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**Core Seminar**

**Dating**

**Session 5: What to Look For**

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**I. Introduction**

“An excellent wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels” (Pro. 31:10). So what makes for an excellent spouse? Let’s turn that into a question. According to surveys, what do *you* think are the top characteristics Americans look for in a spouse? [Have the class guess the top 4] In order of descending importance and frequency: (1) Good personality; (2) Physically attractive; (3) Good sense of Humor (makes me laugh); (4) Fun-loving (eager and able to have a good time).—What do you think? Good list? Certainly nothing wrong with any of these things—but are these really the secret to a great marriage?

As you might guess, the Bible has a different idea of what makes for an excellent husband or wife.

And that’s our topic for this morning. How do you figure out if *this* person is your excellent wife, your excellent husband? I’ll admit, as I look back on my years of dating, I’m surprised by how much more worldly my answer to that question was than I realized. Let me put that as a challenge to you. We’ll walk through some common myths Christians believe, and then what makes for an excellent spouse. But as I do that, don’t just sit there passively, nodding in agreement with everything I say. Walk out of this class this morning with at least one area where you realize that your answer to this question isn’t as Biblical as you thought it was.

So how do you figure out who is the right person for you? First, how it *doesn’t* work:

**II. Popular Myths**

***You’ll just know***

We’ve all heard those stories: the man and woman meet, and from the first moment they “know.” But you’ve been dating for almost a year, and you don’t have that same sense. If this is God’s spouse for you, shouldn’t you just know?

The problem here is that nowhere in Scripture does God ever say that we’ll just *know* what to do—about anything. At least, not normally. I love the subtitle of Kevin DeYoung’s book *Just Do Something* about decision-making: “How to make a decision without dreams, visions, fleeces, impressions, open doors, random bible verses, casting lots, liver shivers, writing in the sky, etc.” God *can* do all of those things. But normally he doesn’t. Normally the way he guides us is through what the Bible calls wisdom. We use our sanctified judgment, shaped by the truth of his word and the counsel of others, to make the decision that seems best.

Sometimes you’ll know. But even then you should be suspicious. Has God really decided—quite unusually—to lead through your feelings? Or are those just your hormones talking? Normally, you’ll just need to make a decision.

***The secret to a good marriage is the right person***

One reason why this world makes such a big deal out of finding “Mr. Right” or “Ms. Right” is the idea that if you find the right person, you’ll have a great marriage. Now I’ll be the first to agree that this idea isn’t totally off. If you marry Mr. Wrong, God promises to use that difficult marriage for your eternal good—but turning it into a good marriage will be quite difficult. So it’s certainly not *un*important what kind of person you marry.

But marriage is much more what you do with it than where you start out. If you and the person you marry want to shape your marriage in a way that will please Christ, you will be far better off than two people with so-called “compatibility” but who want to run their marriage their own way.

So carefully consider the Bible’s exhortations to marry someone with noble character. But recognize that it’s the *source* of that character—the wisdom of God’s word—that’s your ultimate hope, not doing your homework exactly right before you say “I do.”

***My spouse will change***

We should expect that marriage will change us. It’s God’s will that we be sanctified (1 Thess 4:3)—and one of his main tools for doing that is marriage. So if you’re looking for someone who loves you just the way you are and never wants you to change, you’re in for a big surprise. And yet you should never marry someone assuming *how* God will change them. God nowhere promises that he will change that annoying laugh or that drinking problem or that struggle with honesty or that history of laziness. You should never get married to someone under the assumption that something about them will change. The sanctification agenda is in God’s hands, not yours.

***More time will make things clear***

Many single people out there seem to believe that if they can just date long enough, get enough information about the other person, work out enough of the other person’s flaws, they will have an easy marriage. Well, guess what? Marriage isn’t easy and no amount of information will ever remove the work it requires. After all, most of what you’ll know about them on your fifth anniversary you probably didn’t know the day you got married. So much of a person is only revealed in the context of vulnerability and permanence that is a marriage relationship. Marriage is wonderful, but it’s always work.

**III. Look for a healthy, growing Christian**

That’s a good summary of what *not* to believe when you’re trying to figure out who to marry. How *do* you decide who to marry? Wisdom. That’s the Bible’s approach to decision-making. Not some kind of mysical, “wait until God speaks to you.” But wisdom. “Buy truth, and do not sell it; buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding” – Proverbs 23:23. That’s our approach. Bathe your mind in Scripture. Follow Christ with all your heart. Seek the council of others. And marry a person where together you can serve God better than apart.

