

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

The Song of Songs

Act Two: Really Getting to Know Each Other...I Mean Really

The Song of Songs 2:8 – 3:5

Introduction: Discernment for Marriage

(SLIDE 1) Last week we covered the issue of attraction. What attracts us to one another? What is healthy and what is not? (SLIDE 2) This week we move into the topic of serious dating, and really getting to know each other.

When Ming and I first met on March 1, 1998, having been set up on a blind date, we took a long 4 hour walk around the Stanford campus. She had grown up there until she was 10 while her dad was in graduate school. And I had gone there as an undergrad from '90 – '94, so it was special to both of us. You may feel that one day about BC. Just to give you a feeling for our long walk, here's what Stanford looks like in the spring time (SLIDE 3). Actually in California, it always looks like this! Well, like any blind date, there was that weird awkwardness in the beginning. Ming had short black hair that half covered her face; I thought she was cute, but until that time I had a preference for long hair. She thought that I was nice but being a bit shabby by wearing torn jeans to a blind date. But as the conversation went on, we could definitely see how our mutual friends could see our strengths and values matching up. She had missed only 1 question on the LSAT but then turned down Harvard Law School in order to do campus ministry at Harvard. It was a conviction that Jesus had given her that she could influence the world just as much if not more by investing in younger people at Harvard. Plus, law wasn't really her thing. I had given up two promotions at Intel in order to invest in the Mexican immigrant community that I lived in. It was a conviction that Jesus had given me that this was a way to be faithful to his call to love the poor, the alien, the orphan. We asked each other a bunch of questions. How did you come to decide that? What was your experience of Jesus? How did he work that into your life? What do you see in Scripture that inspired you? What are you hoping your life to be like? And in a guarded but tentative way, the way two people who are skeptical yet hopeful, we became kind of interested in each other.

But shortly after we started to date, there was trouble in paradise. Partly because I am two school years younger than Ming, Ming didn't respect me as much as she could have or should have on certain things. So we had to talk through that. Ming's mom, being Chinese, didn't like the fact that I was of Japanese descent, so we had to work through that one. But the issue that I want to go into more depth was one that involved a mistake on my part. About 5 or 6 months after we first met, and 3 or 4 months after we started dating, I said to Ming that I was pretty sure that I wanted to marry her, and that I would come out to Boston. Now I tend to make decisions based on a deep gut-level feeling, praying and thinking about it, of course, but usually there is something in my gut that tells me what the best thing to do is. But in this case, I ran a bit ahead of my gut and emotions. As I thought about what I had just committed to, the next day I felt emotional whiplash. I had a lot of doubts about leaving California and going to Boston. It was physically hard to breathe when I thought about it too much. I realized I wanted to talk to more people about this. So the next day, I call Ming and said, 'I'm sorry, but I have to take back the promise I made. Mostly it's the thought of moving to Boston and giving up my life here. I'm not sure about that and I'd like to think that through some more. And I love you but I think there are still some feelings that need to settle down in me before I feel able to propose to you.' Needless to say, Ming was pretty mad. But she forgave me. We learned a lot about each other during those months of dating, as we really got to know each other. But it was only because we both believed that dating was discernment for marriage. Otherwise, what's the point?

Context:

Last week, we started this series called 'It's Complicated: Dating, Sex, Love, and Marriage' by looking at an ancient play. It's called *The Song of Songs*, and it's a play about a relationship from start to finish, from the basis of attraction (which we covered last week) through dating and problem solving through marriage through conflict and resolution all the way through old age. The benefit of spending time with Solomon and Abishag the Shunamite (aka 'the Shulamite') in this play is that nowhere in life do we see an entire relationship from start to finish. You were not there when your parents dated and got married. You probably didn't even think of how they did that until recently. On the other hand, fairy tales like Cinderella and Snow White all end with the wedding, 'and they lived happily ever after.' They make it sound like marriage solves all your problems; but marriage is really just the beginning of all your real problems. So it is a privilege for us to spend these five or six weeks with this couple.

(SLIDE 4) Last week, we talked about falling in love with actual demonstrated character, not falling in love with potential. Abby the Shulamite valued the name that is like purified oil, a demonstrated character. And we talked about a framework for thinking about attraction.

(SLIDE 5) The way you get to know someone is usually (1) Physical Attractiveness; (2) Personality; (3) Character and Values; and then (4) Core Commitment. But that order is opposite the order of their importance. (SLIDE 6) (4) Physical Attractiveness is least important; (3) Personality next; (2) Character and Values are really important; and (1) Core Commitment is ultimately important.

