

## **It's Complicated: Dating, Sex, Love, and Marriage**

### ***The Song of Songs***

#### **Act One: The Laws of Attraction**

##### ***The Song of Songs 1:1 – 2:7***

##### **Introduction:**

(SLIDE 1) Today we are going to start a 6 week series on dating, sex, love, and marriage, called 'It's Complicated.' I am excited to do this, and by the unusually eager looks on your faces, so are you. Many of our deep hopes and desire involve dating, sex, love, and marriage. Many of our deepest pains involve dating, sex, love, and marriage. And because of that, everyone has some kind of opinion about it. Here is Hitch on dating (first 3 minutes of Hitch).

##### **Why the Song of Songs?**

We are going to look at another source of advice, a source that is more sensual and more thoughtful than most movies today. It's a play called *The Song of Songs*. I have to warn you that *The Song of Songs* is very erotic, sexual and playful. This is unlike anything you've ever read in the Bible. But I want you to know this book well for a number of reasons. First: this is the only book of the Bible that describes what we would call dating, although back then, they would have called it courtship, the pre-marriage phase of romance. Still, there are a lot of very practical points about dating you can take away from this. We're going to see what attracted them to each other, the basis of healthy attraction, what their relationship was like before they got married, how they handled things like other friends, physical intimacy and conflict.

Second: this is the only material that I know of, in the Bible or otherwise, that describes a godly relationship from first attraction to old age, from start to finish. Compare that to the time span covered by today's stories. When I was a student, the most popular romantic comedy was the movie *When Harry Met Sally*, which covered 10 years of a couple's life, from their first meeting to their wedding. *The Princess Bride* covered 5 years, from friendship to wedding. In your generation, the most popular romantic comedy is *Hitch*, which covers 1 week, from first meeting to the decision to date. The movie covers only one week. One week! The culture you're surrounded with encourages you to make only short term decisions about the second most important part of your life. I'm concerned that you have relational ADD.

The reason why this series is going to be 6 weeks long is because these four topics of dating, sex, love, and marriage are actually one unified subject. It is hard, from a Christian standpoint, and I would argue generally, to separate these four topics and handle them independently of each other. Ultimately, it is impossible. Yet your generation in particular wants to do so. It sometimes wants to talk about dating but not marriage, sex but not love. The Song of Songs covers attraction to dating to marriage to conflict and resolution all the way to old age. That is a favor to you, because only when you think long term can you make good decisions in this area in the short term. Even children's fairy tales like Snow White and Cinderella don't prepare you well. They all end at the wedding, and then say, 'They lived happily ever after.' That can be deceptive, because it encourages you to think that once you get married, all your problems are solved. No: In marriage, your real problems only just begin. Trust me!

By contrast, look at how the observant Jewish community handles this book. In the Ashkenazi Eastern European tradition, it is read *every year* on the Sabbath of Passover. In the Sephardi Spanish Jewish community, the Song of Songs is recited *every week*: every Friday night on the Sabbath. That means it's read in front of children, erotic language and all. Why? There are certainly multiple reasons (like the metaphorical interpretation that this book describes the covenant love between YHWH and Israel), but in part, it's to see what it takes to make a relationship good from attraction all the way through old age.

##### **The Main Characters: 1:1**

(SLIDE 2) In chapter 1, verse 1, the Song is introduced as 'the Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.' It means that this is the greatest of all songs, the 'best of the best,' the ultimate 'song of songs.' We're also told that it was either written by Solomon in his early years or is somehow about him or for him; we can't totally be sure. What is it about? It is about a love affair between a man and a woman. It unfolds in the

form of a play. There are two main characters: the man and the woman, whose love unfolds before us. There is also the chorus of friends who comment on the relationship or reinforce a point.

Let's first get to know the two main characters. We are told right away to envision Solomon as the young man, before he became King. There are historical notes (she says, 'the king has drawn me into his chambers' in 1:4 that does not refer to Solomon; Solomon refers to concubines, presumably David's, in ; and we also see Solomon's coronation as king in 3:6 – 11). Solomon was the last king of a united Israel, before Israel had a civil war and became two different nations, Israel and Judah. He was the son of the great King David, who was himself a warrior and poet. Although Solomon as an older man fell into great sin, by turning away from God, committing polygamy, and ruling badly, he started off with great wisdom and respect for God, and great love for this one woman.

