

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

The Song of Songs

Act Four: A Scene from Married Life, and What Single People Need to Know About Marriage

The Song of Songs 5:1 – 8:4

Introduction: What I Asked

(SLIDE 1) When I was a junior in college, my college pastor Dorman and his wife Blythe invited me over for Thanksgiving with them and their five children. It was awesome. They served a great turkey, along with stuffing, mashed potatoes, and something I had never tried before: home-cooked cranberries, not that jello stuff that comes out of a can. It was so much better! They certainly knew how to feed the body. But what fed my soul was seeing them as a family. By that point in my life, my parents had been arguing about getting a divorce for 5 years. But it wasn't just recent things. My parents' marriage had never been good, as far as I could remember. They argued all the time. My dad had alcohol issues. My mom constantly criticized him. So it was refreshing to see Dorman and Blythe together at home, doing things together, playing with their kids, involving me into their family time. I got to ask all kinds of questions, like, 'How did you know you wanted to marry each other? How much did you know about each other? Are the same things that attracted you back then still the same things that attract you now? What do you think I should look for? How do you do ministry together? What's it like living here?' And so on.

Relevance:

One of the big concerns that I have for you is that you don't get enough time like that with older couples. That is the unfortunate reality of Boston: there simply aren't very many married couples to be role models for you, even in the churches. Stanford was in the residential suburbs, so there were more families around, including in our church. Dorman and Blythe also arranged for mature Christian couples to invite students over for dinners on a regular basis, so we as students got a home cooked meal (awesome!) and a good example of Christian marriage and sometimes childraising. That was important because our Sunday service was a college student service so we didn't see people of other ages in church unless we went, and also because college students don't usually get to know older people in the context of church services, anyway. I've noticed that what happens here in Boston is that churches aren't helping college students think about the next major stage of life.

As an aside, if I had my way, the churches would focus on young adults and families, to build up some stability and also because stable people care about the city, because that's a justice issue for me. And then, perhaps those families would invite you over to give you the same kind of experience I had. Instead, most of the churches – not all but some – just pull you *off campus* without helping you carry out Jesus' mission *to this campus*, but simply to develop more community in the name of whatever church. So in some ways, I think you get shortchanged: churches that role model more of a withdrawal mentality rather than a missional mentality, and they also don't mentor you into the next life stage.

Back to the main topic here: What is marriage really like? Popular fairy tales lead us to think that once you get married, you live 'happily ever after.' Yet by the time I got married at age 27, one of my friends had told me that he would not marry his wife again, and two other friends had already gotten divorced from their spouses. One of them worked at Intel with me, and I walked with him as his wife told him she met someone else, then refused to reconcile their differences, and then left him. I hope that none of you will have to endure anything like that. Of course, there are really no guarantees in life; as the series title says, 'It's Complicated.' But there are lots of things you can do to be wise and discerning now. (SLIDE 2) So, I want to give you a glimpse into marriage in a way that will help you be wise and discerning about dating.

Context:

(SLIDE 3) We are in *The Song of Songs*. It is a script of a play, embedded in our Bibles. This masterpiece has five main parts. We are looking into the fourth part. We've covered attraction, serious dating and courtship, the wedding day and the wedding night, and now we're going to look into what this play shows us about marriage. By next week in Act Five, we will see them in old age, reflecting on young romance. Once again, it is a rare treat for us to see the entire life span of a healthy, God-centered relationship. It is almost impossible to see all of any marriage relationship in real time. You may see your parents' marriage when they are old, but you did not see your parents

fall in love and get married. You didn't see the problems they've always dealt with start back then. You didn't learn how to identify them in seed form for yourself. Probably the only relationship you'll ever see from young attraction until old age is your own. And of course, we all wonder how that will be? So that is why we all need to become familiar with this couple in this play, *The Song of Songs*. It is God's gift to us.

A Moment of Missed Intimacy: 5:2 – 6

Last week, we got to see their wedding day, and even part of their wedding night. Solomon and 'Abby' the Shulamite are now married. An undetermined amount of time has passed. There are indications in this section that their relationship has matured over time: their sense of humor with each other, their hilarious references to their sex life, their familiarity with one another. So Act Four opens with this problem.