(SLIDE 7) Now, we're going to delve more deeply into this in the context of the larger issue: serious dating relationships. What is it and what is it for? Maybe serious dating is (1) just a step above 'friends with benefits'; or (2) a heartbreak waiting to happen, if you're hopeless or cynical; (3) something you need to do to learn more about yourself, regardless of what you think about the future; or (4) a minor marriage in itself, where you have sex, move in together, and open a joint bank account, all without an explicit promise for life. I would argue right up front that if you're thinking about dating in those forms, it's not going to make much sense to you, it's going to cost you unnecessary time and energy, and it'll cause you unnecessary pain and confusion both now and in the future. Serious dating only makes sense when it's discernment for marriage. Why do I say that? It may seem so radical to you in this day and age, doing things with so much purpose. Why not go with the flow? Let me try to explain that as we get into *The Song of Songs*, Act Two. Let's turn to where we left off, chapter 2 verse 8.

Listening to Each Other: 2:8 – 14

(SLIDE 8) The setting of Act Two is: Spring. Winter is ending, and with the budding flowers comes a sense of expectation. Beauty has reawakened in the world. And there's even a wedding not too far off – their wedding. In Jewish tradition by the first century, couples were betrothed by their parents or some other matchmaker, like in the great musical *The Fiddler on the Roof*. Then, engaged couples spent a year getting to know each other before the actual wedding took place. Assuming this tradition reached back to the days of Solomon, then they have been dating – slash – courting almost a year.

Shulamite

^{2:8} Listen! My beloved!

Behold, he is coming,
Climbing on the mountains,
Leaping on the hills!

(SLIDE 9) ⁹ My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag.

Behold, he is standing behind our wall,
He is looking through the windows,
He is peering through the lattice.

¹⁰ My beloved responded and said to me,

We see Solomon's excitement through the eyes of the young woman. He comes running and bounding, like a gazelle or a stag, she says, to see her. He is full of energy. But like a gazelle or stag, he makes the running look gracefully easy. I guess she thinks he is athletic. Also from this section, we learn that the area the young women reside in is protected from the rest of the palace. Even the king cannot enter from the outside. Instead he must impatiently wait outside the wall, peering through the lattice work in the windows to see if she is coming yet. When she finally comes into the courtyard, he calls over the wall and says through the lattice:

(SLIDE 10) *Solomon*

'Arise, my darling, my beautiful one,
And come along.

¹¹ For behold, the winter is past,

The rain is over and gone.

¹² The flowers have already appeared in the land;

The time has arrived for pruning the vines,

(SLIDE 11) And the voice of the turtledove has been heard in our land.

¹³ The fig tree has ripened its figs,

And the vines in blossom have given forth their fragrance.

(SLIDE 12) Arise, my darling, my beautiful one,

And come along!

¹⁴ O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,

In the secret place of the steep pathway,

Let me see your form,

A

Let me hear your voice;

B

For your voice is sweet,

B

And your form is lovely.'

A

Springtime in Israel is a beautiful thing, as we see from these amazing pictures. Notice that Solomon does not pursue her using wealth or position, something that would have been very easy for him to do. Instead, he wants to take a long walk. Yes, he wants to tell her how beautiful she is in the midst of all the beauty of spring. Hence he says, 'Let me see your form...your form is lovely.' But fundamentally, he wants to talk. 'Let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet.' Usually, Hebrew poetry has an A-B-A-B structure. But here (SLIDE 13), there is an A-B-B-A structure, which is a chiasm. In a chiasm, the center point, the middle, is the place of emphasis. So that's why I think he's saying, 'Yes, I do want to see your beauty, but more importantly, I want to talk.'

In Western culture, there is a quote: 'Eyes are the windows to the soul.' But in Jewish culture, there is a proverb that says, 'Words are the window to the soul.' Why is that? Because through a person's words you can sense what they've thought about, how they've dealt with suffering, what kind of resolve they have, what their inner life is like, what they're passionate about, and who they are. Actions are important as well. From 1:4, we know that having a name like purified oil, or having demonstrated character, is vital. But you need to listen to how a person *interprets* their actions. Words are the way you can tell spiritual things about people: love for Jesus, motivation, hope, struggle, self-awareness, God-awareness.

