

Principles for Dating

Patrick Zukeran

What Is Love?

We were made to love and be loved. God is love (1 John 4:16), and beings made in His image need to experience love. Among the spiritual virtues found in the Bible, love stands preeminent. It is no wonder the devil has worked hard to distort its meaning.

Today, the word *love* has been misconstrued in several ways. One misconception is, *love is sex*. Hollywood has bombarded the media with this definition. When two people are “in love” in the movies, they immediately get sexually involved. Biblically, however, the proper place for sex is in marriage. There are at least two commitments involved in the institution of marriage. First, there is the commitment each partner makes to honor, protect, and be faithful to the other for life. Second, true marriage involves a commitment to the larger society to abide by these principles. Thus, in a healthy society, the individual’s failure to keep these commitments is recognized as social irresponsibility and the violation of a covenant. Seen from this vantage point, sex outside the context of marriage is not only selfish indulgence and exploitation, but also social anarchy on a small scale because it threatens the stability of society which is based on the bedrock of marriage.

Remember that Hollywood portrays a distorted view of reality. But we often laugh when we see scenes that are factually ridiculous. For example, one absurd scenario we often see in movies occurs when a group of skilled soldiers hidden behind trees and armed with machine guns open fire at the hero who is in close range and fully exposed. Even so, the trained marksmen all miss him, but with a single pistol in his hand, the hero annihilates his enemies. We laugh, knowing that this is the fantasyland of Hollywood. However, we often buy into the scene of two people falling in love, getting sexually involved, and then leaving one another without any consequences. Just as the first illustration was absurd, so is this second. Yet, too many people have been deceived into this type of thinking. They frequently think that if no pregnancy was involved, there was no harm done. Yet the reality is that sexual involvement can lead to such consequences as emotional pain, feelings of exploitation, guilt, sexually transmitted diseases, and harmful memories that are not forgotten. Do not buy into the definition that love is sex.

A second misconception is that *love is a feeling*. Love needs to stir up emotions of excitement, happiness, and passion. It must make me feel good. When we define love as an emotion, we inflate the accuracy of emotions. True, there are good feelings associated with love, but love also involves self-sacrifice and perseverance in difficulty. Love is a commitment to do what is right even if there is pain. Love defined as an emotion is not love at all-but a self-centered desire for pleasure.

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A third mistaken view of love is the belief that *love is conditional*: I love you if you meet my expectations. It requires the other person to perform up to a desired level before any love is given. This love is shallow and self-centered. In the end, conditional love proves to be destructive.

True love begins with God. Only His love can fill the emptiness in our heart. The people we date and even marry can never meet our deepest needs. In 1 John 3:16 we read, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us.” God the Son valued us so much, He was willing to suffer and die on the cross so that we could have a meaningful relationship with Him. He loves us unconditionally, even though we can never repay Him. God’s definition of love is a committed, sacrificial, and unconditional love. This is the kind of love that any solid friendship, dating, and marriage relationship must be built on. God’s way of love is the key to a significant life and to meaningful relationships.

In order to love God’s way, we must first experience God’s love personally. Only when we know we are loved just for who we are, and we are secure in God’s love, can we share that love with others.

Principles to Remember

When I began dating, I didn’t have a clue what God’s Word said on the subject. As a result, my first few dates caused both parties a lot of unnecessary pain. These hurtful experiences could have easily been avoided, if I had followed two principles from God’s Word.

The first principle comes from 2 Corinthians 6:14 which states, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?” Paul draws on the analogy from Deuteronomy 22: 10 which prohibits harnessing an ox and a donkey together for plowing. The result would be disastrous since they would pull a plow at different speeds and end up going nowhere. It is impossible for two different species of animals to pull a plow properly since they have too many incompatible traits. The same is true between a believer and an unbeliever when it comes to dating. The differences are so great Paul contrasts it to light and darkness or Christ and Belial.

This principle applies to Christians as well. It is possible for two Christians to be dating and still be unequally yoked. One person may be committed to the Lord while the other may be worldly. It is not enough to date someone who goes to church. We must see if the other person’s life reflects a heart for God. The first girl I dated was a pastor’s daughter. Although she spoke the right words and outwardly lived a good life, I soon discovered her heart and mind were not on the Lord. After a few weeks, our worldly and frustrating relationship came to a bitter end.

