

SUGGESTIONS FOR CHRISTIAN DATING

"Dating"—what an interesting Western practice. In many cultures, dating is prohibited prior to marriage; in fact, many people don't spend any time together until the wedding; in other words, they don't "fall in love" first, then get married. So what do they do? They marry and are committed to love each other because they're married. (Incidentally, the divorce rate is lower in those cultures than in ours. According to Webster, our Western practice of dating refers to "an engagement between two persons that often has a romantic character." As Webster indicated by his use of the word "romantic," it's generally conceded that dating is for the purpose of finding a marriage partner. Furthermore, general contemporary thought leads people to believe that if someone doesn't date and/or marry, there must be something wrong with him/her.

So since it's true that dating is for marriage, and since it's thought that people must marry to be "normal," then before we discuss some Suggestions for Christian Dating, we need to discuss another point.

Celibacy is praised in Scripture (primarily as regards men).

Celibacy refers to a self-denial of any sexual relations and therefore of marriage. Let's read Paul's teaching concerning celibacy in First Corinthians 7:1 & 8: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman. ... I say to the unmarried and the widows: It is good for them to remain even as I am (unmarried)." See, Paul clearly taught that celibacy is not only acceptable, but it's also good. Yes, God did say that "'it is not good that the man should be alone'" (Genesis 2:18), but other passages (such as we just read) teach us that Genesis 2:18 is a general truth not to be applied to each and every individual and to each and every circumstance. Apparently man has always had trouble finding a balance regarding marriage.

Consider Old and New Testament times. At one time Jewish tradition not only looked on marriage as the ideal state, but it also looked on singleness as disobedience to God's command to "'be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth'" (Genesis 1:28). On the other hand, during the time of Paul's writing to the Corinthians, many Greeks who became Christians were reacting to the sexual sins of their past by looking on celibacy, not only as the ideal state, but also as the only truly godly state. Now...

Consider more recent times. In the Middle Ages, Christendom regarded marriage as second-rate. Today we seem to have swung back the other way, creating the idea that people are abnormal or even queer if they don't get married. When Paul dealt with this attitude, he taught that God doesn't look at one state as being any more acceptable than the other; in other words, celibacy is no more spiritual than marriage or vice versa. However, as the context goes on to show, if a person truly possesses it as a gift from God, celibacy has many advantages: First Corinthians 7:7, 32-33, and 35 read, "I wish that all men were even as I myself (unmarried). But each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that.... But I want you to be without care. He who is unmarried cares for the things that belong to the Lord—how he may please the Lord. But he who is married cares about the things of the world—how he may please his wife.... This I say for your own profit ... that you may serve the Lord without distraction." The point is, if you (as an unmarried person) discover that you have the gift of celibacy, then you have the right to use it. Furthermore, don't let anyone make you feel that you have to get married!

There's also such a thing as part-time celibacy. God wants everyone to be single part of his life; in fact, a person may be completely fulfilled as single at one stage in life, but not at another. Besides, a married person never knows when his spouse's death may bring him right back into the single life.

An important implication here is this: We ought to take our time! Just because I may be 16 doesn't mean (regardless of what my peers say) that I must date; and even if I'm considered weird, I just need to remember that I am, after all, God's peculiar person (First Peter 2:9). Now even though celibacy is praised, Paul did give warnings about choosing to be celibate, especially if one doesn't have that gift. First Corinthians 7:7, 9, & 2 read, "I wish that all men were even as I myself (unmarried).... But if they can't exercise self-control, let them marry, for it's better to marry than to burn with passion.... Because of sexual immorality, let each man have a wife, and let each woman have a husband." Now...

Here are verses 36-37 from Wilson's version (The Diaglott): "If anyone think he acts improperly in remaining single, if he be past age, and thus it is fitting to be married, let him do what he wishes, he sins not; let him marry. But he who stands firm in his heart, not having necessity, but has control over his own will, and has determined this in his heart, to maintain his celibacy, does well." [From my studies of this passage, I believe this is the intended meaning by Paul.]