Illus: Here's an example where words were really important. How many of you have been in a love-triangle situation? How many of you are currently IN a love-triangle situation??? This was not Ming, by the way, but the girl I dated before I met Ming; I'll call her 'Dee.' There was one summer when a friend of mine and I were hanging out at a Vietnamese noodle house. He asked me how I was doing, and I said, 'Good; I'm starting to get to know this girl.' As I described her, my friend got a worried look on his face. He said to me, 'Uh...What do you think about two friends liking the same girl?' I thought, 'Oh no.' But as we talked it through, we decided that the best thing to actually do is for both of us to keep trying to get to know her. If Dee is mature, then she'll know whether one of us or neither of us would be better for her. But if she's not mature, then that will show and then each of us will have to reevaluate whether we liked her for real or just the great illusion called 'the potential her.' I walked away from that conversation with a sinking feeling in my stomach, and I'm sure my friend did, too. And, there were some tense moments, like the time I was at her place hanging out and there was a knock at the door – and there was my friend! And the three of us hung out! Our group of friends liked to go ballroom dancing, so there was always something we had to think about in advance because we had many friends in common. Eventually our other friends found out about this because we didn't lie about it either. That situation lasted for FIVE LONG MONTHS. Basically my friend felt that there weren't enough things in common he had with the woman, so he called me to tell me that. A few months after that, she and I started dating.

Now it would be easy to say, 'Great for me! I'm glad that worked out.' But that episode taught me a lot. If she chose me, then why? Is it because I wined and dined her? Is it because I pseudo-stalked her and tried to hang out all the time with her? Is it fundamentally because I put more money, energy, and time into pursuing her than my friend did? I decided that that must not be the reason why. There had to be a deeper reason why she would like me if she did, because if money, energy, and time are the fundamental basis for relationships, then any other guy who put more money, energy, and time into her would and should sweep her away. So I talked with Dee. And we found that we shared a lot of the same interests and passions: a love for Jesus; a love for investing in younger people, so we wound up talking about me investing in Mexican youth and her mentoring younger high school girls at her church; a love for Scripture and how to communicate it; and so on. Our chemistry related to our core commitment: not ourselves, but Jesus. We also connected to some degree on our character and values: love for others and people development in ministry. That is why Dee chose me, and that is what I wanted. I actually spent less money, energy, and time than my friend. But I had already decided that if she was the kind of woman who was more persuaded by

those kinds of factors, then I didn't want her. I was looking for a deeper connection, and that connection was made through words. 'Let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet.'

Illus: There is a story by Scottish storyteller George MacDonald called *The Poet's Homecoming* that illustrates this well. The young man Walter leaves his family's farm for a literary career in journalism in the city. Walter arrives in the city and has to struggle to adjust and make it and possibly find romance. In one conversation, Walter finds himself in a conversation about ghosts. Someone says, 'How horrible! To find a soul with no body.' Someone else responds, 'More horrible still is to find someone who is a body with no soul, that is, to find someone who is outwardly attractive but has no character, no soul.' Much later, after learning some hard lessons about superficiality, Walter returns home to his family and the girl next door, a young woman named Molly, who is beautiful, yes, but also insightful, wise with her words, loves the people around her, spiritual and ever deepening in this direction because she is in love with Jesus; Jesus is her core commitment. All this happens in the larger story about words: journalism, poetry, and words of substance. How do you really get to know someone and figure out whether they are people of substance? Listen to their words.

Catching the Foxes and Problem Solving: 2:15 – 17

In addition, words are the way you work through problems and discern a person's character that way. Look at v.15 – 17.

(SLIDE 14) *Shulamite*

¹⁵ Catch the foxes for us,

The little foxes that are ruining the vineyards,
While our vineyards are in blossom.

¹⁶ My beloved is mine, and I am his;

He pastures his flock among the lilies.

¹⁷ Until the cool of the day when the shadows flee away,

Turn, my beloved, and be like a gazelle

Or a young stag on the mountains of Bether.

There are two references here to problems in the relationship. First is the reference to foxes in the vineyard in v.15. While grapes are in bloom, the vines are tender and the blossoms can easily be knocked off. Growers of grapes frequently had problems with fox cubs playing in the vineyards. Their antics would knock blossoms off and break the new shoots. So the growers had to set traps for the foxes and remove them from the vineyards so the vines could grow unmolested. So what she's saying is, 'Catch the little problems that we're starting to see in our relationship. Let's focus on them, so that they won't surprise us later, or creep up on us to eat the life we have together.'

