us of the distraction of the body and to put us into a more spiritually sensitive state. How long that you fast for and exactly what foods or all foods that you abstain from is entirely up to you. My recommendation would be to take one entire day, go someplace where there would be no distractions such as the corner of a park, and abstain from all food and drink except for water. Plan out the entire day and set aside large chunks for prayer. You may not get God’s answer that day but that is OK. Spiritual success is not necessarily defined as getting what we want when we want it.

The second key is to seek God’s will with an honest heart to obey whatever He tells you to do. If we already know what we are going to do and are only looking for confirmation from God then He may not respond. God will not be treated as a rubberstamp. If we have already decided that we are going to marry this person no matter what God says then God may stay silent. In Proverbs 1:28-29 God says, “Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but they shall not find me, because they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the LORD.” Also, God may stay silent if He knows that no matter what He says we will distort it to hear only what we want to hear.

There once was an old Scottish woman who went from house to house across the countryside selling her wares from a cart such as thread, buttons, and shoestrings. When she would come to an unmarked intersection she would throw a stick up into the air and go into whatever direction the stick pointed to when it landed. One day she was seen tossing the stick up several times. Each time she would bend over, look at the stick, pick it up and toss it again. A man who was standing nearby asked, “Why are you throwing the stick up into the air over and over again?” “Because,” the woman replied, “it keeps pointing to the left, and I want to take the road on the right.”

## ***God’s commandments***

The most definite but perhaps most time-consuming way to determine God’s will is by understanding what He has said in the Bible. The Bible is God’s most important way to communicate with us. Why did God give us the Bible instead of just speaking to each of us individually and personally? Because if He did

the latter than God's character and God's ways would be open to the interpretation of each person and each person could claim whatever they wanted because after all, "God told me this" and how could anyone disagree? Then in order to determine universal truth about God we would not only have to know the words that were said but to validate them based on the character of the person saying them. God would then be unknowable because we would never be able to separate those words that were truly from God and those that were from the emotions or imaginations of the other person.

Even today that problem exists on a large scale with different religions and cults competing for the souls of men with each claiming to have "heard the voice of God."

This problem also arises on a smaller scale when a Christian claims to have been told something by the Holy Spirit that affects other people. We are going to examine that more closely in the section "Other people's prophecy or revelations."

But unlike divine voices or impressions in our heads the Bible can be opened up and everyone can read the exact same words that millions of others have been reading for thousands of years. We can all study the same Hebrew and Greek words, we can all understand the same context, and we can all compare it to similar passages in other parts of the Bible. Of course, there are issues of interpretation and application but for the vast majority of scripture and certainly for the major themes there is universal agreement among those who are Christians. Because we know that the Word of God is true and accurate we can study it and know the mind of God. Therefore, we do not have to seek God to know if pre-marital sex is OK because we can go to His Word and see that it is wrong. We do not have to go on a quest to find out if stealing is right because the Bible tells us that it is sin.

The first place that we should always look regarding God's will is to the Bible.

- We should see if there are any commands that directly address our situation.
- We should see if there are any principles regarding this issue.
- And we should see if there are any people in the Bible who went through a similar situation to what we are going through and then see how God worked in their lives. This would be our example.

Martin Luther wrote, "I study my Bible like I gather apples. First, I shake the whole tree that the ripest may fall. Then I shake each limb, and when I have shaken each limb, I shake each branch and every twig. Then I look under every leaf. I search the Bible as a whole like shaking the whole tree. Then I shake every limb—study book after book. Then I shake every branch, giving attention to the chapters. Then I shake every twig, or a careful study of the paragraphs and sentences and words and their meanings."

However, there is a way of using the Bible to discern God's guidance that I would caution against. That is to pray for God's guidance, randomly open the Bible, put your finger down, and take whatever verse your finger is pointing to as though God Himself directly handed it to you. Now I realize that many people will claim that they have done this and it has produced amazing results. One woman thought that she had a terrible illness and might die so she did what I just described and the verse that she saw said,



“Indeed, may you see your children's children.” She believed that God was telling her that she would live long enough to see her grandchildren. It actually turned out that she did not have any illness at all. So was that truly a promise from God? It could have been. God can do whatever He wants. But I would certainly take this method with a large grain of salt and would absolutely qualify it with other means of guidance.

One joke has a man talking to his minister about his failing business. The minister tells him to go to the beach and open up his Bible and let the wind blow the pages. When the wind stops, look down and do whatever you see first. Six months later the man comes into the minister's office wearing an expensive suit, wearing a Rolex watch, and hands the minister a check for \$20,000. He says, “That advice you gave me worked great. I'm driving a Rolls Royce, my bank accounts are overflowing, and I have more money then I know what to do with. So in appreciation I want to give you this check.” The minister was stunned but he asked, “So what did you see when you looked into your Bible?” The man replied, “Chapter 11.”

So using the Bible as our guide in the case of marriage we can be certain that God's will is that a Christian must only marry another Christian. There are a number of reasons for this.

*It is commanded.* There is probably only one command in the Bible that God gives regarding Christians in marriage and that is that a Christian must only marry another Christian. He gives no commands or even suggestions regarding age, race, culture, economics, education, or emotional or spiritual maturity. Though large differences in any of these areas can bring additional difficulties to the relationship God did not see cause to even warn about them. However, God in no uncertain terms tells Christians that they are not to marry a non-Christian. We can read this in 2 Corinthians 6:14-16.

14 Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?

15 Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?

16 Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.

This fact of it being commanded should be enough. We do not need additional reasons. Either we are obedient or we will be rebellious. Either we love God and want to please Him and trust Him or we love ourselves more and are willing to push God aside.

But for those who need further convincing here are more reasons for why a Christian should only marry another Christian.

*It creates a complete unity.* Why is this so important? We consist of three parts: body, soul, and spirit. The body is our physical being and our five senses. Our soul is the intangible part consisting of personality, creativity, intelligence and so on. Our spirit is that part of us that communicates with God and perceives the supernatural. Everyone who is alive has a functioning body and soul. But only someone who has been born-again has a spirit that is alive. Ephesians 2 talks about how we are dead because of our sin, but

through God's mercy we are made alive. A non-Christian (someone who is not born-again) only has two of the three parts that are alive. A non-Christian is spiritually dead. A Christian has all three that are alive.

The most that a non-Christian can unite with someone else, whether they are a Christian or not, is with their bodies and souls. A corpse cannot unite with anything; it cannot feel anything and it cannot give anything. To marry a non-Christian is to marry a spiritual corpse. But two Christians can unite in all three areas. This gives the potential for a much more fulfilling, intimate, and satisfying relationship.