Who is the young woman, his beloved? In the Song itself, she is called the Shulamite. That is the feminine form of Solomon's name. Both are based on the word 'shalom,' or 'peace.' They are, in this way, made for each other. That is probably a nickname of sorts, because there was a beautiful young woman that Solomon knew who was called a 'Shunammite.' Early in Solomon's young adult life, when his father King David was very old, David employed a beautiful young woman as a nurse. She is called in 1 Kings 1, 'Abishag the Shunammite.' I'll call her 'Abby' for short. The text of 1 Kings is very clear to say that King David did not have any sexual relations with her whatsoever (1 Ki.1:4). I think it would have been very natural for the young Solomon to visit with his father, the aging King David, and to fall in love with this young woman who was serving as a nurse to his father. What better way for him to see her care and sensitivity? And it's very natural for this young woman to fall in love with a young man who wants to honor his father, who seeks his wisdom and leadership, who wants to know God in the way his father did. What better way for her to see his manhood and maturity?

We also know that there had been a love triangle: One of David's other sons, Adonijah, tried to name himself as successor and King before David died. Not only did he want the throne, he wanted Abishag the Shunammite as a wife (1 Ki.2:17). But the plot was foiled. King David named Solomon as heir to his throne, and when Adonijah still requested Abishag the Shunammite as a wife, Solomon got really upset and said, 'He might as well ask for the whole kingdom!' (1 Ki.2:22) So I think what we know of Solomon's life matches the Song of Songs. Clearly the young man Solomon loved this young woman. So the word 'Shulamite' is probably a nickname for the real and very hot 'Abby' the Shunammite.

(SLIDE 3) The Song of Songs is a play in five Acts. Act One (1:1 – 2:7) covers attraction. Act Two (2:8 – 3:5) covers courtship and problem solving. Act Three (3:6 – 5:1) covers their wedding day, and their wedding night! Act Four (5:2 – 8:4) is a scene from married life. Act Five (8:4 – 15) is an elderly, married reflection on young romance. (SLIDE 4) We're going to look at Act One tonight, which goes from 1:1 – 2:7. This is the start of the relationship, and it highlights The Laws of Attraction.

#### **Attracted to Name and Character: 1:2 – 4**

(SLIDE 5) We open with the woman already saying that she's attracted to him. They've already met and spent some time together, so we're not talking about the first date, or what we might call casual dating. They're already pretty serious about each other. I'll comment at the end of our time about 'casual dating,' like going out to get to know someone else. But the complicated part begins when you like each other enough to talk like this:

<sup>2</sup> May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!

For your love is better than wine.

<sup>3</sup> Your oils have a pleasing fragrance,

Your name is like purified oil;

Therefore the maidens love you.

<sup>4</sup> Draw me after you and let us run together!

The king has brought me into his chambers.

Whoever said that the ancients had no passion? This girl is hot for this guy! She wants his affection: long, slow, deep, soft, wet kisses. She wants to drink in his love: it's better than sweet wine that makes you

happy. She even likes his cologne, in v.3: 'Your oils have a pleasing fragrance.' But why does she like him? Is it because there's something magical about his kiss? His extra strength cologne? His ripped biceps? No: She likes him because, as she says, 'Your name is like purified oil.'

'Purified oil' in ancient Jewish culture was used by the priests who served in God's presence in the Tabernacle. It was 'holy' because it had impurities removed from it. What she likes best about him is that his name has had impurities removed from it, and his name can be in the very presence of God in an honorable way. It's not that he's perfect; there is no such person. But that he's been high quality, consistent, and public. This is not something that 'only she can see' in him. In the movie Jerry Maguire, Renee Zellweger says, 'I love him for the man he almost is.' That's not what's going on here. She is not in love with potential. She is in love with actual demonstrated character, something everyone can see, not just her.