The application of this principle is simple. A Christian should never date a non-Christian for any reason. That does not mean we cannot be friends with unbelievers. How else would we win them to Christ? However, we should not be in a dating relationship with non-Christians. Missionary dating: dating someone with hopes you will win them to Christ, is always an unwise practice for Christians. The person you want to date is someone who has shown him or herself to be faithful and growing in the Lord.

The second principle is what I call the three M’s: Master, Mission, Mate. The first priority in a Christian’s life is to know his or her *Master*, Jesus Christ. Matthew 6:33 says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.” From this relationship, all of life falls into its proper place.

After knowing your Master, you need to discover the wonderful *Mission* He has for your life. Ephesians 2: 10 states, “For we are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Your future partner will compliment the mission God has called you to. That is why to the students I have worked with, I do not recommend they date anyone seriously until college-because in high school, they are often unclear on God’s call in their life.

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The third M stands for *Mate*. This must follow the first two priorities. The best dating relationships come when two people who know God and know their mission, are walking down the same paths toward the same goal. Somewhere down the road their paths will connect. From that point, they march together on the same path. God will determine that meeting point at the best time.

Marks of a Healthy Relationship

I am often asked, “How do I know if I am in a healthy dating relationship?” Here are a few ways to tell. Proverbs 27:17 tells us, “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” When two swords rub against one another, they result in two even sharper and better swords. The same should be true when two believers are together. They should make each other stronger in the Lord. They do this by encouraging the other to grow in the Lord, exhorting each other to become more like Jesus each time they are together. Positive constructive changes are produced in one another. A healthy relationship looks like a triangle. The man and woman stand at the bottom corners. At the top of the triangle is God. As each person moves closer to God, they move closer to each other. The focus of each individual is the Lord.

When I first entered the ministry, like most men I was goal oriented and insensitive to others. It’s not that I didn’t care about others—it was that I was so focused on the goals I often ran over other people to accomplish the task. As I started dating the young lady who became my wife, she pointed out these flaws, and through her “sharpening process,” I have become more balanced. I am still goal oriented, but I am also learning to be more sensitive to others around me in the process of meeting my goals.

The question to ask about the person you are dating is, “Do I get closer to God as a result of being with this person?” or “Do I love Jesus more today because of our time together?” If you can answer yes, you have the makings of a healthy relationship.

A second indicator comes by looking at the relationships around you. Look at your relationships with your friends, your parents, your pastor, and older mentors. Are these relationships being strengthened or weakened as a result of your dating relationship? In a healthy relationship, these friendships are strengthened. In unhealthy dating relationships, the couple often isolates itself from others.

This is unhealthy for several reasons. One person cannot meet all your needs. There will come the time when you need other friends. Yet, unless you take the time to build other relationships now, later when you need the friendship of others, they may not be there. Often, one person in the relationship will try to dominate the time of the other. Because this person is insecure, they will be very possessive of the other. This leads to a relationship built on selfishness, distrust, and insecurity. When I see relationships deteriorating between the dating couple and their parents, older mentors, or pastors, it is often because the dating couple has something to hide. Dishonesty to parents and others is not a foundation for solid relationships. Integrity, sincerity, and truth are the marks of a healthy relationship. Couples in a healthy relationship have nothing to hide from those who care about them. When I was involved in unhealthy relationships, I saw key relationships around me deteriorate. As hard as I tried, they continued to decline and soon I knew this relationship was not of the Lord. When I began dating Kris, my wife, our relationships with family, friends, and disciplers grew stronger. Both our parents felt good about us, and our friends enjoyed our company because together we were better in the Lord.

If you are in a healthy relationship, both of you will be growing in character and in the Lord, and your relationships with other people will be enhanced and strengthened.

How Far is too Far?

When I speak on dating, one of the most frequently asked questions is “How far is too far?” In other words, “How physical can I get with my date and still be obedient to God?” The answer is found in Paul’s

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exhortation to young Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:1-2. “Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.”

When asked, “How far is too far?” I respond to the guys, “How far would you go with your own sister?” To the girls I say, “How far would you go with your own brother?” Usually the crowd will respond with looks of disgust. Paul’s words remain clear. As Christians, we are now part of one family belonging to the kingdom of God. He says to the men to treat younger women as sisters with absolute purity. There should not be even a hint of sexual immorality in the dating relationship. Women are to likewise treat men as their own brothers. Righteousness should be the hallmark of Christian dating relationships.

