

Dating, Sex, Marriage  
RUF, Fall 2012

## Dating: After Attraction, *Then What?*

Genesis 2:15-25

“A romantic relationship begins with attraction and then grows through affection for each other. But a relationship matures toward true and godly love as it ripens into a desire to give, a longing to bless, and a willingness to sacrifice and serve.”

(Richard and Sharon Phillips, *Holding Hands Holding Hearts*)

### Scripture Introduction

This is our sixth week in our series, “Dating, Sex and Romance.” Tonight, I want us to consider some of the practicalities of how relationships begin and how they mature.

Let’s start with the obvious: **A romantic relationship begins with attraction.** Something about someone catches our attention, and it creates a desire for that person within us.

Now, the qualities we consider attractive are different for different people, and especially different cultures.

Case in point: I read about a pastor’s experience in West Africa—Timbuktu to be exact—and the missionaries were telling him that in that culture the larger the women were the more beautiful they were thought to be. In fact, a young missionary who had a small, trim wife said that the nationals had told him she was a bad reflection on him—he obviously was not providing well enough for her. A proverb in that part of Africa says this: If your wife is on a camel and the camel cannot stand up, then your wife is truly beautiful.

Attraction is relative.

But, attraction can also differ in respect to timing.

Sometimes, attraction is like turning on a light. It happens immediately. But just as often, attraction is like a sunrise (how romantic!). It happens over time.

One of my close friends called his dating strategy in college, “the War Wound” strategy. (Keep in mind, this is not an endorsement.) Convinced he made a poor first impression, he would just keep hanging around a girl – in “subtle” ways – stuck to her. At first, (like a war wound) she might be a little turned off, maybe even a slightly publicly embarrassed by him – perhaps longing for an easier time in the past when he wasn’t around. But over time, a strange thing would happen: she would get used to him. He might even be a source of comfort to her, like a stray dog. And then, eventually, she would grow to embrace him, and even bring him out in public to show him off (like, a war wound). His strategy was the tortoise and the hare applied to dating. Now he’s happily married with two children. (Again, not an endorsement.) I merely offer this as proof that attraction is complicated, and not always a “love at first sight” kind of thing.

A romantic relationship begins with attraction. Dating begins with attraction.

That's not a bad thing. God has wired us for attraction. Attraction is good. But we do need to be self-critical here. As I said last week, we are often too superficial and obsessed with outward appearance to even give inward attraction the space to develop. In other words, we demand attraction too quickly, and it's our loss when it comes not only to potential romances but to friendships as well. We write great people off for shallow reasons. Give attraction a chance! If you ask couples you know who are married to describe the way their relationships started, how their attraction began, you'll discover that it's not formulaic at all. In fact, some version of the sunrise is more normal than the light switch.

Attraction is good, but what next? Where do we go from there? What should we hope for in a dating relationship? How do we know if the relationship is going anywhere? Is there any measuring stick beyond, "She's pretty," or "He's... there"?

Not surprisingly because of when it was written, the Bible says absolutely nothing about dating. Not a word. But the Bible does say a lot about marriage. Marriage is the ideal romantic situation in the Bible. It's ideal because it combines commitment and vulnerability in a way that allows our desires, our attractions, to mature and flourish. So what we have to do tonight when we talk about dating is we have to work backwards. We have to talk about God's design for marriage in order to speak with wisdom about dating.

Many of you don't want to think about marriage at all right now. You feel light years away from all that. Remember, I'm not asking you to get ready for marriage. All I'm asking is for you to treat marriage as a reference point in your life. Listen to what the Bible says about marriage, and then treat it as a way to orient yourself to romance and dating in general.

Let's read now the oldest story we have about a guy meeting a girl and falling in love.

### **Read Gen. 2:15-25**

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." Now out of the ground the Lord God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man."

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

## Pray

## Opening Remarks

Genesis 2 is essentially about 3 things – it’s about worship, work, and companionship. And these three things belong together in how God has designed us. Worship, work, and companionship should impact the way we think about romance.

## HELPER

To begin, look with me first at verse 18:

“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’”

The first thing declared not good in the Bible is not immorality. It’s aloneness. It’s isolation. It is not good to be alone.

So, notice what Adam needs in order to remedy his loneliness. This is important. Adam doesn’t just need God. He’s already got Him, and God himself says that He is not enough. Adam needs more than God. He needs flesh and blood. He needs a “HELPER fit for him.” And so that’s what is going on in verses 19-20. All of God’s creatures are eligible for this role, and so they’re brought before Adam to audition. But, all fall short. Even black labs aren’t a man’s best friend, according to verse 20: “But for Adam there was not found a HELPER fit for him.”

And so Adam is anesthetized. His own body is broken for God’s final creational project, the life of a woman. Some might say, his best work yet. This woman is the HELPER fit for Adam, because she is the same flesh and bone as him. In other words, she bears the image of God equally, and yet complementary. Adam and Eve are puzzle pieces that fit. She is “The One.” (Though the other options are birds and sea lions and such.)