How many of you fall in love with potential? I totally did this. In 9<sup>th</sup> grade, I had a major crush on a girl on a different swim team. She was gorgeous, but I had never spoken a word with her. I didn't know if she knew I existed. But I had constructed all kinds of fantasies about what we would be like as a couple. A crush is when you're in love with potential. You project an idealistic fantasy about what that other person is like, and how they'd be really good to you consistently, but it's not actual demonstrated character.

The key here is to understand that the typical order in which you get to know someone is the opposite of the order of importance. The order you get to know someone is (SLIDE 6):

1. physical attractiveness
2. personality
3. character and values
4. core commitment

But the order of importance of those things is (SLIDE 7):

1. core commitment
2. character and values
3. personality
4. physical attraction

Let me explain this first. We tend to think that people's personality and character don't change, but they can, and they often do. When I was in high school, I was super competitive and didn't like anyone who slowed me down. But when my core commitment became Jesus and not myself, over time he helped me to care about other people, kids, injustice in the world which I wanted to not think about and brokenness in my own family which I wanted to avoid. My character changed. I was also kind of sullen and quiet by personality. But Jesus gave me real purpose I couldn't find without him. He made me happy. He gave me things to say, things that were more important than anything else I could imagine saying before, so suddenly I wanted to talk about life, about him, and about matters of the heart. Your core commitment (what you're most in love with) drives your character and values, which drives your personality, which can make even affect your physical attractiveness. I have a friend who used to carry all the stress in her life in her shoulders, and you could tell physically what was going on with her. When she gave that to the Lord, her physical posture changed, and her face changed, and she became more attractive and more sexy. Inward change can have an effect on your outward demeanor.

The problem is that people are by nature committed fundamentally to themselves. How that gets expressed is different for every person, and sometimes we're able to offset it in different ways, but it's a serious issue for anyone. This commitment to oneself is a disease that Jesus is committed to healing. So Jesus is committed to drawing you out of yourself, making you less committed to yourself and more committed to him so that we could pour out his love for others. That's why when you fall more in love with Jesus, your character changes, and your personality and even your physical attractiveness can change too.

The challenge of attraction is that the order in which you typically get to know someone is the opposite of the order of importance of these things. This is why some of you have had the experience of thinking someone is cute, really liking their personality at first, and then finding out some deeper problems later

about their character and values. For example, they have a bad day and they take it out on you. Once, twice, you can understand. But then they start to take you for granted. You ask them about this, and at first they apologize. But over time, they start to make you feel like you are their crutch. They don't handle pain that well, and they want you to make them feel better. But when you become a source of disappointment for them, it changes. They shut down when they're hurt, then instead of working things out with you, they start looking for other people to understand them. He starts to treat you like he treats his mother – like you're a burden, as if he's afraid of being controlled by you. Or she starts to treat you like her younger brother – like you're a bother and can't be fully trusted. When you try to talk about this with them, they get defensive. That's a character issue.

By contrast, what you want to look for is someone who has a name, a reputation, like purified oil. And you want to have character, demonstrated publicly, so that your name is like purified oil.

Illus: Ming and I were set up on a blind date, by mutual friends, Dave and Christine Lee. Actually, Dave dated Ming while they were in college. Seven years had passed since that time. Dave and Christine had gotten married and knew that Ming was passing through California for a work-related conference. They asked me if I wanted to meet her. I said, 'No, that's too weird. You want me to meet your old girlfriend?' They said, 'Yeah, because you two have more in common than most people I know. She loves Jesus. She loves investing spiritually in younger people, as she was an InterVarsity staff at Harvard. She loves kids. She has lived in the inner city, wants to live in the inner city, and started the Boston Urban Internship summer program in 1993 to encourage others to live in the inner city. She's made difficult choices. She has a track record, a *name*, a demonstrated character. We think you'd enjoy meeting her as a friend.' I said, 'Okay.' Less than a year and a half later, we were married. I'll tell you more about what happened later.