My basic guideline is this: the more physically involved the dating relationship, the worse off it is. That flies in the face of the world, which teaches the opposite. Over the years, as a pastor of students, I have seen many relationships destroyed because the couples were too physically involved.

In marriage, sex is the most intimate expression of committed love, which binds two people together. Outside of marriage, it has the opposite effect. It becomes a hindrance to the development of mature love. Sex hinders the development of solid communication. The ability to communicate at a deep level is vital in a relationship. Couples must be able to solve difficult problems, discuss deep issues, resolve conflict, and pray together. To think a kiss or a hug can solve a conflict rather than communicating and praying together is like putting a Band-Aid on a broken bone.

Solid relationships are built on mutual trust and respect. When sex enters the picture, trust and respect can be lost. When a guy pushes a girl too far, she loses her trust in him. Her trust has resulted in her exploitation. The guy loses respect for the girl, knowing she is willing to give up her honor, self-respect, and virginity for passionate lust. When trust and respect is lost, not much remains in the relationship.

However, when a couple makes the commitment to wait until marriage, a strong mutual trust develops which carries over into the marriage. Security and harmony define the relationship because both know the other will remain faithful even in difficult times.

Should one partner even be disfigured in an accident, the other will be there because they have a proven commitment. Mutual respect is developed when both parties prove themselves to be people of character who will not compromise their convictions, honor, and obedience to God. Trust and respect pay huge dividends in relationships.

The best way to keep from sexual immorality is to develop the conviction to have a pure relationship from the beginning. It is difficult to reverse the process. Establish your convictions and limits at the beginning, then maintain them throughout your dating relationship. Although it may be difficult, there is a tremendous reward that awaits you in marriage when you honor the Lord in your dating life.

How to Know You Are Really in Love

Another question I am often asked is, “How do I know if I am in love or just infatuated?” Is this relationship worth pursuing, or is it just two people infatuated with one another? Relationships do often *begin* with infatuation, but healthy ones *move on* to mature love. Too often what appears to be love is simply infatuation. Here are some ways to know the difference between the two.

Real love edifies. Two people in love seek the best for the other person. Their attitude toward the other is, “How can I help make you everything God ever intended you to be?” The two have found their fulfillment and security in Christ, and as a result, they can securely serve with the other’s best interest in mind.

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On the other hand, infatuation is selfish and driven by the desire to have your own needs met. “Infatuated love insists upon continual reassurance from the other person. It makes unreasonable demands that stem from possessiveness and insecurity. Charted on paper, it would range from high peaks of certainty to valleys of doubt. Unstable in its duration, infatuation is like a seasonal monsoon; it comes, blows fiercely, and moves on.”

Second, love is based on knowledge. One must first get to know the other person over a significant period of time and in many different circumstances. As you see the other person’s character strengths and weaknesses, ask yourself, “Do I still feel strongly attracted to him or her?” Try this exercise. List as many attributes of the other person as you can, including strengths and weakness, and the evidence to support your claims. If you have a good-sized list, you probably know the person well and are basing your decision on knowledge. If it is infatuation, your list will be quite short. When two people are infatuated, what they are often attracted to is an idealized image of the other person.

Third, ask yourself, “If I were blind, would I love this person?” In other words, can I love this person without any physical expression? Is my desire for him or her based on quality of character or just physical attraction? If you can’t express your love apart from the physical element, it is not true love. Physical involvement will distort two people’s perspective, and it often leads to unwise decisions. Physical involvement can make people feel close, but upon careful examination, the only thing the two may have in common is lust.

Finally, real love endures. Over time, real love grows and matures. Two people in love can wait for God’s time, no matter how long it may be. Paul states in 1 Corinthians 13 that love is patient and love always perseveres or is long suffering. True love will endure the tests of time and difficulty. Infatuation is marked by impulsive and emotional decision making. It wants to rush into things before prayer or wise counsel is considered. Driven by insecurity and possessiveness, false love seeks to rush the process of physical intimacy and even marriage. True love, on the other hand, is willing to wait on God’s time and allow the other person to grow and become the person God desires him or her to be.

As we conclude, remember this truth: God loves you and desires that your relationships be joyous and meaningful. He will not let you go wrong in the area of dating if you let Him be the Lord of every aspect of your life.

Notes

1. Paula and Stacey Rinehart, *Choices* (Colorado Springs, Col.: NavPress, 1996), p. 120.

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