*It creates a potentially stronger marriage.* Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 is commonly used to show that a marriage that includes God will be stronger than one that does not. God is usually considered to be the third strand. Verse 12 is the climax "And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart." However, in this case the first two strands can be the body and the soul and the third strand can be considered to be the spiritual part of a marriage. Two non-Christians working together can resist all of the pressures that threaten to tear a marriage apart if they are deeply attracted to each other physically and with their souls. But greater strength comes when a couple is bound together in spirit also. This is a marriage of three strands and it is a marriage that is not quickly torn apart.

*It strengthens each other's spiritual walk.* More than likely the non-Christian will dilute the Christian's walk with God rather than the Christian deepening the non-Christian's spiritual interest. 1 Corinthians 15:33 says, "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company corrupts good morals.'" Bad company does not necessarily have to mean someone who is a criminal. It could also mean someone who has wrong or no spiritual values. Too many Christians think that they will marry a non-Christian and then their own spiritual interests and activities will spark the other to be the same. But be warned, more than likely the Christian will first become frustrated and then will become lax. Proverbs 13:20 also warns, "He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm." It is difficult for a strong Christian and a non-Christian to dwell together without their beliefs stepping on each other. Oftentimes a compromise is settled on. The non-Christian may pay patronage by going to church but the Christian will stop being so involved.

*It provides mutual spiritual encouragement.* It would be hoped that for a Christian, Jesus Christ would be the most important person in their life and the most exciting and interesting conversations would be centered around the Bible or what God is doing in their life. But if one is not a Christian then this whole area of shared interest and communication is lost. In a non-Christian marriage it is much less likely that they would pray together, read the Bible together, or encourage each other with God's promises and faithfulness. When the Christian partner is struggling with something they would most likely hear from the other some quip or cliché rather than a promise from the word of God.

*It provides a more consistent belief system for any children.* When the two people in a house have different belief systems then that precludes a consistent model for the children. Who will the children go to when they have moral questions and will each parent's answer differ significantly? And when they get to a time of decision it is not simply a choice between mom and dad's beliefs versus the world's beliefs. Now it is between mom's beliefs, dad's beliefs, and the world's beliefs.

*It affords similar spiritual authority.* Should there ever be a problem in the marriage or the need to seek counsel about a decision, if both partners are Christians then they should be able to seek the counsel of their pastor or to study what the Bible says. But if one person is not a Christian then their respect for these authorities will be diluted or non-existent. In that case any counsel, no matter how wise, can be quickly disregarded because “I don’t believe the same thing that you do.”

Yes, non-Christian marriages can work but they are drawing from a well that is not as potentially deep as that between two Christians. It is much more difficult and the shared interests will be less.

#### **You are self-centered if you:**

- Walk into an already existing conversation and take over without even knowing what the current topic was.
- Find that most conversations center around your life, thoughts, opinions, experiences, needs and desires.
- Have had a small tragedy and someone else has had a large tragedy but all that you talk about is yours.
- Consistently and easily grow bored when other people are talking about themselves.
- Are planning trips involving other people but only want to go to places that you like without any regard for their desires.
- Are at a potluck or dinner party and take nearly every piece of one food because you like it.
- Rarely ask how someone else is doing and just jump right in with your life.
- Only call people when you need something.
- Spend your extra money only on yourself.
- Are irritated by someone else's success or attention.
- Often interrupt other people.
- Do not work hard because you do not feel that you are paid what you are worth.
- Steal other people's thunder by leaking out secrets and information before the source person can announce the news.
- Refuse to cooperate simply because you do not want to.
- Get angry when your personal expectations are not met.
- Feel that everyone must accept you the way that you are or that is just too bad.
- Cannot support, aid, or be involved in someone else's work if you are not going to get a big share of the credit.
- Complain incessantly when you are inconvenienced.
- Shrug off other people's difficulties with "That's not my problem."
- More than once have dumped friendships or given people the cold shoulder just because they did not do what you wanted them to do.
- Wish that other people would fail just so that you can look better.
- Are unconcerned about other people by doing things such as talking during movies, cutting people off while driving, cutting in line, talking loudly on your cell phone in a public place, etc.
- Embarrass or humiliate someone in public because they did something to you that you did not like.

- Go to church wondering what you can get from others rather than what you can give to others.
- Consider anything that you are not interested in to be boring or unimportant.

## ***Compatibility***

This can be the most overused or underused method of determining God's will that there is. It can be overused when two people think that they are right for each other when, in reality, the only things that they share in common are some interests. Just because you both love baseball and animals and computer games does not mean that you will be able to live together in marriage. There are greater issues involved such as trust, responsibility, support, sensitivity and so on. Those previous common interests may mean that you will be great friends and that there might be potential for something bigger but that is all that you can say at the time. You will need to spend more time together to see how the deeper areas are compatible.

It can also be overused when the compatibility is not even with each other but with some third person. An example might be when the guy looks just like an ex-boyfriend or ex-husband that she still might like. Or if she looks like some celebrity that he is infatuated with. Or if your friend thinks that this other person is very attractive and, even though you do not agree, you still think that your friend's opinion is good enough for you.

Another way that it can be overused is if you both are greatly compatible but one is a Christian and the other is not. In that case then no matter perfect a fit you two are it is not God's will for you to marry each other.

The way that this can be underused is if there is a sense of desperation and, even though you do not really get along well together, you feel that this is your last chance and so you might as well go for it. You figure that you can "learn to live together."

It can also be underused if you think that you have had some direct revelation from God that this is the one and so you do not even consider other issues. This may occur more frequently than any of us would hope. The question is, "Is it wise to base such a life-changing decision on something of such tenuous certainty as supernatural guidance while ignoring other more clear means of guidance?"

Let us face it, marriage means being together. It means spending a lot of time driving together, eating together, sleeping together, planning together, and making decisions together. If you cannot get along together then how will this work? It is true that the Bible does not say that compatibility is a necessary prerequisite to marriage. It is also true that two people, even if they start out with the odds against them, can have a great marriage if they both make a big effort to work at it. But starting a marriage with doubtful compatibility is like starting a new, highly complicated job with no skills. You may be able to figure it out as you go but it certainly makes it a lot harder.

So how do you know if you are compatible? I would suggest studying the section in this book on "Keys to good relationships." Of course there does not have to be 100% compatibility because people can adapt and change. And until you have spent a lot of time together in marriage you probably will not realize

a number of the issues anyway. This is not like filling out a compatibility questionnaire, adding up the numbers, and seeing if you pass the test. Compatibility does not usually have an absolutely “yes” or “no” answer to it. It is more of an overall sense that the two of you and those whom you get counsel from will know.

Ultimately there should be a balance to the relationship, the ability to have fun together, to understand each other, and a continual deepening of the more important qualities between each other. You should be able to talk to each other for hours and hours and yet be comfortable with silence. You should care about each other and be more interested in what you can give to the other person than what you can get.