For some of you, I think perhaps the word “HELPER,” sounds pathetic. It sounds socially backwards. The Hebrew word for *HELPER* in this passage is the word, “*ezer*.” It’s the same word used to describe God in his relationship to Israel. God was Israel’s helper, and most powerfully as Israel’s Redeemer. In the Bible, to call a woman a HELPER is not to emphasize her weakness but her strength. It’s to label her as peripheral but as essential to God’s purpose in the world.

And in the context, we learn that Adam needs this HELPER for two reasons. Adam and Eve need one another for **companionship**. And Adam and Eve need one other for **work**. How romantic, right?

Let’s look at companionship first.

## COMPANIONSHIP (vv. 18-24)

Again, verse 18:

“It is NOT GOOD that the man should be ALONE.”

In other words, we need companionship. That’s one of the main purposes of marriage.

So, what does this tell us practically about dating? I think we can say at least two things. Here’s the first:

### 1. *Emphasize friendship in romance.*

Listen to what a pastor named Tim Keller writes.

“What is friendship? The Bible, and particularly the book of Proverbs, spends much time describing and defining (friendship). One of the prime qualities of a friend is constancy. Friends ‘love at *all* times’ and especially during ‘adversity’ (Proverbs 17:17). The counterfeit is a ‘fair-weather friend’ who comes over when you are successful but goes away if prosperity, status, or influence wanes (Proverbs 14:20; 19:4, 6, 7). True friends stick closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24). They are always there for you. Another of the essential characteristics of friendship is transparency and candor. Real friends encourage and affectionately affirm one another (Proverbs 27:9), yet real friends also offer bracing critiques: ‘Faithful are the wounds of a friend’ (Proverbs 27:5-6). Like a surgeon, friends cut you in order to heal you. Friends become wiser together through a healthy clash of viewpoints. ‘As iron sharpens iron, so friend sharpens friend’ (Proverbs 27:17).”

Here is his summary:

“There are two features of real friendship – constancy and transparency. *Real friends always let you in, and they never let you down.*”<sup>1</sup>

*Real friends always let you in.* What does that mean for dating? Can you talk to one another? Does he disclose himself to you? Do she encourage you? If everything else was stripped away, do you simply *like* being together?

*Real friends never let you down.* Is the other person trustworthy? Does he do what he says he’s going to do? Does she?

You’re going to laugh when I say this, but I think, for those of you in relationships, one of the best ways to kind of see where you are in terms of depth is to put a moratorium on physical affection for a while. Take it away. Do it for three weeks or so, long enough to really make things hard (longer than a week), and see what you learn about your relationship. Do you really have a friendship, or do you have a fling?

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*.

If you're not in a relationship, two things: (1) one of the best ways to consider a potential romance is to look at that person's existing friendships. Are they strong? Are they deep? (2) Practice being a good roommate. The best pre-relationship practice I can think of is to literally love your neighbor – the person living closest to you. Love and serve your roommates.

Emphasize friendship in romance.

## 2. *De-emphasize compatibility in romance.*

We tend to make romance all about compatibility. For example, we are obsessed with finding “the One.” Dating services make a lot of money on the promise of helping someone find their perfect match... by filling out some paperwork.

Here's why I think it's dangerous to emphasize compatibility as the way to a great relationship.

- (1) **It's inherently selfish.** It just is. It is selfish for me to expect another human being to fulfill me. At the same time, it's just plain lazy. We are lazy when it comes to romance. We don't want to change. Instead, we want to find someone who will allow us to just do what comes easy and natural to us. Compatibility has this inherent selfishness and laziness behind it.
- (2) **It's a myth.** “The one” is a myth. The perfect match is a myth.

Why is it a myth?

- (1) People change. A couple that seems compatible at 28 might not be at 48.

In fact, I have a friend, a former RUF campus minister, who is older than me by about 7-8 years, and we were talking about our marriages one day... and he said, “If Julie and I met each other right now, there is NO WAY we would even go out on a date.”

Now they've been married over 12 years. They have a great marriage. But what he was saying is that they have changed tremendously in those 12 years, so much so, that they wouldn't be able to recognize from a casual meeting enough compatibility to venture a dinner and a movie together.

Think about your own long-term friendships. How much have you both changed in 5-10-15 years? I imagine you've changed a lot. And yet, if you're still friends it's not because you were always compatible, it's because you both continued to make the effort that friendship requires. The same will be true of marriage for you one day. Compatibility can't sustain relationships over time, because people change.

- (2) There is NO WAY you can accurately assess your compatibility with someone else before you marry that person.