Here are 10 rules to help you determine if singleness is for you.

1. Recognize that singleness may be for a period of time (e.g., until you're 30) rather than for all of your life.
2. Recognize that it's easier to decide that singleness isn't for you and get married than to realize you should've remained single once you're married.
3. Are you able to live with the idea that you might remain single all of your life?
4. Is your desire to serve God complicated by the thought of a marriage partner?
5. Are you able to enjoy yourself without feeling the need for lots of dates?
6. Could you live out the conditions of remaining single for a period of time (1 year, 5 years, etc.) without serious dating?
7. Do you see the benefits of singleness outweighing the benefits of marriage?
8. Do you see that your God-given talent would be limited if you were married (e.g., mission work)?
9. Are you willing to live with the stigma of being single if you do have this gift?
10. If you think singleness is for you, try it for a specific period of time (e.g., go for 1 year without a date, devoting your normal dating time to serving God).

These thoughts, then, lead us back to our purpose...

Here are some suggestions concerning Christian dating.

After having talked about celibacy, the first obvious suggestion is, Don't date if you don't want to marry! Many people have made the mistake of marrying into families and religions that they didn't want; their marriages ended up in divorces, and they subsequently, therefore, had to live with the reputation of being a divorcee. Why? Because dating eventually leads to walking down the aisle.

Here are some suggestions for the time before you begin dating; the main idea here is that a person ought to become marrying material before dating, that which is designed to find a mate.

Learn all the different kind of loves: *eros*, *storgos*, *philia*, and *agape*.

Be able to control and implement all these loves (when right to do so); the best time to work on this is now, while you're in your present home. For instance, if neither you nor your candidate for marriage can exhibit *agape* in your present homes, don't even think of depending on either of you being able to exhibit it in your future homes.

Here's a great exercise to do: read First Corinthians 13:1-3 from the NIV by replacing Paul with ourselves: "If I [your name, not Paul's; if "I"] speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing." Even better, let's do that same thing with verses 4-8a by replacing the word "love" with ourselves: "I am patient, I am kind. I do not envy, I do not boast, I am not proud. I am not rude, I am not self-seeking, I am not easily angered, I keep no record of wrongs. I do not delight in evil but rejoice with truth. I always protect, always trust, always hope, always persevere. I never fail." Ouch, that hurts! But let's take it one more step further, let's read verses 4-8a the same way except, this time, let's add the recipient of our love to the end of the sentence: "I am patient toward Mom, I am kind toward Dad. I do not envy my brother, I do not boast to my friends," etc. This really brings it all into focus. Doesn't it?

See, as a single person looking forward to marriage sometime in your life, your present home is your best training ground: it's at home that you must learn the sacrificial love necessary for a happy future home and will even affect your relationship with your in-laws. If a person can't love under difficult circumstances at home, he won't be able to love under difficult circumstances after marriage either; or, if he/she does, it will, at the very least, be a long and tiring task, running the risk of divorce. So learn to live and love at home!

Here are 8 things to think about relative to your present family members...

1. What have you done in the past to let them know they are important to you?
2. During the past two weeks, what have you done to express your positive feelings toward them?
3. What new things could you say and/or do that would let them know they are important to you?
4. Describe what you've done to discover what kind of relationship they expect from you? What can you do about this in the future?
5. How have you helped them meet their needs and develop a greater meaning in life? How can you help them in the future?
6. If they have had difficulty in talking to you in the past, how did you respond to them? How can you be more helpful in the future?
7. What have you done with them to make it easier for them to show love toward you? How can you improve this in the future?
8. What have you done to assist them to receive love from you? What have you done to show love to them?