## **Counsel**

Proverbs 11:14, “Where there is no guidance, the people fall, But in abundance of counselors there is victory.” Getting good counsel is a vital step in discerning God’s will for marriage. But why is counsel important? —For several reasons.

*Blind spots.* Very few, if any, people are without blind spots. These are characteristics or mindsets that are not seen by the person who has them. They may be weaknesses or they may be sins. For example, a person who frequently interrupts others may not understand just how rude and arrogant that is. Or a woman who dresses seductively and does not realize its impact may just think that she is doing nothing more than following fashion trends. Counsel shows things to people that they do not see on their own.

*Objectivity.* Other people may be more objective when examining a situation. It has been said that “love is blind.” That may not always be true, but many times other people are able to see the whole picture in a clearer light. They are not as likely to be overly influenced by one or two issues as we might be. In one real situation an ambitious and hardworking man was dating a woman who was very attractive and outgoing, but she was also lazy and irresponsible. The man was unwilling to look past the positive traits and consider the implications of these negative traits. He knew that they were there but he did not want to factor them into the equation. Only from others pointing out the consequences was he able to realize that, ultimately, she would have driven him crazy.

*Experience.* Other people may have learned valuable lessons from experience that you might not have yet. There is nothing noble in having to learn about the hardships of life directly when you can avoid them using the experience of others. A man who married when he had no savings and no job can warn someone else who is in the same situation to wait until finances are better and not have to go through the same terrible struggles and arguments.

*Wisdom.* Some people have greater wisdom than we do in the Scriptures or in evaluating life’s situations. They are able to apply God’s word to many situations and give tremendous insight.

So who should we seek counsel from? Perhaps the three most valuable resources are 1) our family, 2) our close friends, and 3) any spiritual leaders such as pastors, elders, or ministry leaders. But for all of these people we must always be honest. If we know how to word things to get the answer that we want then we

are not sincerely seeking counsel; we are only dishonestly completing what we think is an obligation. We should always give as complete a picture as is necessary and we should answer even the hard and contrary questions with integrity. Counsel should never be seen as a challenge to fake out the other person.

When seeking counsel for the first time from a person do not give reasons as to why you disagree with what they are advising at this time unless it helps to clarify the situation. It would be best to think about their points. You can always go back and explain why you do not necessarily agree with them.

But as in everything there is a word of caution related to counsel. Just as you can misread God's leading or misunderstand where various factors are pointing so can other people. The counsel of others, even if they are sincere and of great spiritual maturity, is not to be readily accepted as the word of God. This is true even if several of them are in agreement on an issue. Now of course if many others are saying one thing and you are of the opposite mind then you should tread very carefully to go against everyone else. Maybe all of them can see something that you are blind to or are unwilling to accept as true. The burden would lie on you to give a good reason as to why you should swim against the tide.

However there are instances where people are giving advice not so much from an objective, God-fearing viewpoint but are merely speaking from their own emotions. There are several ways that this can happen. Sometimes personal feelings can cloud the issue. One case that I remember is where a man who had a number of women friends wanted to marry a very attractive woman. So he asked the advice of these friends. All of them gave him the same advice to "get away from her." But, as was discovered later, all of these women were not interested in the young man's best interests; they were simply jealous and were being catty. If he had asked for details or examples as to why the women felt that way he would have found out that they had none. All of their advice was based on vague feelings. Their reasons were usually of the line, "I just know it" or "I have this sense about her."

Besides jealousy there are other reasons as to why some people might give wrong advice. One is that they do not want to lose a close friend. Another is that they think that God has greater, more noble plans for the person that marriage would only ruin. Or they know someone else who is interested in the other person that they would rather see together. Or they are not married and simply do not want anyone to get married; sort of the "misery loves company" idea. And there are many other selfish, wrong reasons as to why people may give bad advice.

But the fact is that you are the one who is ultimately responsible for the final decision. If you go along with everyone else and it turns out to be the wrong decision then you cannot blame them.

But despite any cautions, counsel is a powerful way to determine God's will for you in marriage. It should be sought frequently throughout the relationship and it should be carefully considered no matter whom it comes from and what was said. Even in bad counsel there may be a grain of truth that can be extracted.

**You are problem oriented if, when a problem occurs, you:**

- Talk or complain frequently about the problem itself.
- Use the problem to prove just how miserable a person you really are.
- Do not make any real effort to solve the problem.
- Do not really consider implementing anyone's advice regarding how to overcome the problem.
- Add this problem to your growing list of unresolved problems.
- Involve a lot of other people in your problem but not to seek answers.
- Frequently use your problems as an excuse for not doing what you should.
- See a problem and immediately start thinking why it is overwhelming.
- Problems put you into inertia rather than into action.
- Consistently see your problems as making you a lesser person.
- Find your problems being a burden and discouragement to others.
- See a problem as a hedge.

***Hearing the Holy Spirit or other supernatural means of guidance***

In determining God's will there is always a temptation to make it more mystical than it usually is. We want it to be told to us by "the voice of God," i.e., something clear, supernatural, and definite. We want to be able to tell our story the same way that many of the Old Testament prophets did by including the words, "Then the Lord said..." Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, God does not usually make it either this easy or this mystical. Most of the time discerning God's will is much more pedestrian. Proverbs 24:2 sums it up well, "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter."

If you want to cup your hand to your ear and listen for the whisper of the Holy Spirit then go ahead and do so. But more than likely you will either hear nothing or will think that you hear only that which confirms what you want to hear anyway.

But this is not to say that God does not speak to us in this manner. So how do we know that it is God who is giving us these promptings or impressions and not our own desires or emotions?

First we should check our hearts to make sure that we are being honest with ourselves. I know one person who whenever his opinion was challenged or if he really wanted to get his way he would tag onto his comments, "The Holy Spirit told me." Of course this puts God on his side and who are we to argue with God? But when we do this to ourselves regarding marriage then we are only deceiving ourselves and turning the wonderful experience of looking to God and trying to understand the relationship into a quick and dishonest revelation.

Second, we should see if this revelation or impression contradicts anything in the Bible. If it does then you can be assured that it is not from God.

We are going to take a specific look at several types of supernatural guidance that people rely on.

**Dreams**

Some people have vivid dreams that they think are revelations from God. A man might be wondering about getting engaged and while he is sleeping he sees in his dream a giant diamond ring floating in the air.

He wakes up and believes that God was telling him that they should get married. So now the issue is settled.