The best way to see your own character or someone else's is to gauge the quality of friendships, especially across time. How does this person care about other people? Do they prioritize people or just their homework? Have they handled conflict well or just run away, or shut down, or let coldness develop? Are they just going through life for himself or herself? For Christians, do they love Jesus? How does that show? Do they care spiritually for others, especially those without faith? Perhaps that's why the Friends celebrate this attraction in v.4b (SLIDE 8):

*Friends*

We will rejoice in you and be glad;  
We will extol your love more than wine.

Publicly demonstrated character. A name like purified oil: In this section, there are three ways character and values are demonstrated. First, by dealing with pain in your past. Second, by living an integrated life, not a double life. And third, by physical boundaries.

**Demonstrating Character: Pain from the Past: 1:5 – 6**

Let's look at dealing with pain in your past. The Shulamite says,

(SLIDE 9) *Shulamite*

Rightly do they love you.

<sup>5</sup> I am dark but lovely,

O daughters of Jerusalem,

Like the tents of Kedar,

Like the curtains of Solomon.

<sup>6</sup> Do not stare at me because I am swarthy,

For the sun has burned me.

My mother's sons were angry with me;

They made me caretaker of the vineyards,

But I have not taken care of my own vineyard.

(SLIDE 10) <sup>7</sup> Tell me, O you whom my soul loves,

Where do you pasture your flock,

Where do you make it lie down at noon?  
For why should I be like one who veils herself  
Beside the flocks of your companions?

There is something painful from her family. Like in many Asian cultures and European cultures, to be darkened by the sun is a mark of peasantry. To be pale skinned is a mark of aristocracy. She is self-conscious because she is dark; she was made to work outside. Whether this also means she comes from a poorer family like Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* we don't know. But something happened where her brothers made her work out in the vineyards. That hurt her. Her family was not perfect. Then when she says, 'I have not taken care of my own vineyard,' she's referring metaphorically to her own body. Her hands may be a little rough. Her hair and skin aren't as perfumed as other women that she could compare herself to.

But even though she looks different from other women, she also is confident of her own beauty. Often, a woman will look to a man to affirm her as a woman. And/or, a woman will listen to the opinions of other women about her beauty. But notice: Her self-confidence does not come from Solomon's opinion of her. Nor does it come from comparing herself with other women. Her confidence comes from somewhere else: God. You can almost picture her standing with quiet confidence as she says in v.5, 'I am dark but lovely.' And in v.7, she asks, 'Where do you pasture your flock?...For why should I be like one who veils herself beside the flocks of your companions?'

In that day, a woman who is not completely welcome into a man's public circle, because he is not totally proud of her, would keep herself veiled. He would keep her partially removed from his world. Nowadays, a guy might say, 'Yeah, she was a thing for the summer.' It's a mark of limited acceptance and limited approval. Sometimes, a person with low self-esteem will accept that kind of treatment. 'Oh, I'm just lucky to be with her or him.' Or, sometimes your insecurity comes out when you've had a little too much to drink: 'Oooooohhh, is she going to brrrreakk up with meeeee?' But the first mark of character here is that she has dealt with pain like that from the past. The Shulamite has the self-assurance to ask to be treated with honor. That is awesome, because one of the most sexy things about people is an appropriate level of confidence. An appropriate level of humility as well, but an appropriate level of confidence. She does not treat allow herself to be treated like trash.

Illus: The unfortunate reality for some of us is that when we enter a dating relationship, we carry pain from the past into the present. When I was in high school, I started dating a girl who was really nice, supportive, and smart, and all that was true about her. One of the most touching things about her was when she would hold her mom's arm when they walked down stairs. Her mom had some kind of eye condition where she couldn't perceive distance and depth as well, and going down stairs was tricky for her. So when I saw this girl hold her mom's arm, something in my heart and mind said, 'Yes! This is right!' But both of us were dealing with pain from the past. She cut herself with scissor blades. She had pain from her past relationship with a guy that made her cynical, and an even deeper pain from her parents about how she felt controlled by them. I thought I could help her by dating her, but I only made things worse. I was coming from an emotional place of wanting someone to be there for me, because my parents had started arguing about getting a divorce. So I wound up eventually pressuring her to be more because I wanted to prove something.