Second, the reference to mountains in v.17 also is an allusion to problems. What are 'the mountains of Bether'? *Bether* means *a cutting or a separation*. The *Believers' Bible Commentary* p.924 says this could mean 'the mountains that separate us.' If that is the case, then she is also saying that she's aware of their differences and wants to work on them. (Others suggest that the phrase is subtle, containing many layers of meaning. Perhaps she is referring to the cleavage of her breasts (her 'mountains'?), and is expressing a desire for physical intimacy. The same word is used in reference to cutting animal sacrifices in half, to seal the covenant (Genesis 15:10, Jeremiah 34:18 – 19). So this idea of moving between two halves invokes the image of a covenant – in this case, a marriage covenant – that is being established.) She asks him to be as confident dealing with problems, as a gazelle or young stag is on the mountains.

Illus: Now I told you that, before I met Ming, I dated 'Dee' as I mentioned earlier. What made the relationship not work out between Dee and me was character and values. Dee and I had been friends before we were interested in each other, so when we started dating, I told her what I was looking for in a wife. I believe that Jesus calls us to make sacrifices and take risks and lay down our lives in order to advance his kingdom everywhere. And because of that, I also wanted back in 1996, to live in an inner city neighborhood like I was doing at the time and like I'm doing now. I wanted to live in intentional Christian community like I was doing at the time and like I'm doing now. I wanted to leave behind my Intel job where I was making a very decent paycheck, in favor of possibly being a high school teacher and investing directly in young people. I didn't want to save up the money to send my kids to a private school or private college. Instead, I wanted to adopt kids or be a foster parent. I had the view that family was a way to reach out to more kids and other families, instead of family being something that you had to protect all

the time. I wanted to stand in the tradition of Christians who had done radical things and changed the world rather than maintain the status quo. And I did not want a cheerleader wife who stood on the sidelines and cheered me on. I wanted a partner who worked with me in the trenches. Dee was new to all this, and it was really challenging for her. She had been a sheltered, middle class Christian whose 1st generation Asian-American parents had protected her from almost everything. Of course, they did not like me at all. When we talked about dating, I said, 'I believe that dating is discernment for marriage. So if there comes a point in time where one of us feels like we cannot get married, then we should break up.' After about seven months of dating, of serious words, of talking about the possibility of marriage, it was clear that we could not agree about a future lifestyle. She was having a hard time processing everything that I was saying because we were dating, and it was a loaded context. Was she doing it for me? Or for herself and the Lord? We had a real values mismatch. So we broke up.

Just because you date someone who calls himself or herself a Christian, doesn't necessarily make it right, doesn't necessarily make it easy, and doesn't necessarily make it wise. What is that person's real core commitment? Is it Jesus? Or is it too tainted with a love for self, for comfort, for something other than Jesus? That's why when I met Ming, I was first interested in her core commitment, and her character and values. Then and only then did I consider other things.

Typical Problems in Dating

So how can we make this relevant to what you might be going through at your age? Here are some possible issues to handle now: I want to use the framework I brought up last week, where the order of how you typically get to know a person is the opposite order of what is important:

(SLIDE 15)

1. Physical attractiveness
2. Personality
3. Character and values
4. Core commitment

(SLIDE 16) Some problems occur on the fundamental level of a person's core commitment. For example, someone's core commitment might be to his or her family. This is the Mama's boy problem, or the Daddy's girl problem. When I was graduating, I asked my mom whether she wanted me to come back to LA to live. She said, 'No. I don't want you to be a mama's boy.' She had just divorced my dad that year, and told me that when they were first married many years ago, they moved into the house that my dad grew up in. My dad's mom, my grandmother, treated my mom like a slave. I guess that can happen in Japanese culture to various degrees. My dad never stepped in; he never took her side. So my mom said, 'You have to listen to your wife before me.' That was an amazing insight, because in Genesis 2, God says, 'For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife.' That is one of the reasons why I believe God exists. No ancient culture would have said that. Every ancient culture, and even Asian cultures today, was based on the power of the older generation over the younger. So when a couple got married, the wife moved into the husband's family. And who's in charge there? The oldest person! No ancient culture would have said that a man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife. Even today, some of the biggest challenges to your future marriage will be your parents. So the person you deserve to see how your boyfriend or girlfriend handles conflict with their parents, and the person you're dating deserves to see you handle conflict. Some of you are too conflict avoidant with your parents, and that will come back to hurt you.