Yes, God did speak to people in the Bible in dreams. I was able to find 22 such instances.<sup>36</sup> Yet God knew enough to give us a stern warning in Jeremiah 23:25-28, “‘I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy falsely in My name, saying, “‘I had a dream, I had a dream!’” How long? Is there anything in the hearts of the prophets who prophesy falsehood, even these prophets of the deception of their own heart, who intend to make My people forget My name by their dreams which they relate to one another, just as their fathers forgot My name because of Baal? The prophet who has a dream may relate his dream, but let him who has My word speak My word in truth. What does straw have in common with grain?’ declares the LORD.”

It is said that dreams follow what we have been thinking about or doing during the previous day. If that is the case then it would certainly be expected for someone who is considering such an important decision as marriage to then dream about it.

Also, dreams can be vague and surreal. This opens them up to many possible interpretations. If someone dreams that the two of them are at their wedding but, as she is walking down the aisle, something catches her train and her wedding gown tears does that mean that God is telling them to get married but to expect some rough moments or is God trying to hold back the marriage by putting His finger on her gown?

In my opinion, I would put very little, if any, weight on a dream for guidance in making such an important decision as marriage.

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<sup>36</sup> These are what I could find.

Genesis 15:12, God put Abraham to sleep and then gave him the vision about his descendents.

Genesis 20:3, God tells Abimelech in his own dream that he himself is in trouble.

Genesis 28:12, Jacob had the dream about the ladder.

Genesis 31:10, God tells Jacob in a dream about breeding sheep to maximize his own herd.

Genesis 31:24, God warns Laban in a dream not to cross Jacob.

Genesis 37:5, Joseph had the dream about himself becoming a ruler.

Genesis 40:5f, The baker and cup bearer each had dreams about their own future. Joseph then interpreted their dreams.

Genesis 41, Pharaoh had a dream about the future of Egypt.

Judges 7:13, Gideon dreamt about how he was going to conquer his enemies.

1 Kings 3:5, God appeared to Solomon in a dream to ask him what it was that He could give to Solomon.

Daniel 2, The king had a dream about future kingdoms.

Daniel 4, The king had another dream relating to himself and how he would fall.

Daniel 7, Daniel has a dream about future kingdoms.

Matthew 1:20, An angel appeared to Joseph to tell him that it was all right for him to take Mary.

Matthew 2:12, The magi are given a dream to not return the same way that they came.

Matthew 2:19, Joseph is told in a dream to go Galilee to avoid Herod.

Matthew 27:19, Pilate's wife had a dream to leave Jesus alone or else she would suffer greatly.

Acts 9:10, God appeared to Ananias in a vision and told him to go see Saul.

Acts 10:3, God appeared to Cornelius in a vision telling him to send for Peter.

Acts 11:5, Peter saw a vision about how the Gentiles were now considered to be clean.

Acts 16:9, God appears to Paul in a vision telling him to go to Macedonia.

Acts 18:9, God tells Paul in a vision not to be afraid because He is with him.



## Fleeces

This concept comes from Judges 6 where Gideon was asked by God to do something dangerous and seemingly impossible. So Gideon asks God for a sure validation by putting a lamb's fleece on the ground. He asks God that the next morning the fleece be wet with dew and ground around it be dry. It was so. Then Gideon asked for the reverse situation for the next morning and again it was so. This gave absolute surety to God's call.

Should we do the same today? We may not use the exact same sign but there are other creative types of fleeces that we can use. We may say, "If we both wind up at the same meeting together then I'll take that as a sign from God." Or, "If I hear this one particular song on the radio today then I'll know." Or, "If my car starts on the first crank, something which it almost never does, then I'll know from God that the relationship is a go." But what is the problem here? There are several.

First, we are telling God how He should reveal His will to us. Suppose God wants us to seek Him longer in pray or to get more counsel? Why should He circumvent those necessary things by putting a silly song on the radio? We want quick. God may want patience. We want easy. God may want sincere seeking.

Second, the last possible fleece that we can see in the Bible is in Acts 1:26 when the Apostles drew lots to see who would replace Judas. Interestingly though, we never read about that person again. Since Pentecost there is no other instance of a fleece or lot being used even when there were times of uncertainty. Perhaps God stopped using fleeces or lots at that time.

Third, the fleeces that were used in the Bible were generally quite specific and unlikely. Gideon's fleece on the first day was unlikely. It being reversed on the second day made it quite the miracle. Are we willing to put out fleeces that are miraculous or are we just counting on coincidence?

Fourth, are we willing to stake everything on that one fleece? If it does not turn out the way that we want will we say "best two of three" or will we accept the results?

But I am sure that someone can say, "I used a type of fleece to determine if I should marry this woman and it confirmed that I should and now we've been married twenty wonderful years." That is great but how do you know that the fleece was from God and not just a happy coincidence? Just because it turned out to be true does not mean that it was from God. As they say, even a stopped clock is right twice a day.

## Other people's prophecy or revelations

Sometimes someone will come up to you and tell you that they have had a prophecy or revelation from God about you and may even tell you that this is what God wants you to do. Should you just accept that the Holy Spirit did tell that person something and act on it or should you challenge it or should you discard it altogether? There are several reasons to be careful about this when it happens.

For one, God knows how to get in touch with each one of us directly. He does not necessarily have to go through someone else. This is especially true if you are diligently seeking God through prayer and His word. But you can argue that God may have to use another person simply because the main person is not paying attention to Him. Fair enough.

Second, if it is difficult for you to tell if your own supernatural revelation is valid then how much more difficult is it to validate when it is coming from someone else? Just because someone comes to you with a “thus sayth the Lord” why should you accept it as so and then make a crucial life decision based on that so-called revelation—even if it is from someone like your pastor? The burden of proof is on the person who comes with the revelation to prove that it is such and a reply of “I just know it” is not good enough. In the Bible, prophets were well-known people who had a perfect track record of proclamation (pronouncements and warnings) and prediction (telling the future). They were very knowledgeable of scripture and of the ways of God. If they made even one mistake they were to be stoned to death because it showed that they were not speaking for God. Even those prophets that were always right oftentimes still took their life in their hands. Prophecy was not a casual hobby.

Third, in the Bible, prophecy was usually given as prediction and not as guidance. For example, in Acts 11 Agabus gave a prediction of a world famine. The result was that the disciples decided to send a contribution to help those in Judea. Then in Acts 21 the same Agabus predicted that Paul was going to be bound if he went to Jerusalem. The result was that the other disciples pleaded with Paul not to go. Paul went anyway; he did not see that as a declaration from God as to His will, only what would happen. The decision to go or not was still left in Paul’s hands. In both of these cases prophecy did not come in the form of “This is what God wants you to do” as much as “This is what God says will happen.” Then in light of that prediction those involved could decide what to do. However, if someone who was known as a prophet came to you and said that if you married this is what would happen it is still your option as to what to do. Even a prediction of a crisis does not necessarily mean that the occasion should not be carried out as we saw with Paul.