(SLIDE 4) *Shulamite*

^{5:2} I was asleep but my heart was awake.
A voice! My beloved was knocking:

(SLIDE 5) *Solomon*

'Open to me, my sister, my darling,
My dove, my perfect one!
For my head is drenched with dew,
My locks with the damp of the night.'

(SLIDE 6) *Shulamite*

³ I have taken off my dress,
How can I put it on again?
I have washed my feet,
How can I dirty them again?

Now the immediate issue is the husband comes home late at night from work and wants to have sex, but the wife is too tired. That seems typical, doesn't it? In a way, if I were to make an analogy so you could *feel* this problem more viscerally, it's like calling a friend on the phone and your friend saying back to you, 'Hey, sorry, I can't talk right now. I'll call you back...sometime.' Now, a word of explanation: In the palace, the king and queen didn't sleep in the same room. The queen slept in a private courtyard with her maidens and female servants. So it's not like she had locked him out of their bedroom! It could sound like that, if we didn't understand the cultural context. But it *was* a big deal to put on a robe in which she could be seen if she ran into someone. Husband worked late, so it's his problem. So instead, she says, 'It's too much trouble.' Nowadays, maybe it's: 'I'm too sleepy.' Or, 'I had a bad day.' What a bummer. Whoever said that this was only a modern problem? This could have been written yesterday.

Now let me take this in terms of the immediate issue, involving sex, and also in terms of the larger issue, which is about oneness. First, the immediate issue about sex: In my experience, when that happens, if the relationship is doing well, it's not a big deal. Sometimes you figure, 'Okay, no problem. Maybe tomorrow. Whatever.' For example, on one occasion, there was a time when Ming and I were going to bed and I was looking forward to being intimate. But then we started talking about a friend who was going through a hard time, and we wound up not having sex but praying for the person instead. But it was relationally good, because we were engaging spiritually together.

But at other times, if there is something emotionally separating you, that you haven't really talked through yet, you feel more alone than you ever felt before. Why? Because you were hoping for a deeper sense of oneness. An example of this was, recently, Ming and I were going to bed, and I was again looking forward to being intimate. But then she said, 'So-and-so [a 13 year old boy in our neighborhood] said that he was sexually abused when he was 5 or 6 years old.' I said, 'Well, it's possible, but during that time he was staying with us. We've known him for 8 years, and he's never said anything like that. He's also been known to exaggerate just to get attention.' Ming and I have never totally agreed on how to treat this boy; I'm tougher on him and I hold him to higher standards; while Ming is more flexible and more lenient. So, needless to say, that spoiled our romantic evening, as we just acknowledged again that we have different ways of treating this particular kid. And we went to sleep reminded of all the things we don't agree on.

Last week we looked at how the couple on their wedding night found that sex was a garden. In fact, perhaps it's a return to the Garden of Eden, the closest thing we have to heaven on earth: it signifies oneness, with each other and with God. And when you're not relating with the other person in a high quality way, sex – *whether you have it or not* – makes you feel disconnected and separated. This is one of the reasons why sex makes a good relationship better, but it makes a bad relationship worse. The intimacy and oneness you were hoping for doesn't just come automatically. It takes patience to let it develop, inner strength to handle other emotions like disappointment and anger and jealousy and insecurity, and wisdom to know how to best to do it.