Or, someone's core commitment might be to self. (1) They want to achieve something not of God, and they'll spend lots of time, energy, and money trying to achieve that goal. (2) They want to control you: possession of your growth.

(SLIDE 17) Here are some problems that come up on the level of Character and Values:

- Self-Centered: Not Christ-centered, afraid of Jesus, not motivated for his kingdom
- Unhealed: Pain from the past affects perceptions and judgment
- Double Life: The person is not one integrated person to everyone; they have unreliable character
- Spoiled Brat: Unable to make tradeoffs; they just want it all
- Overly Anxious: Unable to handle uncertainty

- Clingy: Easily jealous, distrustful
- Neglectful: Does not prioritize you
- Can't Wait: Has trouble with physical boundaries

When you hit conflicts on the levels of Core Commitment and Character and Values, you might give it a little time, but in the end I think it's better to break up.

(SLIDE 18) Some problems come up because of Personality. There are lots of ways to get at personality conflicts. One way is to use the Meyers-Briggs Temperament Indicator. I give this to you because it's available on line, because there's a lot of things written about it, because it's used to look at dynamics in dating and marriage, and because I actually find it personally helpful. The one thing I've noticed in Christian couples is that there is one particular personality difference that causes most difficulties. The Intuitive (N) vs. Sensing (S) difference. Intuitive people tend to be idealistic, visionary types who see the world as what it could be or what it should be. So they want to change things. Sensing people tend to be practical people who see the world as it is, and think that we need to adjust ourselves to the reality of the world. So in a Christian context, Intuitive people tend to see the way the world could use the love of God, and want to change it. They see Sensing people as supporting the status quo, afraid of change, afraid of the unknown, or not willing to eat the cost of personal sacrifice. Sensing people tend to care for people through what is known. They see Intuitive people as unrealistic, 'head in the clouds', wishful thinkers who burn people out because they don't think through plans, details, and people's personal limitations. That's the difference, and it can work, but it's a difficult one at times.

Physical Boundaries Again: 2:17 – 3:5

But once again, in the story of Solomon and the Shulamite, the issue of sex comes up.

(SLIDE 19) ^{3:1} On my bed night after night I sought him
Whom my soul loves;

I sought him but did not find him.

² 'I must arise now and go about the city;

In the streets and in the squares

I must seek him whom my soul loves.'

I sought him but did not find him.

(SLIDE 20) ³ The watchmen who make the rounds in the city found me,

And I said, 'Have you seen him whom my soul loves?'

⁴ Scarcely had I left them

When I found him whom my soul loves;

I held on to him and would not let him go

Until I had brought him to my mother's house,

And into the room of her who conceived me.

When you find someone with whom you work out problems well, it increases your love for them. More of their good character is shown. And you can trust them more. This is what happens here. For several nights the young woman has been having nightmares. She dreams that she has somehow lost Solomon. In the dream, she wanders everywhere and can't find him. Night falls and the watchmen come across her still looking. Just as she leaves them, she suddenly finds him. She is determined not to let go of him until the marriage is final. So she wants to bring him to the house she grew up in, into the room and the bed on which she was conceived, and make love to consummate their relationship. Apparently, one ancient Jewish marriage rite was to spend the night of your marriage in the room where you were conceived or born (Genesis 24:67). So she wants to speed up the relationship to that point.

But once again, he says no.

(SLIDE 21) *Solomon*

⁵ I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,

By the gazelles or by the hinds of the field,

That you will not arouse or awaken my love

Until she pleases.

Again, this is absolutely stunning. Let me explain why I think their example is great. At the very basic level, there is the question of learning how to handle your body. Part of growing up, I think, is learning how to live in your body, temper it, and control it. I see it in my kids. First they had to learn to bring their hands to their mouths. Then they had to walk. Now that they're in karate and ballet classes, they have to really learn to control their bodies. That happens for us with regards to our bodily senses. For instance, when I was growing up I was able to eat three Big Macs. I was able to eat a dozen donuts by myself. I loved the smell of gasoline, and would get out of the car when my parents stopped for gas and took a big whiff. Those are extremes. I think that's a natural part of growing up, but in other ways, it is killing our lungs. The issue is that as we grow, we need fewer and fewer strong sensations. Over time, the natural course of growth as a person is to learn to appreciate subtle flavors, subtle smells, subtle humor. I can barely eat one Big Mac now; that orange sauce is just too much. Or, I can remember the day when I was 16 that I discovered that I liked bell peppers on my pizza, and then more vegetables. My parents were right. Extreme flavors, and repeating extreme experiences, were no longer attractive.