However, there are instances where a prophet does proclaim the will of God. One example is in 1 Kings 12:24 where Shemaiah the prophet tells Israel, “Thus says the LORD, ‘You must not go up and fight against your relatives the sons of Israel; return every man to his house, for this thing has come from Me.’” So they listened to the word of the LORD, and returned and went their way according to the word of the LORD.” But then in the very next chapter we can read about the disobedient prophet who falsely claimed that God spoke to him in order to mislead someone.

Fourth, we should be very careful not to assume that everyone who thinks that they have heard from God did so in fact. Some people just like to think that they are more sensitive to the Holy Spirit than other people are and so think that they have God’s inside information. I have known people who wanted to make a point or have something done but could not justify it themselves so they tack the Holy Spirit’s name onto it because who would want to go against the will of God? The problem is that the vast majority of the time the Holy Spirit is used as nothing more than as a bully to get others to agree with that person’s view. This is dangerous. God is gentle and gracious and does not appreciate being used as a big stick.

None the less, prophecy is a gift of the Holy Spirit and God does count prophets highly. So we should consider the words of a prophet. But even for those few people where that may be true that still does not mean that God told them something about you. I believe that even if God did choose to speak to you

through a prophet that He would still confirm that through several of the other means of discerning His will.

## Signs

A sign is a situation where someone asks for something clear and external to determine or confirm God's leading. Sometimes a sign can be predetermined. This was covered under "Fleeces." Other times a sign can be something spontaneous such as a strange coincidence or occurrence.

One problem with signs is that many times they are open to interpretation. I knew one case where a man who was in his twenties was involved in a Christian group that his parents, who also were Christians, did not approve of because they felt that the group had gone off in some of its practices. This man was going to a conference sponsored by this group in another state. Soon after leaving town he hit a deer and badly damaged his car. He had to turn around and limp back home. His parents interpreted hitting the deer as a sign that God did not want him go. He interpreted it as a sign that going to the conference was so important to God that Satan tried to stop him with the deer. So he made an even greater effort to make it to the conference. Who was right? It depended on each person's predetermined ideas and desires. Was it a sign from God or an obstacle from Satan or was it nothing more than a stupid deer that ran in front of a car?

Another problem with spontaneous signs is that we tend to pick and choose them as we please. If there is an unusual occurrence that is in line with what we want to happen then we take it as a sign from God. But if it disagrees with our desires then we just blew it off as nothing more than an unusual occurrence. By doing this we can accumulate a slew of positive signs and no negative signs.

A similar problem is that if we are on the alert for signs then we can start to see them everywhere. One man was asked to be an elder at his church. He was unsure as whether to accept or not. But then the word "elder" started showing up everywhere. His mother made elderberry pie. The TV news made mention of an elder statesman. A family member referred to another member as being elder. To him this was God's confirmation that he should take the position. Of course it could be true that God did have all of that happen for that very reason, however it could also simply be that the person had become acutely sensitive to that word. It is the same principle as when you buy a particular car. Before then you might not have noticed that car on the road at all. Now all of a sudden they seem to be everywhere. No, hordes of people did not suddenly rush into car dealers throwing suitcases of cash at the salespeople in order to buy that car; you just suddenly became aware of them.

Also, as with a fleece, God may not choose to inform you of His will with a sign no matter how much you may beg for one.

Oftentimes what we may think of as a sign is nothing more than a favorable circumstance. If you are thinking about getting married but are not sure because of poor finances but then you get a raise from work you may take that as a sign from God to go ahead with the wedding plans. But maybe it was just a favorable circumstance. Maybe you deserved that raise and would have gotten it anyway. But we will look more closely at circumstances in that section.

However, despite all of the previous warnings I do believe that God can and does use signs. I just do not think that He uses them as frequently as people think that they see them. The same problem as relying on hearing the “voice of God” exists for signs; that is, we want something quick, definite, clear, and easy. We do not want to have to wade through the scriptures to find relevant passages even though that will greatly deepen our spiritual knowledge. We do not want to have to seek out counsel. We do not want to pray and pray and pray. We want to hear or see something, snap our fingers and say, “That’s it! Now I know.”

When I was about to propose marriage to the woman who is now my wife we were sitting on a couch in the living room. As she was talking I glanced outside the window and I saw two Canadian geese flying across the sky. Usually Canadian geese fly in the “V” formation as a group so seeing two alone seemed to be unusual. Was this a sign from God that I should go ahead with the proposal? Perhaps it was but I was going to ask anyway whether I saw the geese or not. So if they were from God I do not so much think of them as having been a sign as much as just a nice gesture from God.

## Validation

In his book “Knowing God’s Will” M. Blaine Smith<sup>2</sup> says that we should ask God to validate any possible supernatural guidance by asking Him to either “provide specific help or resources which you would clearly need to carry the guidance” or “to provide clear reasons for following the guidance you believe you have been given supernaturally.”<sup>37</sup>

To be safe, even if we think that God is inwardly leading us regarding such a major decision as marriage we should confirm it with some of the other ways that God gives us direction. I do not believe that God is only going to give one confirmation in the vital decision of marriage and expect us to take it and run.

### **You are solution oriented if, when a problem occurs, you:**

- Right away start thinking of ways to solve the problem.
- Talk to others about the problem so that they can give their advice.
- See problems as a way to make you more capable and more godly.
- Keep making an effort until you finally solve the problem.
- Add this to your list of “wins” when you overcome it.
- Find your solutions being a hope and encouragement to others.
- See a problem and immediately think of how God’s grace is sufficient.
- See a problem as a stepping-stone.

## ***Circumstances and open/closed doors***

Circumstances can be very difficult to read. Do good circumstances mean that we should keep going ahead and bad circumstances mean that we should stop? But what about Matthew 14 where Jesus made the

<sup>37</sup> M. Blaine Smith, *Knowing God’s Will* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1991), p. 139.

disciples get into a boat and cross the Sea of Galilee only to have a terrible storm arise and terrify them? Did that storm mean that they should not have listened to Jesus? Or what about the blind beggar in Mark 10 who cried out to Jesus only to have the crowd sternly warn him to be quiet. If he had listened to their rebukes he would never have been healed. Or what about Jesus, who knowing what the cross held for Him, still went to be crucified? There are many situations in the Bible where people went ahead despite the circumstances only to be rewarded in the end. The entire chapter of Hebrews 11 tells us about these people.

Probably we have all heard some story similar to the one where someone got a flat tire and was stuck on the side of the road only to find out that there was a major accident up ahead that he would have been in if his tire had not blown. In Hebrews 1:14 angels are called “ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation.” I believe that much of what these angels do is to protect us from harm by manipulating the circumstances around us. The comic strip “Rose is Rose” has a guardian angel that cleverly protects his little charge.