Whether or not the issue involves sex, the general issue is always oneness. What happens when you feel like you're not connecting as one? When Ming and I got married, both of us had hopes that we would feel like one. But we discovered that while there were high points, there were also low points. A complicated issue that comes up repeatedly for us is how to apologize. For example, one morning several months ago [on December 7, 2007], Ming took my keys by mistake. She came to BC for her classes in her Masters in Social Work program. I was supposed to take the kids to school and then go to several meetings at Tufts. But if I couldn't use my car, I had to stay with the kids. I called her and was furious. By that point, she couldn't come back home because she had a group meeting. Fortunately, one of my housemates was still home and she let me use her car. What made it more complicated was that we have different ways of dealing with anger. When Ming did that, I got angry. And she said, 'Don't be mad, please don't be mad.' That made me even more angry, because anger to me is a sacred emotion. It takes a longer time for me to get over the deepest point of my anger. When the anger is going away, then I can be normal. So when she said, 'Don't be mad,' I told her I feel like she was trying to shortcut my processing, to manage my emotions because she's uncomfortable. But when the situation is turned around, when I do something wrong, Ming gets mad and would like me to apologize to her a lot. She wants me to say, 'Don't be mad, please don't be mad.' But to me, that's like begging, and I don't beg! When I apologize, I do it once or twice. How do you know I'm really sorry? You see it in my actions. If it takes longer for her to work through the emotion of anger, I think that's fine: Go to the Lord in prayer. Ming feels that the other person should keep on apologizing until they've said sorry enough times for the person to feel better. So it's strange when one of us does something wrong because we don't apologize in ways that we like, and sometimes we make it worse for the other person.

So, I suppose we come to another problem couples have: bad timing and mismatching schedules. One person wants intimacy when the other person is away, or doesn't. This is what happens in our text:

(SLIDE 7) *Shulamite*

⁴ My beloved extended his hand through the opening,

And my “feelings” were aroused for him.

⁵ I arose to open to my beloved;

And my hands dripped with myrrh,

And my fingers with liquid myrrh,

On the handles of the bolt.

⁶ I opened to my beloved,

But my beloved had turned away and had gone!

My heart went out to him as he spoke.

I searched for him but I did not find him;

I called him but he did not answer me.

Now the word “feelings” that I put in quotes is not really “feelings.” The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery says that that is effectively the word for “vagina.”

(SLIDE 8) *Shulamite*

⁴ My beloved extended his hand through the opening,

And my vagina was aroused¹ for him.

¹ Leland Ryken, James Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, editors, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (IVPress, Downers' Grove, IL: 1998), p.777

Quite frank, isn't it? Well, there is a helpful way to move back to oneness, and when you're dating, there are certain character qualities to look for: hope that is non-demanding. When she touches the lock, she is startled to find his favorite cologne on it. It was made from an expensive spice called myrrh. Paper was less common in those days, so instead of love-notes, couples sometimes poured a little of their favorite perfume on an object their loved one would be sure to find. It was a simple way of saying, 'I was here and thinking of you.' Solomon wasn't going to force his way in, he was quietly leaving a message before he left. Solomon doesn't get angry, but neither does he stuff his feelings. He expresses hope.

At certain times in our marriage, Ming and I will turn to each and say, 'I miss you.' Even though we obviously live together, sleep together, and raise our kids together, there are times where we miss each other. Just yesterday, Ming and I got some time to hang out. Over the last 2 years, she has been in the Masters of Social Work program here at BC, and has had school work to do most evenings. Over the last 2 years, I've been a campus staff at BC and Tufts, and Tufts was a surprise because I had a staff resign unexpectedly there. Most of the time, we've been able to manage our schedule and family life pretty well. But one thing we haven't done is read to each other. It's something we did while we were dating and at different times when we wanted to read the same book. We talked about wanting to do that this summer. It was a brief comment, but it expressed hope and longing.

Application: So if you're dating someone who is just demanding, or manipulative, be careful. Chances are they are demanding because there is some inner need that they are not allowing God to meet, and they're looking to you to meet it. You have become an idol.

The Longing to Regain Intimacy: 5:7 – 6:1

The Shulamite finds that missed intimacy is painful. She longs to regain it.

(SLIDE 9) *Shulamite*

⁷ The watchmen who make the rounds in the city found me,
They struck me and wounded me;
The guardsmen of the walls took away my shawl from me.
⁸ I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem,
If you find my beloved,
As to what you will tell him:
For I am lovesick.

Apparently the guards didn't recognize her, and by mistake struck her. Now she gathers her friends, who are probably the women in her courtyard, to help her find him. But they ask this:

(SLIDE 10) *Friends*

⁹ What kind of beloved is your beloved,
O most beautiful among women?
What kind of beloved is your beloved,
That thus you adjure us?

They seem to be concerned why she's looking for him. Why did they fight? Is he distancing himself from her? Maybe they're concerned about their relationship, so they ask, 'What kind of person is he? Before you were married, you had this really good impression. Now that you've been married for a while, what do you say now?' Then she describes him.