But what does that person look like? Let’s start with character. As Proverbs 31:30 says, “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.” I know you know that. And yet so often we don’t really believe it. But really: you want to marry a man or a woman who fears the Lord. Full stop. No exceptions. You want to marry someone who is a healthy, growing Christian. Here are ten questions to ask yourself:

1. Is he/she clearly a believer? If you have any uncertainty in answering this question, get counsel from a wise Christian friend ASAP. Remember: your goal isn’t simply to check the box on the person being a Christian. As in, “he says he prayed a prayer when he was six. Check. Now, how ‘bout that sense of humor?”
2. Does he or she show an evident love for Christ in their values and priorities? Can you tell that they’re a Christian from their schedule and their bank statement? From their passions and their dreams?
3. Does he or she show an evident trust in God’s word? How does that show up in their decision-making?
4. Does his or her life show clear fruit of God’s Spirit? Walk through the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5. These fruits of the Spirit aren’t there to show who the “super Christians” are (as if the Bible even has a category for that)—but to show who the *Christians* are. Our lives should all exhibit these things—and in increasing measure as we mature.
5. Is he or she fruitful in ministry? This means they don’t just *say* they want to spend their life for Jesus; you can see it in action. Evangelism, discipling, and hospitality are going to be the main fruit you’ll look for in anyone’s life.
6. Does he or she have evident love and care for others? Jesus was clear that his followers will be marked by love—and particularly, by love for others in the church (John 13:35).
7. Does he or she faithfully make use of the means of grace? Scripture reading, prayer, church, and so forth.
8. Do you share the same view and value of marriage?
9. Do you trust his or her character? This is someone you will entrust with your money, your children, your friendships, and in many ways, your soul. Do you trust them more or less as your relationship matures?
10. Do others that you trust hold them in high regard? To know someone well you need to know what *others* think of them. If your most trusted friends don’t think highly of him or her, break up.

These are questions you should think through when you decide to start a dating relationship. But they’re questions you’ll revisit many times over the course of your relationship—because they basically outline what it means to be a healthy Christian.

*Questions?*

**IV. How do you fit together?**

Everything I’ve said is true—and yet it’s easily misused. Let me explain. So much of worldly dating is sizing someone up to see if they’re worthy for me. Good looking figure, check. Prestigious education, check. Lots of debt…hmm maybe it’s time to move on. And it’s easy to use the 10 questions I just asked in the same way—as if we’re sizing up each other just like the world does, just with Christianized criteria.

We need to abandon the world’s idea that the goal of marriage is to buy as good a person as you can afford. Or, better yet, to land the catch you don’t quite deserve. If that’s what you think makes for a great marriage, you’re in for a very hard landing. That’s the language of performance, pride, and fairness, not of grace.

Instead, I think you can use these ten questions in two ways:

1. Use them to shape what you’re attracted to. If you’re looking for charm, beauty, *and* the fear of the Lord, you’re going to get hung up on things that just don’t matter to your marriage. One of the goals of your single years is to train your affections so that you admire what God admires in a person—no more and no less. God’s rebuke for the prophet Samuel is one we all need to hear: “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7).
2. Think of these questions as an important baseline—but recognize that much of your decision of who to marry won’t be about *that* person, but about how the two of you are together. If you think that dating is mainly about assessing that person, you’ve bought into the second myth I mentioned earlier, that the secret to a good marriage is the person you marry. Dating is about assessing the person, to be sure—but it’s mainly about assessing the relationship, not the person. Your question shouldn’t be as much “who is the Godliest person who will agree to marry me” but “will we better display the excellence of Jesus if we’re together or apart?”

So what’s it look like to assess the relationship? How can you know whether you and she, or you and he *together* will build a relationship that brings God glory?

Let me give you a few questions to ask:

***How well do your strengths and passions complement each other?***

God’s given you some wonderful abilities and passions for his glory—and the same for this person you’re dating. Well, do your strengths seem to complement each other? Or do they seem to pull you in opposite directions?

I’ll give you an example. How many of you know Justin or Abigail Tanner? [probably lots of hands go up.] Justin serves as one of our elders; they are some of the most outgoing, hospitable people I know. And the great thing is, they’re both like that. So isn’t it great that God gave her a husband who delights in all that extroverted craziness! Of course, that doesn’t mean things are as simple as looking for someone with your own personality type. Take another example: Deepak – who is an extrovert – spends his days at work talking to people every hour of the day. What if he married an extrovert, and he came home with his emotional gas tank on low, wouldn’t it be kind of God to have him marry an introvert? Someone who won’t over-run him with more talking all night. Someone who will be short, concise with her words? Well, God, in fact had Deepak marry that person—Sarah!

You may well not see all of this—or even most of this—before you get married. But as much as God enables you, look for ways God might be uniquely fitting the two of you together. Of course, this is a great topic of conversation with others who know your relationship well.

***How well do your weaknesses and struggles fit together?***

We said a few weeks ago: every Christian has struggles. You never marry a perfect person. But when you get married, you’re deciding which struggles you want to marry into. So how do your struggles fit each other?