When you come into a dating relationship with unresolved pain from your past, it will keep hurting you. You may say you're over it, but you try to compensate for the past in some way. You'll overreact to something. You will feel pain disproportionately to the current reality. Your judgment will be off. And most importantly, when you or someone else has been through something hard, it often increases your core commitment to yourself. Even if you feel badly about yourself, you're committed to yourself at a fundamental level. The great news, though, is that Jesus can heal that place and begin a process of transformation. He replaces our love for self with a love for him, and in response, he pours out his purified genuine love for others, and it really is purified and genuine because it's his love for others, not our own.

Illus: The thing that my wife Ming really valued about my life experience when we met was that for three years, I went through a period of deep soul searching, journaling, talking with God, and talking with people

who counseled me about my brokenness. It was a dark night of the soul for me, and it lasted a while. But it was worth it not just because of what it meant for Ming, but what it meant for my spiritual life. I learned to meet with Jesus in the midst of very deep pain in my life, instead of trying to avoid it or protect myself from it. That's what allowed Jesus to love, through me, my parents during their divorce, and my dad through his alcohol recovery. That's a whole other story which I'm glad to talk about but we don't have the time here. This section just identifies that as an issue.

If you are someone with lots of issues from the past, or if you're dating someone like that, I think you need to ask some spiritual questions. Can Jesus help heal you? Are you open to that? Can Jesus help heal this other person if they're open to that? You probably need to put the pause button on your romantic relationship until that gets sorted through a bit more.

### **Demonstrating Character: An Integrated Life, not a Double Life: 1:8 – 11**

The second demonstration of character is an integrated life, not a double life. Look at v.8 onward. She has just asked to be treated with honor, for him to fully integrate her into his world, not keep her off to the side while he's secretly embarrassed about her with his guy buddies. So what does he give her? An integrated life with him. A place of honor in his world. (SLIDE 11)

*Solomon*

<sup>8</sup> If you yourself do not know,  
Most beautiful among women,  
Go forth on the trail of the flock  
And pasture your young goats  
By the tents of the shepherds.

<sup>9</sup> To me, my darling, you are like  
My mare among the chariots of Pharaoh.

<sup>10</sup> Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments,  
Your neck with strings of beads.

Now it's a bit strange for us today to compare a woman to a horse. But nowadays, some men compare hot women to hot cars! I think that's actually more crude, because it just sounds like accessories. Solomon is really saying to her, 'You are my strength.' His strength in battle is her. In Egypt, before battle, a mare would be trotted out before the stallions of the army. It would get them whipped up, alert, energetic. That's the effect she has on him. But not only is she his strength but his vision of beauty. Her face and neck are great to look at. Later he will tell her how beautiful her body is, but notice right now he focuses on her face. That is appropriate for this stage and that is classy.

Remember that she asked for him for a public relationship, not a secret one. No woman deep in her heart wants a secret relationship. I know of some cases nowadays where two people start dating and they want to keep it quiet, not let other people know. Maybe because there's an ex-girlfriend or ex-boyfriend around. But let me tell you, you're not really doing anyone a favor. And if you're treated that way, or if you have a tendency to do that, check yourself. It's not really healthy. Either the relationship becomes public as it should or it ends because it was too superficial to begin with.

Solomon welcomes the Shulamite into his closest circles. He says in v.8, 'If you yourself do not know, most beautiful among women, here is where I spend my time. This is where I work. These are the people I'm with. I hide nothing from you. I hide nothing from them. I do not lead a double life. I am where I say I am. I will be where I say I will be. What I say is what I do and vice versa, or at least I struggle for that all the time.'

This is the second major area for character and values. Having character means you lead one life, not two. A variation on this theme is to do the high school thing of ditching your friends as soon as you start dating someone. It's like your friends don't see you anymore, right? That's also leading a double life. It's not integrated. It's separate.