(SLIDE 11) *Shulamite*

¹⁰ My beloved is dazzling and ruddy,
Outstanding among ten thousand.
¹¹ His head is like gold, pure gold;
His locks are like clusters of dates
And black as a raven.

(SLIDE 12) ¹² His eyes are like doves
Beside streams of water,
Bathed in milk,

And reposed in their setting.
¹³ His cheeks are like a bed of balsam,
Banks of sweet-scented herbs;
His lips are lilies
Dripping with liquid myrrh.
¹⁴ His hands are rods of gold
Set with beryl;
His “abdomen is carved ivory”
Inlaid with sapphires.

Again, a lot of her clever wit is disguised by embarrassed translators to make this rated PG. This should really read:

(SLIDE 13) ¹⁴ His hands are rods of gold
Set with beryl;
His *penis is a tusk of ivory*²
Inlaid with sapphires.

I guess she’s telling her friends, ‘Yes, even *that* is valuable to me; it’s a smooth and exotic prize!’ She’s witty even in this moment of lovesickness.

(SLIDE 14) ¹⁵ His legs are pillars of alabaster
Set on pedestals of pure gold;
His appearance is like Lebanon
Choice as the cedars.
¹⁶ His mouth is full of sweetness.
And he is wholly desirable.
This is my beloved and this is my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem.

At the end of it all, she comes back to ‘this is my friend.’ Her real answer to her friends’ question, ‘What kind of beloved is he’ is: ‘He is my friend.’ Of course, you want to marry someone who is your friend, your best friend as far as opposite gender goes. That is why learning how to be a friend is more important than learning how to get dates.

Verbal Communication Comes Before Sexual Communication: 6:1 – 13

The women of her entourage are persuaded. They go with her and look for him.

(SLIDE 15) *Friends*
^{6:1} Where has your beloved gone,
O most beautiful among women?
Where has your beloved turned,
That we may seek him with you?

(SLIDE 16) *Shulamite*
² My beloved has gone down to his garden,
To the beds of balsam,
To pasture his flock in the gardens
And gather lilies.
³ I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine,
He who pastures his flock among the lilies.

So when they go to the place where he shepherds, does he come angry? Does he make her feel guilty? Is he aloof?
No: Actually he comes first with words of appreciation.

² Leland Ryken, James Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, editors, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (IVPress, Downers’ Grove, IL: 1998), p.778

(SLIDE 17) *Solomon*

⁴ You are as beautiful as Tirzah, my darling,
As lovely as Jerusalem,
As awesome as an army with banners.

Tirzah was the most beautiful city in the North (which later became the capital of the breakaway Northern Kingdom after the Civil War; cf. 1 Kings 15:33). Jerusalem of course was the most beautiful and important city in the South.

⁵ Turn your eyes away from me,
For they have confused me;

What does that mean? It's significant. I'll come back to that in just a minute.

Your hair is like a flock of goats
That have descended from Gilead.
⁶ Your teeth are like a flock of ewes
Which have come up from their washing,
All of which bear twins,
And not one among them has lost her young.
(SLIDE 18) ⁷ Your temples are like a slice of a pomegranate
Behind your veil.
⁸ There are sixty queens and eighty concubines,
And maidens without number;

He's probably referring not to other wives but metaphorically to her entourage, as if it were a royal procession from other nations

⁹ But my dove, my perfect one, is unique:
She is her mother's only daughter;
She is the pure child of the one who bore her.
The maidens saw her and called her blessed,
The queens and the concubines also, and they praised her, saying,
(SLIDE 19) ¹⁰ 'Who is this that grows like the dawn,
As beautiful as the full moon,
As pure as the sun,
As awesome as an army with banners?'

It's interesting here that he praises the beauty of her face and not her body. He stops at her face because he doesn't want to get into the sexual in his own mind. It's too selfish. And when you're trying to talk about a conflict and work through it, that is not the right time to make references to sex. It would give her the impression that many people have had down the ages: that women give sex for love, but men give love for sex. That can be true, and is sadly often true, but it must not be the norm for the people of God. Even though she has come to kiss and make up, he knows that there are deeper issues to talk about. So he says, 'Turn your eyes away from me, for they have confused me,' because in her eyes he sees her desire in the moment, but he doesn't want to just take advantage of that desire. They have to talk about deeper things. Sex is not a *means* to being loved.