But none of these are examples of circumstances being used for guidance. So can circumstances be used for guidance? I believe that they can but the key is to pray and ask God to do that. One simple example is someone who is looking for a job. He can ask God to close up any job possibilities that are not good and open up any that are good. But God does not absolutely guarantee that He will do this so we should still pray and think about any job that is open.

Or you are already married and are thinking about having children but neither of you has health insurance and your income is barely paying the current bills or even if finances are not a problem but the marriage is shaky. In either case I would highly suggest waiting to start a family; the circumstances are not very favorable.

Or you are thinking about buying a new place but some tile fell off of the ceiling while you were checking it out. I would counsel you to look elsewhere.

But notice that in all of those examples whether the circumstances were supernaturally produced or not did not make a difference. Reason alone told you what direction to take because it was fairly obvious.

I would dissuade people from using circumstances as some supernatural indicator when considering marriage unless it forces an obvious answer. For example, you are about to propose and then you discover that the girl is only 16 years old. That is a clear circumstance that you need to stop. Or he is arrested for murdering his previous girlfriend. I would seriously rethink the whole wedding thing.

But suppose you buy an engagement ring and it is stolen or lost. Do you break up figuring that God is telling you stop? I do not think so. Or suppose two times in a row you are about to pop the question and she gets called out of town on business. Is that a signal from God? Maybe it was nothing more than bad timing. Maybe there is a whole slew of things not working out? Should you just quit on the idea and break up? How do you know that maybe God is allowing those things to happen so that you can confirm to yourself just how much you really want this marriage.

Here is the main point, in life it is rare for everything to fall into place and sail along smoothly. Those things worth having will not come easily. There will be hindrances and problems to work out. Are those

signs from God to stop or trials from God to build your character or maybe they are just circumstances that have no supernatural meaning. How do you know the difference? Probably you do not. That is why you should only use circumstances as reasonable indicators of which direction to go but not as supernatural indicators. If God closes a door then you need to go elsewhere. But if the door merely has a bump in front of it then whether you stop or go through is up to you.

## ***Peace of God***

When you ask most Christians how did they know that they were to marry their spouse you will often get the reply, “You just know.” They cannot point to anything specific because the answer lied not so much in any one event or revelation but simply in a coming together of many smaller things all of which pointed to the same conclusion. When this happens there is a sense of peace and confirmation.

A verse that is often used in this regard is Colossians 3:15, “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.” The “peace of Christ” is not the peace that we have with God through reconciliation but, rather, an inward peace of the heart and mind that comes from God. It is not a psychological peace that we drum up ourselves because we think that everything is going well; it is a special peace that can only come from God. The word “rule” means to umpire, to arbitrate, or to decide a debate.<sup>38</sup> Nearly the entire chapter of Colossians that this verse is nestled in is dealing with various human relationships. So when our relationships are right God will give us this peace but when they are wrong it will be withheld.

I believe that when we are in a right relationship we will have a deep, inner peace. This does not mean that everything is going well or that there are not any conflicts but that God is giving us an affirmation. The verse does not read, “the peace of Christ will be in your heart.” God specifically says that we should let the peace of Christ rule or umpire in our heart. What is the difference. In the first case we would understand that God gives us peace. But in the second case God tells us to use this peace to make a wise choice.

Of course, a person must be careful not to try and force this peace so as to make it appear that they are following God’s will. Nor should anyone base their decision entirely on this factor. God does not say that this is the only factor necessary in determining His will in relationships. If that were the case then He would not have to give all of the commands regarding how we should act around each other. Some people are so nervous about everything that they could not feel God’s peace even if it were up to their necks.

This is one factor that we should consider when deciding if we should marry someone. Does everything look good but there is an inner turmoil? Then I would wait. But do we have a deep sense of God’s peace regarding this relationship? Then maybe we should this to the list of positive factors.

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<sup>38</sup> John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary—New Testament*, op. cit., p. 682.

## **Government**

This is not going to be much of an issue for the great majority of people, but there must be an observation of laws governing age, how closely you are related, and citizenship.

## **Conscience**

If the relationship is leading you into sin or is violating your conscience then it is time to back away and either slow things down or break up. How might this occur? Maybe he is trying to get you to have sex before marriage. Maybe he wants you to become involved in something illegal such as drugs, theft, being a fraudulent witness, assault, or arson. Maybe you often get drunk together. Maybe she is trying to separate you from your parents or good friends. Maybe he is trying to keep you from going to church anymore.

If some sin is becoming a large part of the relationship then that is a bad indication. God will never bless sin. He will never bless moral or ethical unrighteousness. If that person is leading you into sin then that is a good indication that the relationship is not from God.

## **Time**

Time is always a tricky issue. The Bible does not give even a hint as to how long two people should know each other before proposing marriage. But there are several issues regarding time that should be considered.

*It takes time to seek God and learn His will.* Perhaps the biggest difficulty with learning God's will in marriage is that it usually requires patience and concentrated focus on seeking God. Unfortunately, for most of us those are two things that do not come easily. But if we can maintain these two disciplines then the assurance is worth the wait and effort.

*It takes time to learn about the other person.* When we are spending a lot of time with someone we are hit with a lot of information about that other person. This can come from his or her words, actions, body language, comments from other people, how we get along alone versus when we are in a group and so on. Conclusions that we had in the beginning change as we learn more. At first we may not think that she is very funny until we realize that she is indeed very clever but in a subtle way. What we first perceived as indecisiveness turns out to be thoughtful contemplation. It takes time to get to know a person.

*It takes time to learn about ourselves.* A relationship also reveals a lot about ourselves even if we have been in a number of previous relationships because each one is different. We may learn that we have areas of intolerance or impatience that we did not know existed. We may realize that we have a long ways to go in learning fiscal responsibility. Or we may come to an understanding that having a dog is the most companionship that we can handle right now. As has been said, it is not so important as finding the right spouse as it is being the right spouse. Time gives us a chance to cut away those parts of ourselves that will cause problems in the marriage.

*It takes time to process our thoughts.* Though our brains are extremely complex and wonderful they can only do so much. Usually in a relationship things can happen quickly and often. It takes time to

correctly put together all of the events and all of the phone calls and all of the time together and determine just how compatible we really are. We have to be careful not to let our desires get ahead of our understanding because if we do then it is easier to make mistakes.