I like how one author puts it:

“So how do you know whether you are compatible or not? It is one thing to both enjoy playing tennis. But how do you respond when a two-year old vomits on you? How will you get along on two hours of sleep a night when you have a difficult baby, or when you learn that you will not be able to have children together? How will you work together when the woman leaves the workplace to be a mother and changes cities for the husband’s job transfer? How will you react when her mother moves in for you to take care of her or when one of you is paralyzed in an accident? Few of us will be able to assess our compatibility in the face of these challenges while dating, but these are the things that a lifetime of marriage entails. We are sorry if this is shocking, but compatibility had better not be the key to marriage, or else our happiness depends on a shot in the dark.”<sup>2</sup>

What is she saying? You would never get married if real compatibility were the key, because you would never know enough about the other person to make an accurate assessment.

What does this have to do with dating? Emphasize friendship. And in order to do that, you have to retrain your imaginations to stop thinking there is a perfect person out there for you – you don’t know who “the one” is until you’re actually standing there taking vows together. Emphasize character, not compatibility when you date.

### **Transition:**

Maybe you’re thinking, “Chad, but it says in v. 18 that the Lord made a helper ‘fit’ for Adam. Isn’t that support for compatibility, that we should look for someone ‘fit’ specifically for us?” Contextually, the answer is NO. Fitness or compatibility here refers to a fitness of the genders, a fitness of Adam and Eve’s calling, not a fitness of personal preferences. In other words, it wasn’t that Adam and Eve were both extroverts or that they loved Mumford and Sons. It was that they were made to complement one another in respect to the mission that God had given Adam in verse 15.

Which brings us to:

### **WORK**

Marriage is not only for companionship. It’s for work as well.

### **Explanation**

What is that work? Verses 15-17 tell us. Our work, broadly speaking, is to take care of God’s creation and to obey God. That’s God’s will for your life – the answer to the much sough-after question, “What am I supposed to do?” Love God. Love God’s world. Marriage helps us to do that.

How so? Well, (1) it helps us to know and to fight against our own self-centeredness. It’s much easier to live selfishly if you’re living alone. How hard is it to start sharing a room again freshman year? It’s hard, because you realize that two selfish people don’t get along that well. They don’t fit. Well, marriage is like having a roommate, on steroids, because you’re sharing everything. Not just space, but finances, children, social

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<sup>2</sup> Richard and Sharon Phillips, *Holding Hands Holding Hearts*.

agendas, etc. Marriage pins us down and makes us deal with the inordinate love we have for ourselves.

(2) But not only that, marriage also joins the creativity, strengths, time, and resources of two people to make them better as a team than they would have been as individuals. For example, my wife's consistency in caring for people over long distances and periods of time has taught me a ton about friendship that I didn't know before I married her, and might never have known if I hadn't witnessed it up close.

God designed marriage for work.

### **Application**

So what does this mean for dating? Mainly this: Dating, like marriage, involves work.

We tend to think about dating and marriage in primarily romantic terms. And romance is certainly important. It's a big part of Genesis 2. The first thing Adam says upon seeing Eve is, "At last." (Imagine that ladies. You walk into the room tonight, and a guy you've never seen before looks at you and declares, "At last!" Pretty romantic.) It's their Jerry Maguire, "you complete me," moment.

But what happens when you think about your relationships purely as romantic experiences is that your view of love gets all messed up.

And this is primary reason we're always "falling out of love." When you first start dating, the feeling of your needs being met is mistaken for love. When those needs are no longer being met, and the loving feelings are gone, then you assume that there is someone else out there who can do better... who can meet your emotional needs at a higher and more sustained level. And so, here's what happens: we "fall out of love" with one person, and look to "fall back into love" with another, and the cycle continues until we come to terms with the reality that no one can or should have to be our personal emotional slaves.

That's not real romance. The romance of Genesis 2 combines work and the fluttering of the heart. Eve is bone of Adam's bone and flesh of his flesh, (that is romantic!), their unity shows itself in the reality that it's time to go to work together, to tend the garden and to cultivate God's creation for His glory.

Think of dating as an opportunity to work –

- to honor God with someone else,
- to grow in grace together,
- to serve others.

Then, put it this way, if your relationship doesn't end in marriage (which is statistically likely), then the least you can do is to ensure that the relationship was a blessing for the other person, and not a curse. The only way that happens is to sacrifice and to put the other person's wellbeing ahead of your own.

At the bottom of it all, good relationships – marriages, friendships, and dating relationships – here's what they all have in common: They may start with attraction. But they all mature through the hard work of sacrifice and service. They all mature through grace.

This is the story of our relationship with God as well. The Bible doesn't say that Jesus suffered on the Cross because he looked down and thought to himself, "My heart flutters when I look at her." Or, "He completes me." "These people really meet my emotional needs." It says he suffered on the Cross, when we were his *enemies*. In other words, the romance was gone. Our relationship wasn't in a good place. And yet we find Jesus, our sacrifice, bearing the work of our maturity. His work was to make us better... all at great cost to himself. That's love. That's what sustains a relationship beyond attraction.