Illus: Why is that? Let me give you an example. When I was in California, in the church I went to for four years, there was an older man, in his 40's, who shared that he had to learn a hard lesson in this. When his wife's father died, she had a lot of unresolved conflict that she didn't know what to do with. She became depressed. It was hard on their marriage in various ways. For two years, they didn't have sex. There were so many emotional things that came up.

I know that's hard for us (especially guys) to imagine. We tend to think about marriage as the time when we could have sex whenever. That demonstrates the fact that sex is not a *right*, although it is a *hope*, and a *desire*. American culture treats sex like a self-evident, inalienable *right*, as if it were part of the Declaration of Independence: 'You

have the right to life, liberty, and sex.’ But the truth is that it is not, because it involves someone else’s *body*. The same goes for emotional intimacy and being romanced; it is not a *right*, although it is a *hope* and a *desire*, because it involves someone else’s *emotions*. When you rearrange the universe so that you are in the center, and everything in the world is for your consumption, you train yourself into patterns of self-centeredness. As a result, when you need to rely on God, you may not have cultivated the kind of character that does. Fortunately, though, the Solomon in *The Song of Songs* has. So the Shulamite says:

(SLIDE 20) *Shulamite*

¹¹ I went down to the orchard of nut trees
To see the blossoms of the valley,
To see whether the vine had budded
Or the pomegranates had bloomed.
¹² Before I was aware, my soul [in other words, my husband] set me
Over the chariots of my noble people.

In other words, he honored her above everything else, even above his career: ‘over the chariots of my noble people.’ She didn’t expect that. But he had been doing some thinking. After their conflict, she went to see if the vine had budded, in other words, if love was beginning to show again, if there were hints that reconciliation was coming in the distance. But love wasn’t just beginning to show again; it was already in full bloom. Then, the couple starts to grab some private time. The friends say:

(SLIDE 21) *Friends*

¹³ Come back, come back, O Shulamite;
Come back, come back, that we may gaze at you!

Daydreamy Talk: 7:1 – 8:3

So Solomon responds, ‘Hey, this is *our* private time,’ and then, as they walk off together, he says the same things he said on their wedding night, expressing his desire for her body:

(SLIDE 22) *Solomon*

Why should you gaze at the Shulamite,
As at the dance of the two companies?
^{7:1} How beautiful are your feet in sandals,
O prince’s daughter!
The curves of your hips are like jewels,
The work of the hands of an artist.
² Your navel is like a round goblet
Which never lacks mixed wine;
Your belly is like a heap of wheat
Fenced about with lilies.
(SLIDE 23) ³ Your two breasts are like two fawns,
Twins of a gazelle.
⁴ Your neck is like a tower of ivory,
Your eyes like the pools in Heshbon
By the gate of Bath-rabbim;
Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon,
Which faces toward Damascus.
⁵ Your head crowns you like Carmel,
And the flowing locks of your head are like purple threads;
The king is captivated by your tresses.
(SLIDE 24) ⁶ How beautiful and how delightful you are,
My love, with all your charms!
⁷ Your stature is like a palm tree,
And your breasts are like its clusters.
⁸ I said, ‘I will climb the palm tree,
I will take hold of its fruit stalks.’

Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,
And the fragrance of your breath like apples,
⁹ And your mouth like the best wine!

Again, with wit and sexual innuendo, she shoots right back and says:

(SLIDE 25) *Shulamite*

It goes down smoothly for my beloved,
Flowing gently through the lips of those who fall asleep.
¹⁰ I am my beloved's,
And his desire is for me.
¹¹ Come, my beloved, let us go out into the country,
Let us spend the night in the villages.

Then she suggests that they take a second honeymoon of sorts:

(SLIDE 26) ¹² Let us rise early and go to the vineyards;
Let us see whether the vine has budded
And its blossoms have opened,
And whether the pomegranates have bloomed.
There I will give you my love.
¹³ The mandrakes have given forth fragrance;
And over our doors are all choice fruits,
Both new and old,
Which I have saved up for you, my beloved.