Back in college, a friend of mine told me that the guy she had started getting to know had a weird relationship with a girl before her. He would just have her over and get physical but otherwise they lived totally separate lives. She asked me what I thought about this, and I said, 'It sounds like they were using each other for a while. Does he want to change?' She said, 'He says so.' But she hesitated, so I asked, 'But it's a pattern in his life? He does this in ways with all his friends?' She said yes. I said, 'I wouldn't trust someone like that. I wouldn't want my sister going out with someone like that, so I wouldn't want you doing that either.'

I think the big question for your age and in an Asian context is leading a double life with your parents. Some of you may wind up dating someone that you know your parents wouldn't like. They're not Korean or Chinese or whatever. You should never hide it. You should never feel hidden by the person you're dating, either. Even if it brings up conflict, Person B always deserves to know how Person A handles conflict with the parents. Why? Because it can't work in the long term. You can't be conflict avoidant forever. So if you're going to disagree with your parents, from God's perspective, you can, but you need to do it with integrity. You cannot lead a double life.

Solomon does not. So the chorus of friends celebrate the Shulamite in v.11:

(SLIDE 12) *Friends*

<sup>11</sup> We will make for you ornaments of gold  
With beads of silver.

**Demonstrating Character: Physical Boundaries: 1:12 – 2:7**

What happens from this point relates to physical intimacy. The Shulamite in v.12 – 14 imagines Solomon contributing to her beauty:

(SLIDE 13) *Shulamite*

<sup>12</sup> While the king [King David, the father of Solomon] was at his table,  
My perfume gave forth its fragrance.  
<sup>13</sup> My beloved is to me a pouch of myrrh  
Which lies all night between my breasts.  
<sup>14</sup> My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms  
In the vineyards of Engedi.

Myrrh is an exotic spice she keeps in a small perfume bag around her neck to make her skin fragrant. I guess it was also a deodorant, but we'll stick with the perfume idea because it's more romantic. Henna is a plant that, when powdered, was used as makeup or even tattooing and body art. So on the one hand, she's saying, 'You enhance my beauty,' in the same way that Solomon said earlier, 'You enhance my strength.' But on the other hand, there is a double entendre here. But it sounds to me like she's also saying suggestively, 'I wish you were close to me, next to my skin.' Or even, 'Imagine yourself lying between my breasts at night.' What does he say to that??? Solomon is very tactful in affirming her. She is playfully drawing his attention to her breasts, but in v.15 he keeps his eyes above the neck, on her eyes:

(SLIDE 14) *Solomon*

<sup>15</sup> How beautiful you are, my darling,  
How beautiful you are!  
Your eyes are like doves.

'I'm just at peace looking into your eyes,' he says. Doves are symbolic of peace. Wow, that is poetic genius and tact and self-discipline right there. In the Song of Songs, he doesn't flatter her body until their wedding night. So men, do not make specific comments on a woman's body until you're engaged or married to her. As much as you might want to, guys, don't do it. It will make both of you feel very awkward.

Then as they're walking out in the forest, she imagines that the forest is their house.

(SLIDE 15) *Shulamite*

<sup>16</sup> How handsome you are, my beloved,

And so pleasant!

Indeed, our couch is luxuriant!

<sup>17</sup> The beams of our houses are cedars,

Our rafters, cypresses.

<sup>2:1</sup> I am the rose of Sharon, [probably: a bright red tulip that stands out in the fields]

The lily of the valleys. [probably: a plant with delicate white flowers]

Then Solomon uses the same flower metaphor but heightens the contrast:

(SLIDE 16) *Solomon*

<sup>2</sup> Like a lily among the thorns,

So is my darling among the maidens.

You're not just a flower among other flowers; you're a flower among the *thorns*! That's the very special verse that I used to propose to my wife with. AHHH...WHAT GREAT POETRY!! Then in the next part of their conversation, the woman talks about how protected and nourished she feels with him:

(SLIDE 17) *Shulamite*

<sup>3</sup> Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest,

So is my beloved among the young men.

In his shade I took great delight and sat down,

And his fruit was sweet to my taste.

<sup>4</sup> He has brought me to his banquet hall,

And his banner over me is love.

<sup>5</sup> Sustain me with raisin cakes,

Refresh me with apples,

Because I am lovesick.