*It takes time to settle our emotions and be more objective.* In the beginning of a relationship usually everything seems so wonderful. You are both on cloud nine and it would be hard to believe that anything could go wrong. It is clear that your marriage will be the most wonderful that the world has ever seen. Eventually, though, reality settles in. Some of those habits that at first seemed so cute are now down right irritating. Being together constantly was great then but now you need a little time off. This is not to say that the relationship goes down hill from that point on but, rather, that you are both seeing each other in a more objective and realistic light and not through pumped up emotions. In truth, this is better. And as time goes on the emotions should actually deepen. In the beginning your emotions are running on adrenaline, but as the relationship grows your emotions will be running on understanding. Time does not necessarily diminish the emotions as much as corrals them and keeps them from going wild.

*It takes time for issues to be discussed.* Every serious relationship is going to have a large number of issues. Do you share any of the same hobbies? Do you both want to have children and how many? Do you have the same taste in music? Do you both like to travel? And so on. Many of these issues are vital and as some of them are discussed other ones will surface. In a sense it may be a long time, if ever, before all of the issues are fully dealt with. But whereas in the beginning the number of these unresolved issues are great and may come at you like a flock of birds, as you spend time together they will be less and less. At some point all of the major issues will have been discussed and either there will be agreement or compromise. The more of these issues that are discussed the more you will both know how compatible you are.

*It takes time to see how we are able to deal with various circumstances together.* In the beginning everything is rosy; there are few arguments, there are few disagreements, life seems wonderful. Of course you are both getting along fantastically. That is not a true test of how you will both get along in marriage. What happens when those irritations start coming up? How do you handle arguments or disagreements? Is there communication or silence? Is there self-control or anger? Is there sensitivity or accusations? This, in a sense, is the true test of how well you both can deal with each other. Sometimes it may take a while to determine this. Of course, it is not necessary to wait forever if you never argue nor is it necessary to force an argument just to see how it goes. But over time different circumstances will arise and this will give a better understanding of your ability to work together.

*It takes time to determine finances and other possible responsibilities.* Maybe one or both of you are on shaky ground financially. This may take some time to work out. Or maybe there are children involved; determining all of the issues involved with that may not be easy. Or perhaps there is a sick parent or one of you has serious health problems or you do not know where you are going to live or there is a major legal case pending. All of these things may take extra time to work through.



But what about people who get engaged after dating for less than two months? Were they foolish or undiscerning? Can we roll our eyes and whisper that they are making a mistake? The politician's answer to that is yes and no. It is certainly questionable when two people make a lifelong commitment after such a short amount of time. However, we do not know what God may have said to them. I am not big on supernatural revelations but I do believe that, though rare, they can happen and how am I to say that God did not tell them to get married? Because God does not specify a minimum amount of time to date or court then neither can I.

Interesting, I believe that as two people get older they have a better understanding of who they are and what they want. This being the case I think that older people generally need less time to determine if this person is the one for them.

#### **You are a bully if you:**

- Lack sympathy for others.
- Enjoy dominating others.
- Find enjoyment in seeing others hurt or in pain.
- Are overly aggressive.
- Want to be the center of attention even if it means putting someone else down or pushing them to the side.
- Are a sore loser and find yourself either despising the winners or wanting to bring them down some how.
- Tend to pick fights.
- Act more physically than communicatively.
- Find someone weaker than yourself and want to intimidate him or her.
- Feel good if you have hurt someone.
- Forcefully take from others and rarely give anything in return.
- Believe that physical power is the best way to succeed.

### ***Miscellaneous Considerations***

The following considerations are not so much regarding how to discern God's will as much as issues to consider when trying to decide how deeply to get into a relationship or if you should propose marriage or accept a proposal.

*Are either of us on the rebound?* When a relationship breaks up no matter who initiated it there will usually be some intense emotions. There may be a hollowness because an important part of your life is now missing. There may be a drop in self-esteem and a feeling of rejection. There may be a need to not be the only one of your friends not dating someone at the time.

This can cause two undesirable results. One is that all of this may lead to a frantic desperation. There is a sense of having to get someone, anyone, and as quickly as possible. If you are dating someone who is on the rebound then you must be careful that you are not little more than a quick fill-in. Are you in that

person's life because you are simply a body filling in a desperate need or are you there because you are truly appreciated and desired for who *you* are?

The other possible result is that because of this turmoil the person is not who they normally are. Their emotions are haywire and their thoughts are confused. Of all types of relationships this is one that should be taken slowly until you can be sure that they have truly recovered from that break up and are now their normal, usual selves again.

Just because someone is on the rebound does not mean that you should run for the hills, but there should certainly be more caution and discernment than usual.

*What about divorce?* This is a much-debated issue. Many large books have been written on the subject. I cannot even begin to explore this topic with the detail that is required, but I would like to present some thoughts. If this is a vital issue to you then I would suggest studying the topic in more depth.<sup>39</sup>

There are many Scriptures that can be studied regarding divorce but one of the key passages is the so-called “adultery or exception clause” that is mentioned in four different places:

Matthew 5:31-32, “And it was said, ‘WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE’; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

Matthew 19:3-12 but especially verse nine, “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

Mark 10:2-11 but especially verses 11-12, “And He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery.’”

Luke 16:18, “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery.”

There seems to be four major schools of thought.

1) There is no divorce and no remarriage. This is the strictest interpretation and contents that under no circumstances is divorce commanded or desired by God. Only because of people's “hardness of heart” was

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<sup>39</sup> Some recommended books are:

Ed. H. Wayne House, *Divorce and Remarriage Four Christian Views* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1990).

Larry Richards, *Remarriage A Healing Gift From God* (Dallas, Word Publishing, 1990).

Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1986).

Spiros Zodhiates, *May I Divorce & Remarry?* (Chattanooga, AMG Publishers, 1984).

Spiros Zodhiates, *What About Divorce?* (Chattanooga, AMG Publishers, 1984).

it even permitted. Marriage was designed by God to be life-long, permanent, and covenanted. A covenant is a promise and God does not revoke His promises. So even though we may break the marriage covenant through a legal divorce God will uphold the covenant and consider the two people to still be married. Therefore if either remarries He will consider it to be adultery and so remarriage is always forbidden.

This view interprets the word “adultery” in the adultery clauses as referring to an incestuous and, therefore, illegal marriage (it violated Leviticus 18:6-18) that was never sanctified by God anyway.

2) The second view is that divorce is allowed under very narrow circumstances but remarriage is always prohibited. Here the adultery clauses permit a legal divorce in the single case of adultery but any remarriage would be considered adultery. Therefore the divorced person must remain single for the rest of their lives.

3) The third view is that divorce and remarriage is allowed but only for adultery or desertion. This allows that the adultery clauses state that for adultery (desertion is covered by 1 Corinthians 7:15) allow a legal divorce and freedom to remarry.