And then, she says she wishes she could be more publicly affectionate with her husband:

(SLIDE 27) ^{8:1} Oh that you were like a brother to me
Who nursed at my mother's breasts.
If I found you outdoors, I would kiss you;
No one would despise me, either.

In that culture, if you were sister and brother, you could show public affection. But even married couples could not show PDA.

² I would lead you and bring you
Into the house of my mother, who used to instruct me;
I would give you spiced wine to drink from the juice of my pomegranates.
³ Let his left hand be under my head
And his right hand embrace me.

The End of the Daydreamy Talk: 8:4

But then, she turns back to her friends and says:

(SLIDE 28) ⁴ I want you to swear, O daughters of Jerusalem,
Do not arouse or awaken my love
Until she pleases.

Whoa! What happened? After all this daydreamy talk about, 'Let's have a second honeymoon; let's do this romantic thing; let me give you this aphrodisiac,' they stop. Why? In fact, notice that this phrase appears at the end of each major section of *The Song of Songs*. (SLIDE 29) At the end of the section on Attraction (1:1 – 2:5), it appears. (SLIDE 30) At the end of the section on Courtship (2:6 – 3:5), it appears. (SLIDE 31) At the end of the section on their Wedding (3:16 – 5:1), they have sex and say the opposite, 'Awake.' (SLIDE 32) And at the end of this section (5:2 – 8:4), here it is again. Why do they stop?

I think what they're doing is moving from intimacy to agreement. They know that there are deeper, more fundamental aspects of the relationship that they have to work on. It's not just as simple as forgiving what just happened and then having sex again. Marriage is more difficult than that. You don't have to agree about *everything*, but in the areas of life that are significant to each of you, you have to work towards agreement.

Dating Tips: Lessons from Marriage

As we explore the reasons why they do this, let me apply it to dating. What's going on? And what does that mean for who you should date, and how? (SLIDE 33)

Find someone who prioritizes you over their career. For them, I suspect that what they have to talk about involves balancing work and home. He has to reevaluate his schedule and his priorities. Look, even though he's the king doesn't mean that he can wake her up at any time. He has to go before the Lord and ask, 'Why did I think I could just do that?' She may have to go before the Lord and ask, 'Why is it that I allow myself to be treated that way?' And together, they have to reevaluate their schedule to be together during the times when they are most alert, most attentive to each other.

When you're dating, I think it's important to find someone who can prioritize you over their career. For example, even if both of you are applying to med school, law school, or some kind of grad school, there are ways to make that work, difficult as that is. But you'll need to prioritize being closer together, and being able to spend time together. You *both* need to be able to *not* go to the best school you could get into, *and be glad for it*. You need to have a deeply internalized sense of values where you'd be happy to make that kind of sacrifice. Christians must get comfortable with downward mobility. If a person consistently is not able to let careerism go *now*, when will they?

Find someone who prioritizes reality over fantasy. If, for example, you indulge in sexual or romantic fantasy, of course on the surface level, what you are doing is creating a fictional person who serves your needs, who doesn't really exist at all. But on the deeper level of character, if you think that it's your mind and it's your right to do whatever you want up there in your head, then you're training yourself to be selfish. Men tend to do this by de-personalizing a woman, and women tend to do it by super-personalizing a man, but the underlying mistake is the same: We create a person who doesn't really exist.

Let me illustrate. How many of you are Jane Austen fans? Even though I enjoy her stories, Jane Austen exemplifies the classical mistake women make. What do most if not all of the men do in Jane Austen's stories? Nothing. Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*, and Mr. Knightley in *Emma* all seem to not have jobs. They are mostly rich aristocratic men who seem to have nothing else to do but be interested in the women, gossip, play the relational games that women play. What makes this especially strange is that Jane Austen wrote during what era in the British Empire? The Age of British Imperialism, when the British Empire was taking over the world. (*Sense and Sensibility* was published in 1811, *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813, and *Emma* in 1815.) British men went everywhere: America, Australia, India, Africa. But do any of Jane Austen's male characters show a desire for adventure? Does Jane Austen deal with the classic tension between a man's desire for adventure and a woman's desire for family stability? No. Jane Austen's men are really women in disguise. They are super-personalized, fantasy men who only live to love women. That man doesn't really exist.