<sup>6</sup> Let his left hand be under my head

And his right hand embrace me.

A woman wants a man who will make her feel safe, especially emotionally safe. That means he is rooted like a tree in the ground, strong and steady, and not carried away by emotions like panic, fear, anxiety, jealousy. You cannot push a grown tree over with your bare hands. A tree has strength. It also provides shade and fruit. I think that fruit refers to how she appreciates that he is emotional enough to connect with her; he can nourish her, as he's not stoic either.

So she rejoices that he has brought her to this imaginary banquet hall in the forest. Written on the leaves of the trees is a banner over her as if this was the emblem of their castle: LOVE. And probably half jokingly but half seriously, she says in v.5, 'Sustain me with raisin cakes, refresh me with apples, because I am lovesick.' If you were a Jewish audience back then, you would have fallen out of your seat, because a raisin cake in Jewish culture was an aphrodisiac. She's saying, 'Come on. Give it to me!!!' Then in v.6, while they're alone, she wants to embrace lying down on the floor of the forest, and be in the position of love making. 'Let his left hand be under my head and his right hand embrace me.'

That brings us explicitly to the third character quality: physical boundaries. We saw it before when he did not let his eyes wander. We see it here again as he does not let his hands wander. Interestingly, it is the man who puts on the brakes. He says in v.7:

(SLIDE 18) *Solomon*

<sup>7</sup> I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,

By the gazelles or by the hinds of the field,

That you do not arouse or awaken my love

Until she pleases.



In our culture we tend to place the onus on the woman to put on the brakes. I think that's unfair. In *The Song of Songs*, it's the man. I'll comment a little bit more on why this is important during our second week, because it happens again there, but most fully when we talk about sex during week four. For now, you'll have to wait a bit. But suffice to say, so do they. They have physical boundaries.

### **Reflection on Character and Core Commitments**

For now, let me back up and offer some thoughts that *The Song of Songs* raises for us. First of all, what if you're not even sure you're attracted to someone? What if you're still getting to know someone? You just hang out or have friendship dates? I'm all for that. I think Professor Kerry Kronin and others have talked about 'bring back the date' as opposed to 'just do the hookup.' Absolutely right. You need to learn the art of conversation. If you need help in that area, we can talk later!

Secondly, you need to learn how to share your heart without giving it away. For some of us, when you are verbally and emotionally intimate with someone, your heart just kind of follows afterwards. For me, that was something I had to learn because my family wasn't a place where we communicated that much about our feelings. So when I started sharing my life with a woman, I thought that kind of sharing – being able to talk about anything – was good chemistry. But sharing is not *agreement*. You need not just sharing, but *agreement* on the level of character and values. Remember that the order in which you get to know someone is the opposite of the order of importance:

(SLIDE 19)

- 4 Physical Attractiveness
- 3 Personality
- 2 Character & Values
- 1 Core Commitment

So you need to develop the skill, and it is a conscious skill, of being able to share parts of yourself *without giving your heart away*.

Third, I hope it's clear to you that you don't actually need to get into a serious dating relationship to get 'experience.' Some of you are nervous about that. Don't be nervous. Some of the happiest marriages I know are between people who never dated before they met the person they married. And they met that person after college. It's not the amount of dating experience that matters. It's the amount of character you have.

Fourth, you need to look for character, and work hard on your own character. In some ways, I think it's important to already be thinking longer term even before you get started. So if you're interested in building your character, and in learning how to identify people with character, listen up. When you were a child, your parents may have said, 'Take out the trash or clean your room and we'll give you an allowance.' Or even, 'Do this, *because we're your parents*.' Why? Because at the core, you loved yourself, and you had to be motivated that way. But when you grow up, you must change. You know that. And you know that you have to come into a rational and emotional conviction where the doing of the good is its own reward. You don't get an allowance anymore.