Sexual arousal and sex itself are the same way. First of all, we need to learn how to control our bodies in this way just like in every other way. Second, over time and in God's tutelage, we learn to appreciate subtlety. Hugh Hefner, the founder of Playboy, demonstrates my point by going the opposite direction. After his first wife admitted to having an affair, Hefner was devastated. He became a womanizer, and slept with woman after woman, Playmate after Playmate. Nothing satisfied him. He experimented with group sex and bisexuality. He overstimulated himself so much that he lost feeling and at times the ability to be aroused. That trajectory seems dehumanizing to me. Everyone has desires; it's what you do with those desires that actually shape the desires themselves, and ultimately, you. Sex is really like every other sense we have. It is meant to mature so that it's not the extremes of wild sex with multiple people, but the subtlety of our one true love, our spouse, that gives us the most pleasure.

If you have sex while dating, you'll actually start to lose the ability to pick up on things because you'll form attachments and bonds with another person that are premature. You'll dull your senses. But when we are trying to discern, we need to be attuned to subtleties: 'Is this person emotionally healthy? Spiritually healthy? Is this relationship spiritually healthy?' To perceive Character and Core Commitment issues in a person, you need to have fine-tuned senses. The more Character and Commitment to Jesus you have, the more quickly you'll be able to sense it in others. In many ways, 'It takes one to know one.' That's why, although it seems counterintuitive, the most important thing for your *future* marriage is to love Jesus in the *now*!!

So Solomon says, 'No'. Wow! How often do we find the man saying no? Like I said last week, in our culture, we tend to put it on the woman to say, 'This is where I feel uncomfortable.' I think that is totally unfair. *The Song of Songs* has the man putting on the brakes. You'll have to wait for Act Three, when we cover *The Glory of Sex*, to find out why.

Dating as Discernment

Let me explain a bit more fully why a serious dating relationship is a discernment time for marriage. I don't think you need to know for sure that this person is the one you'll marry. But I am saying that if you ever get to the point where you think you shouldn't marry this person, you should break up immediately. So why do I think that?

(SLIDE 22) (1) Because marriage gives you something to filter other people through. If you're not thinking about marriage, you'll be enjoying the moment hedonistically. But you won't know what to talk about, think about, and listen for in the other person. It is tempting to idealize the other person so that you think you don't have problems. Or, when the problems start appearing, you ignore them. But you *want* to filter people romantically. After all, how many of you women would like to date a guy who is like this: You ask him, 'What do you think about us long term?' and he says, 'I don't know; I really haven't thought about it; I don't think long term.' Or how many of you guys want to date a girl who is like this: You ask, 'Am I the kind of guy you could respect and be with for your whole life?' and she says, 'I don't know; I always assumed we'd break up at some point.' Wow. And yet, in essence, many people set themselves up for hearing something like that.

(2) Because marriage gives you something to grow towards, even if you're not dating. (a) When I was in college, I wanted to learn how to cook, because I wanted to have a marriage where I could romance my wife. So I had something to grow towards. (b) Also when I was in college, I recognized that I was emotionally constipated. I was pretty stoic. Some people didn't feel like they could emotionally connect with me. I had seen that my dad was very emotionally distant and I was starting to see the impact of that on our family. I didn't want to be that kind of person.

So I had something to grow towards. (c) And, when I was younger, I had seen Christian couples and how they raised kids, and I felt fairly strongly that if at all possible, I wanted to have my kids grow up for their first 4 years of life with one parent at home with them. I wanted to marry a woman who felt the same way. But that made me ask, 'Am I being fair? Am I willing to be a full time dad, or more likely, to coordinate with my wife to work part time and switch off at home part time?' That was a character and values question. Marriage gives you something to grow towards. It was also helpful because I decided that any woman who didn't want to be at least a part time mom was too much of a careerist for me. There was another helpful filter.