At the other extreme, there is Ian Fleming's *James Bond* series. What do the female characters do in James Bond? Fall for James Bond and have sex with him! Even when they're supposed to kill him! The Bond women are de-personalized sex objects. They have no desire for trust, safety, long-lasting commitment, or children. And James Bond has so much machismo, they can't resist. What makes this especially strange is that Ian Fleming wrote during what era in British history? The end of British Imperialism, when the British Empire was breaking up. (*Casino Royale* was in 1953, and he wrote until his death in 1964.) British men were suffering the loss of their machismo and self-delusions of grandeur. Yet what becomes really popular is the James Bond character who can still conquer any villain and bed any woman. Women are de-personalized, fantasy women who only live to satisfy a man's ego and sex drive. That woman doesn't really exist either.

Those are the two tendencies that men and women have. So guys, if you're dating someone who loves reading those harlequin novels – which are soft porn for women – be careful. Women, if you're dating someone who can't control his eyes, be careful. Chances are, they have not internalized a deep sense of values, and instead they live life as if

they could ‘get it all’ for themselves. You need someone who lives in reality, not fantasy: Someone who deeply values having healthy limitations on their own ego and selfishness. That leads to the next point.

Find someone who prioritizes spiritual connection over physical connection. In this scene from married life in *Song of Songs*, they work hard at the deeper, underlying dynamics of their relationship. They cherish what is good: their friendship, their memories of and hopes for each other. They have fun with what is fun: the verbal appreciation of each other and even the enticing. But they have limits and they stop when they need to work on harder things. They work on what is bad. That means they are always working to have a spiritual connection with each other.

Illus: Among my Christian friends, there are three married couples I know of who had sex before getting married. All of those couples now look back and see the mistake they made. Why? Because in every case, when they were dating, they would resort to having sex when they felt disconnected. When a problem came up, they wouldn’t really deal with it. Instead, they would long for some kind of closeness and intimacy to reassure themselves, so they’d have sex. For example, in two cases, the parents opposed the engagement, and to make up for the pain and uncertainty that caused, so boyfriend and girlfriend would have sex. In one case, it was hard to make tough choices between career and the relationship, so sex became a way to falsely manufacture a sense of being on the same page. But in all those cases, it was an illusion. Sex doesn’t make a bad relationship good; it makes a bad relationship even worse. The problems just got worse because they weren’t dealing well with the real conflicts, which were about deep and spiritual things: priorities, character, values, emotional health, and commitment to Jesus. When these couples got married, they could have sex all they wanted, but by that time, it didn’t take away the problem, and it only increased their frustration with each other. What helped them was starting whatever good patterns of working things out they started during dating. It forced them to deal with real problems. To the extent that they recommitted themselves to Jesus, abstained from sex while dating, they did much better.

I stress over and over that the deeper your connection goes with someone, the stronger your relationship. Where is your connection? If it’s only on the level of physical attraction and personality, you’re in real trouble. But the deeper your connection goes to the level of character and values, and even more deeply into the level of our commitment to Jesus, the better your relationship will be.

Finally, *find someone who prioritizes Jesus over you.* That may sound strange, but think of it this way. When a person says that they want to put you first in their life, you might be flattered at first. But what that person is *really* saying is they are putting themselves first, and eventually you will sense that they want you to put them first even above yourself. But like Frodo in *The Fellowship of the Ring* asked Boromir and Aragorn, ‘Can you protect me from yourself?’ you ought to ask that, too. Be cautious and wary. That is one of the key questions in good relationships, to which the best answer I know is, ‘Jesus will help me protect you from my own selfishness.’ Someone who prioritizes you over Jesus really just wants to indulge themselves in you, and they’ll say a lot of flattering things to get you to trust them.

Closing Exercise

Now I would like you to break up into groups of 2 or 3 and tell each other what questions you would ask a married couple if you had the chance. Lord willing, you’ll get that chance, and I want you to be prepared.