4) The fourth view is that divorce and remarriage is allowed under a number of situations such as adultery, desertion, and abuse. This perspective more factors in the idea of God being forgiving, gracious, and compassionate. It is unlikely that God would allow repentant murderers and criminals to be allowed to participate in the full blessings of God but divorcees must remain single for the rest of their lives. The adultery clauses and 1 Corinthians 7:15 (which allows the broader categories of desertion, abuse, and homosexuality) permit remarriage.

In all of these four views God sanctifies marriage through a covenant. Divorce is never encouraged and even for adultery reconciliation must first be vigorously sought.

After spending much time studying this topic I have concluded that it is much less clear and more open to debate than I had previously thought. However, I feel that the fourth view is the more correct. In all areas of life God knows that people will make mistakes and yet He allows second chances. God does not necessarily force anyone to be burdened by a past mistake; that is the whole point of forgiveness. David committed adultery and murder but he was permitted to remain king. Peter denied Christ but was able to remain an apostle. Jonah fled from God’s command but was permitted to still be God’s spokesman. Mark deserted Paul but afterwards was considered useful and as a son to Paul.

Some people make terrible mistakes when they get married. In an adulterous or abusive situation I cannot see a person having to be forced to remain in that marriage or to remain single if divorced. Also, even if a person divorces for a wrong reason such as they just got tired of being married but then the ex-spouse remarries, I believe that frees the first person to then remarry.

However, if you are in this situation then you must develop your own convictions based on what you truly believe Scripture is telling you. Romans 14:22 applies here, “The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.”

*What about finances?* If you are in dire financial straits but you truly believe that God has told you to get married then you must obey God and trust that He will provide. However for anything short of such an absolute confirmation, it would be prudent to wait and see if you are able to improve your situation first before plunging into something as potentially stressful as marriage. Money is one of the biggest sources of arguments within marriage so why start out with this potential problem looming? However, God never says that we must be rich or even financially stable in order to get married.

Also, it should not make any difference, in my opinion, who makes the most money. Ultimately there is not the husband's money and the wife's money; it is equally both of their money no matter who put it there in the first place.

*Are one of us only looking for a father or mother for a child?* If this is discerned to be the case then I would suggest being very careful about entering into marriage. The question must be asked, "Would I still marry this person even if I did not have a child?" or conversely, "Would he or she marry me if they did not have a child?" Marriage must be more than being a live-in big brother or big sister or a glorified nanny.

*What if one of us is seriously ill?* Though illness can complicate the situation God does give abundant grace to handle this with love, patience, compassion, and humility. Just because someone is sick that should not exclude them from participating in the blessings of marriage. If love can overcome sin then it can certainly overcome illness.

But for an illness that is degenerative, the healthy person must be aware of the future burdens and possible sorrows. If they can accept that with their eyes wide open then great, but a false nobility can be disastrous. It would be better to be wise and understand your limitations then to be foolishly confident.

If possible, it might be helpful to talk to someone who is already in a similar situation. You might be able to find such people by contacting organizations focused on that particular illness.

*What if we are different races?* This should not be an issue. Yes, there are bigoted people out there but the sin of others should not prevent you from doing what you believe God is telling you to do.

The Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs in some translations) is a story about a woman marrying King Solomon. The woman as stated in chapter 1 verse 5 was black but Solomon was white (in 5:10 he is described as being ruddy or rosy). Skin color should be no more of a factor than eye or hair color.

Of course, just as someone may prefer redheads so someone may prefer a person of their own race and that is fine. But to claim that an inter-racial marriage is wrong in itself is to misunderstand how God views people and is to fabricate differences between races that simply does not exist.

## **Conclusion**

Marriage is a wonderful thing and it should also be a permanent thing. Even marriages that last for only a very short time will affect a person for the rest of their lives. It is not a decision that should be made

glibly. For a Christian to be able to know that this person is God's will for them gives a sense of wonderful peace and assurance. But discovering this will is not usually easy. It should involve a lot of prayer, a lot of counsel, a lot of discernment, God's word, and a sensitivity to any other means that God may want to speak to you. Great care must be taken to not force any of this to match our predetermined desires. It would be better to wait longer or even to break up the relationship than to fall into a miserable situation just because you were both anxious.

Two issues must be realized regarding God's will and marriage. One is that people can choose not to do God's will. Rarely does God force someone to do something. He may make it very clear what He wants someone to do but the ultimate choice lies with that person. The problem is that when this happens there is usually disastrous results. And unfortunately that wrong decision will almost always affect other people and will certainly do so in the area of marriage.

When the original Israelites who left Egypt were on the edge of the Promised Land God told them that they could not enter it because they had sinned. Some did not listen and tried to enter it anyway. They were beaten back by the inhabitants (Numbers 14). Jonah was told to go to Nineveh; instead, he went to Tarshish. A great fish swallowed him (Jonah 1). God told Lot to flee to the mountains. Lot begged to go to Zoar instead. The result was that the nations of Moab and Ammon were born to his daughters—two nations that harassed Israel (Genesis 19). So too God may tell two Christians to marry each other but one may rebel and choose a different mate; maybe even a non-Christian. That being the case there are now two people who did not do what God wanted them to do—the one rebelled and did something otherwise and the one who might have been obedient but was left empty-handed because of the other person's wrong decision. For the first person God forgives those who truly repent and God does have mercy. However, that person will surely miss out on most if not all of God's blessings for marriage. For the second person God is not thrown into despair because His original plan was confounded. He is certainly able to bring someone else into that person's life that results in an equally blessed and wonderful marriage.

The main point here is that sometimes things do not work out even when you have done everything that you should have and everything pointed to this relationship being God's will. Because people have a choice in the equation things may not happen as they should. Therefore, you should not beat yourself thinking that you blew it and read everything wrong. Maybe you did not, maybe it was the other person who missed God's will. Of course even here you should not go and point your finger at that person and make railing accusations concerning their spirituality. Rather, you might want to explain to him or her in sincere, mature detail how you understand God's will concerning your relationship. But you cannot force their choice; that is solely their responsibility before God. But know that for you God can still turn a barren wilderness into a paradise.

The second problem is the opposite of the previous one. This is where you have misread God's will concerning this other person and think that He has spoken and this is "the one" when, in fact, He has not. Then the relationship falls apart. You will be tempted to be angry and bitter and disappointed. You will

want to blame God for the situation. In this case it is best to seek counsel from others. You must resist any of your emotions calling you to sin. You must do what is right.

But even if you do make a mistake and go against God's will and marry someone that you should not have, that does not mean that you are necessarily doomed. God gives tremendous grace and because of that He can turn even the most despairing situation into one of glory and triumph. You can change to become that perfect mate. And if you married a non-Christian you can always pray that God will turn his or her heart to Him. When you make a wrong decision it will be a harder road, but it does not have to be a road that leads you over a cliff.