If you're not thinking about marriage, you won't know how to grow in your own character. Look at how Solomon and the Shulamite handle the things that separate them, the foxes in their vineyard. In their case, they are not just dating. They're already engaged. Act Three will open with the coronation of Solomon and then move on to their wedding night. So if anyone could have just pushed off problems into the future, it was them. I mean, what difference does it make if you know you're going to get married? Just push it off until then, right? WRONG!!! Character growth doesn't happen suddenly. It takes practice. Another proverb says, 'Watch your thoughts; they become words. Watch your words; they become actions. Watch your actions; they become habits. Watch your habits; they become character. Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.'

(3) Because marriage tells you whether or not you should break up. If you need to break up, it is less painful to break up sooner rather than later. Especially if you've been physically intimate or made big decisions wrapped around the other person, like how much to spend your time with this other person versus other friends, or where you're going to live. The more time you spend joined together, the more it's going to hurt when you break up. So if it doesn't make much sense now, break up now. Think about it this way. How many of you would like to be with someone who says, 'I think we should break up.' You ask, 'How long have you felt this way?' and the person says, 'For about two years.' That would kill you, wouldn't it? You'd say, 'Why didn't you tell me back then?!?' So how could you inflict that on someone else? Even if it's agreed upon that you're just mutually using each other, it'll hurt, and besides that, that's a character issue.

So let me again make this practical. If you start seriously dating someone, it's not that you have to know that you're going to marry that person. But if it becomes clear that you can't marry the other person, you need to break up, immediately. Here's why (SLIDE 23): There is an ethical imperative within dating, based on what you know about the other person. If you are dating someone who you know you can't or shouldn't marry, you are...

(1) You are intending to disobey the teaching of Jesus by marrying a person who is not missional, not growing spiritually, materialistic, or not a Christian, or something to that effect – you are planning to be *disobedient to Jesus*. That is a serious problem for you. Because your heart is being led astray. Paul says in Ephesians 5 that marriage is a spiritual union with Jesus, involving three people, not just a physical union involving two people. That's why he says in 1 Corinthians 7:39 to Christian widows that they could get remarried but 'only in the Lord,' that is, to another Christian. It is disobedience to Jesus for a Christian to voluntarily marry a non-Christian, or to marry someone who wears the label of 'Christian' but whose heart isn't really there. In 2 Corinthians 6:14, Paul says, 'Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?' That speaks to certain types of binding relationships, including marriage, and serious dating.

(SLIDE 24) Illus: Let me read you part of a letter that I wrote to a student many years ago. 'Therefore, I reiterate that breaking up now will be better than breaking up later, and not just for you. I am concerned not only for you, but for her. Even though I haven't met her and don't know her at all, I can still appreciate the hurt that's in store for her. One day you'll have to say, 'I can't marry you, so I think we should break up.' She will ask, 'How long have you known this?' The truthful response will have to be, 'A long time now.' And that will feel like a deep betrayal. Prolonging the relationship only allows time for more attachment (emotional, physical, spiritual) to happen. Because you've been hasty in getting together without thinking biblically about the issue and without really hearing other Christians' concerns, you've put her into a situation where she will get hurt, she may develop some negative feelings about Jesus which will only increase the longer you date, and you've put yourself into a situation where your witness is already diminished. There is always hope, of course, in that it's not too late to bring forth integrity out of this. You can explain this to her, break up, and become a better friend to her than you have been so far. For in this regard, I would say that you have not yet loved her well. Seriously dating a non-Christian is always a failure to truly love Jesus, and at the same time, a failure to truly love the other person.'

(SLIDE 25) Coming back to this list here...

(2) You are agreeing to use each other as 'crutches' for the time being – *hedonism*

(3) You are being dishonest with the non-Christian by not telling the truth: 'I can't actually marry you' – *dishonesty*

(4) You trying to persuade the non-Christian person to commit to Jesus while dating and through dating – *manipulation*. Should you ever date someone to change that person? No. It's too manipulative and you wind up trying to control the other person's process of growth and development as a person. As soon as you realize that you can't marry this person, you should break up. For example, if I dated Ming and then said, 'I want us to date but I'll only marry you if you became more clean and organized', that's manipulative. It's a loaded context. This is why it's important not to date people who are not Christians, or people who call themselves Christians but are really self-centered. You're not going to change them. They have to want to change on their own and for their own sake, and not just because of you. You can love them unconditionally *as a friend*. Or;

(5) You don't know what the teaching of Jesus and the apostles actually is regarding choosing a marriage partner – *uninformed*