Let me give two very live examples of how people do or don't develop character. It comes down to a choice when you're presented with it. Some of you went to New Orleans over spring break and were disappointed that our work projects weren't more on the cutting edge, front lines work. In the past two years we rehabbed houses directly, we met more residents of New Orleans, we felt like we finished something with a target, we did cutting edge front lines work. It was sexy and glamorous service. This past year, we mostly did capacity building work instead. Most of us at different times cleaned up a large community center and got it ready to house 160 more volunteers. Now for some of us, our work ethic suffered because we weren't as motivated as we thought we'd feel. So when we experience disappointment like that, it's great, because what is being revealed and refined is our character. Character is the ability to be faithful and work hard and find joy in the doing of something good simply for its own sake, not because we feel important but because it is important.

Another example pertains specifically to Christians. For those of you who are not Christians, I apologize for speaking to an issue that you're not familiar with, but for the Christians here, we need to do some house cleaning. Some of us are praying for revival to happen in 2009. Now I think this is great in many ways, but one of the things I have heard is that people think God and/or we are going to bring revival to Boston. Now I'm all for Boston experiencing more of God, but you need to know something. Boston as a city has already been experiencing revival for the last 30 – 40 years. There has been an explosion in the number of immigrant and ethnic minority churches. This is very thoroughly documented and people from African-American, Haitian, Jamaican, Dominican, Puerto Rican, and Brazilian communities can attest to it. People in my neighborhood can attest to it. Their family members in Latin American and the Caribbean can attest to it. If you want to talk about college students in Boston, especially Asian-Americans, well, starting about 15 years ago, new churches were planted by people who did campus ministry: CCFC, the Grapevine which became Highrock, Cornerstone, and CityLife were all started by people who did campus ministry. That's been going on now for a while. So where does this perception come from that Boston is spiritually dead? It comes from the White Protestant community because the White community in Boston has been spiritually dead. Yet as of 2006, I believe, Boston became majority minority, so this is not a trivial oversight. It is ignorant. It is racist. And it is disturbing from the standpoint of *character*. Do certain people just need to feel like they are on the cutting edge, the front lines, doing the sexy, glam work, because they need that kind of motivation? In reality, we are the caboose; we are bringing up the rear; we are 30 years behind. But some people need to falsify the story in order to feel motivated. So if you're praying for God to move, great; I pray for that as well. But just know that we are bringing up the rear. We are joining a large group of people who have been praying it and doing it since before I was born. If you're still motivated to join, good. But if you're feeling any less motivated now, then be concerned. Christian character is the ability to be faithful and work hard and find joy in serving Jesus not because of some special deadline, not because you feel so avant garde, but simply because you love him.

Character is formed by small choices to do what is right and good even without reward or glamour. Why is that important? Because when you're married and you're working through hard issues, will you stick it out and keep loving the other person even if you feel like you're not getting much in return? Will you honor God? Only if you have character.

Do you want a name like purified oil? A reputation for good character? Then look at your core commitment. Your core commitment drives your character. If at the core, you are committed fundamentally to yourself, if at the core, you fundamentally love yourself, then you're doing to need all kinds of rewards and extra goodies to motivate you to love others well. Ultimately, it's about your core commitment. If deep down you are committed to yourself, you will run into a paradox. You will find that everyone will disappoint you in some way. People will piss you off. Even your future spouse will not be as committed to you as you are. That's the paradox of life: In order to find happiness, you have to give your life to something much larger than yourself. It must be so. In order to find life, you must give your life away. That is why I came to Jesus and why I am still a Christian. I would encourage you to consider Jesus. He is far more loving than me or you, and because of that, he makes us more attractive, too.

To illustrate that, there is another poem attributed to Pedro Arrupe, the father general of the Jesuits in the 1970s to 1980.

Nothing is more practical  
than finding God,  
that is, falling in love  
in a quite absolute, final way.

What you are in love with,  
what seizes your imagination,  
will affect everything.

It will decide what will get you  
out of bed in the morning,

what you will do with your evenings,  
how you will spend your weekends,  
what you read, who you know,  
what breaks your heart,  
and what amazes you  
with joy and gratitude.

Fall in love [with him], stay in love [with him],  
and it will decide everything.

I look forward to seeing you next week when we talk about really getting to know each other, and working through some big issues!