And by that, I don’t mainly have in mind, “can you put up with his or her struggles.” Your marriage, if you get married, is intended to show off the faithfulness and goodness of our God and savior, Jesus Christ. The way that you two interact with your struggles and weaknesses may be one of the ways that—quite unseen to the outside world—your marriage most advertises God’s faithfulness. Or you may find that your particular combination of struggles is mutually destructive.

I remember the night that I was trying to decide if I should propose to my wife. True to form for me, I pulled out a piece of paper and drew a line down the middle. To left was the “minus” column; to the right was the “plus” column. As you can imagine, the “plus” column far outweighed the “minus” column. On paper, at least, I should ask her if she’d marry me. OK—you’ll need to get beyond the self-righteousness of what I was doing—but there’s an important lesson here. I was really stuck with what was on that minus column. What if I discovered in marriage that those minuses were bigger than I’d realized? What if I found new ones? What if the pluses turned out not to balance out the minuses anymore? I just couldn’t imagine as a Christian getting to the point where I said, “well, I guess it was a bad idea to get married—but we’ll stick it out anyway.” That would hardly seem to be a marriage that shows off God’s faithfulness. So I asked my dad about what to do with the minus column.

Here’s what he said to me: “Each of my wife’s flaws is custom-made by God for me. Each of her struggles is exactly what I need for my sanctification.” Right. That makes so much sense. God isn’t surprised by any of those minuses. Of course I should never marry someone *because* of their flaws. But the moment we say “I do” all those minuses go to the other column. All of who my wife is, is designed perfectly by God to be the helper I need. So I threw the paper into the fire, picked up the phone, called the jeweler, flew to California…and she said yes. Despite my self-righteousness—which I’m sure was a minus on her sheet.

Part of dating is figuring out how your weaknesses fit together. Does she struggle with insecurity and he’s confident, sometimes overconfident? You can see how God can use that to grow both of you. Does he struggle with doubt and she’s a panicer? That should raise some big red flags in your mind. You hear something very tender when you talk with a mature couple about each other’s weaknesses. You don’t hear distain, or disgust; you hear love. “Yes, I know he struggles with that. But if someone’s going to help him through it, I want it to be me.”

Two strong people will have a hard time building a sweet marriage. But two people who can help each other—whose strengths correspond to each others’ weaknesses—can, if they’re humble, build a marriage that’s wonderfully dependent on each other. And that makes for a delightfully sweet marriage.

***Does your relationship spur you both toward Christ?***

How does your relationship with your potential spouse help you to grow in Christ-likeness? If your relationship leads you into sin (physically or otherwise); if it dulls your interest in your church or your walk with the Lord; if you are less eager to learn, study, grow and pray because of the influence of, or interactions with, your partner, why in the world would you consider making that relationship permanent? If you can’t affirmatively state that you are better off spiritually with this person, then you must think very seriously about whether that relationship should continue. And what do others--particularly those under whose authority the relationship has taken place--think of the relationship? Does it look solid to them? Does the relationship seem to be good for both of you spiritually, glorifying to God, and Christ-centered?

***How do you fit in your potential roles of husband and wife?***

One last thought on fit. Look at Ephesians 5:22-33. Consider carefully the roles laid out for men and women in this passage. Do you *want* to fill that role with *this* person?

Men: do want to lay down your life for her? If she’s paralyzed on your honeymoon, would you see it a privilege to lay down what dreams you might need to in order to spend your life caring for her? Does she seem to respond well to your leadership?

And beyond that, how does she seem to fit with you as a potential parent to your children? Is she the kind of person you can see trusting as their mom? Someone you want to raise and disciple your children?

Women: do you respect him? Do you trust him? Do you *want* to spend your life supporting him—given all that you’ll need to forego to do that? Is the life you can build together worth what you could do for the Lord on your own? And speaking of support, is he capable of supporting you, and any children God may give you together? Is this someone you can trust to protect your family and to provide for you?

*Questions?*

**Conclusion**

Jesus gives you great freedom of who to marry. Anyone in Christ. And that freedom can be frightening. You don’t need to wait for writing in the sky or an audible voice from God. Yes, he can do that—and may at times—but that’s not normal. As you look at that person across the table at the restaurant, the crazy thing is to realize that you *can* marry them. Nothing’s stopping you.

And honestly, after you’ve worked through the basics—like those ten questions I gave you earlier—and you have an idea of the good and bad ways you’ll fit together, a lot of this comes down to what you want. Do you *want* this life together? You don’t need to say yes. But do you want to say yes?

How do you make sure you’ll answer that question well? By following Christ well today. Follow hard after him, let him reshape your desires and aspirations. And when you’re at that point of deciding to get married, you’ll be wanting the right thing.