If you think there is some other possibility, I eagerly invite you to explain it to me. But as far as I understand the issues, this is what's going on. I wanted to cover the bases so that you are no longer (#5) uninformed of the biblical teaching on marriage and its spiritual significance. There is an ethical and spiritual framework for dating. If you are dating someone you know you cannot marry at this point, then either you're planning on disobeying Jesus (#1), or you're agreeing to use each other as 'crutches' for the time being (#2), or you are being dishonest with the person by not telling him/her that you can't actually marry him/her (#3), or you're hoping to change him/her (#4), or some combination of those things. For anyone who claims to follow Jesus, all those postures are problematic. Being disobedient, hedonistic, dishonest, and/or manipulative are not good. You are going beyond boundaries. If you do this, and if you persist in it, the more you are damaging your own faith, your own character, and your own personality. You would be compromising yourself. And because your standards of good and evil, of unselfishness and selfishness, will always adjust to accommodate your own behavior, you would also be hurting yourself. Your character will slip and so will your discernment of other people. That is why there is an ethics of dating.

Dating, Marriage, and Morality

I understand that if you are not a Christian, you might feel like I am saying that Christians are more moral than other people. That's not what I'm saying. So please listen carefully. Everyone is moral in their own way. But our moralities don't agree. For example, my mom is not a Christian. She believes it is immoral for me and my wife to raise our kids in a lower-income, higher crime, mostly Black neighborhood. We are not sending them to the best possible schools. We have taken lower paying jobs, so we don't give our kids the things she thinks we should buy. For Stanford and Harvard graduates like us to plan to send our kids to a public college rather than a private is immoral to her. The issue is not that we are 'more moral' than her. The issue is that we have *different moralities*. Another example: Non-Christians don't do evangelism, but evangelism is a moral duty for Christians because Jesus is a new humanity for all humanity; so is prioritizing forgiveness over retributive justice because Jesus forgives people; sex is for husband and wife in a lifelong marriage, even if both husband and wife agree to have an 'open marriage' where they can sleep with other people, because God designed marriage and His vision defines it. The moralities are actually different. And those different moralities flow out of different core commitments. You can't just evaluate one morality using another morality. Instead, you need to look into the *basis* of those moralities. Sadly, we don't have the time here for that. (please see my material on my website:

http://nagasawafamily.org/archives_question_proof.htm)

So you may think I'm saying that there is a morality that everyone agrees with, and Christians are just better at it than other people. That is not what I'm saying. *There is no morality that everyone agrees with*. There's something I'd like you to keep in mind: I'm speaking as a Japanese-American. Meaning: Christian faith has never been a big part of my ethnic community, so I think of Christian morality as a *different* morality than what my parents taught me, and from what Buddhism taught me. But I think when you are Korean-American, where 77% of the population goes to church, or when you're surrounded by Korean-Americans (as we are here in BCACF), people who are leaving the church, or not Christians, think that they need to prove to the Christians that they can have the same morality and be 'just as moral.' I've found a similar dynamic to be true in the Black community, because of the high rates of church going, and also the White community. That's because some European modernists and some postmodernists would like us all to believe that there is really just one morality, and that some people are better at it than others. But it's because those White people are post-Christian and still feel like they need to prove something

to the Christians. And then Christians and non-Christians get into debates about ‘who is more moral.’ But that doesn’t make any sense. The problem goes even farther back. How you define good and evil, morality and immorality, self-giving and self-centeredness, depends on where you stand. And where you stand depends on bigger questions. You cannot compare moralities; you have to compare the entire worldview package. So, Christians, do not say that you are more moral than non-Christians, because that’s not a valid way to think. And non-Christians, do not say that you can be as moral as Christians, because that’s not a valid way to think, either.

Conclusion

(SLIDE 26) Let me conclude by coming back to a lesson about dating as discernment. The reason why dating is a discernment for marriage is:

1. Marriage gives you a way to filter people
2. Marriage gives you something to grow towards
3. Marriage tells you whether or not you should break up

May God bless you with wisdom, integrity, discernment, and true, godly love – not selfish love – for the other person and yourself!!

(SLIDE 27) Here are some questions for discussion:

1. What do you think about this framework for dating? Does any other framework make sense?
2. In a love triangle situation, what would make one possible relationship better than another? Is there a way to tell?
3. What can you change about your approach to serious dating as a result of what you’ve learned so far?
4. Conflict resolution is an important skill to have in dating and in general. How are you at that?