Furthermore, make use of every chance to learn homemaking skills: helping your parents with the chores is not only the loving thing to do, but it also trains you to do these things later. Why is all this important to know and be able to do before dating? Because this is laying the foundation. The Sermon on the Mount includes teachings on love, lust, marriage, divorce, and adultery; Jesus concluded this sermon with a parable about two builders (Matthew 7:24-27): one who built his house on a rock, and the other, on sand. Let's name these two fellows "Rocky" and "Sandy." Sandy's house was going up while Rocky was still digging down. Sandy was enjoying his house while Rocky was still working on his foundation; by the time Rocky finally moved in, Sandy had been enjoying his house for days. Who was the wise one? Jesus said the one who built on the rock. When the storms came, Rocky's house stood, while Sandy's house fell; and great was its fall! Listen, don't envy your friends who are already married or who are experiencing sexual relations outside of marriage while you're still laying foundations, because when the storms of life come—and they will—you'll be very glad you were wise enough to put forth the effort to become marriageable. Once you've become a marriageable person, then you can begin dating for the purpose of looking for someone else who has become marriageable and who

complements you. Here are some suggestions for dating and choosing a mate...

Vary the person. A teenager is too young to be restricted to dating one person all the time; since we mature as we relate to other people, it's important not to narrow our relationships to too few people. It's important to relate to people who are not identical with our personalities. A person who doesn't talk much needs to be in the presence of people who talk more. A person who is intellectual without much common sense needs to spend some time with a more practical person. A person who doesn't laugh much needs to be with people who do. In this way we help mature and balance each other: Solomon said, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17, NIV).

Vary the experience. You can never know a person unless you see him/her in many different kinds of experiences. If possible, go on group dates first, moving from there to triple dates, then to double dates, then finally to pair dates; in this way you can see how your date relates to others. For example, does he/she crawl inside a shell when others are around?

1. *Work together.* Shop together. Cook together. Help an elderly couple with something together. Wash and wax your car together. Do church work, such as visiting the sick and elderly, together.
[Nothing seems to draw people closer together than work, especially work for the Lord Jesus.]
2. *Play together.* Play miniature golf, tennis, ping-pong, checkers, chess—whatever. Do you want to know how your candidate thinks? Play Monopoly or Life. [You get to know people as you play together.]
3. *Think together.* Talk about something that stretches your minds. Do we really get to know people by conversations like this:

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

"Your eyes are beautiful."

"Your eyes are beautiful, too."

"Your hair is nice."

"Your hair is OK."

Talk about something that makes you think: Discuss how Christians use their money. Discuss books you have read lately. Discuss priorities. Discuss viewpoints on various subjects. [Find out how the other person thinks.]

4. *Worship together.* Going to church is a great thing to do on a date, but worship is more than that: you ought to worship on every date, for if you can't pray on a date, there's something terribly wrong with you or the person you're dating. Someone may say, "How dull can you get?" But I say, "How romantic can you get?" There's nothing more wonderful than coming together at the end of an evening and thanking God for the wonderful time the three of you had together. (Incidentally, if the fellow cannot take a spiritual leading role on the date, don't expect him to in his own home after marriage.)

Avoid petting. (If you're a Christian and have learned about *eros* love and its powerful pull, you'll understand the reason for this suggestion; Webster defines "petting" as "to engage in amorous embracing, caressing, and kissing," what used to be called "necking.") So don't date a renowned playboy. Learn to say "No" with meaning. By avoiding petting, especially early on in a relationship, you can intellectually choose the right person instead of allowing your emotions to cloud your judgment; this is what usually causes someone to choose too soon.

Know what you're looking for in a spouse. (First Corinthians 13:4-8a is a great place to start in determining characteristics to look for.) Choose someone who has the same purpose in life as you do; since God and His Cause as a Christian is your primary purpose in life, then don't even think about dating someone who doesn't have that same goal. Second Corinthians 6:14a and 17 read, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers [or unfaithful, I might add]. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? ... 'Come out from among them, and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.'" First Corinthians 9:5a and 7:39 read, "Do we have no right to take along a believing wife." ... "A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, [but] only in the Lord."

Conclusion

Next to committing yourself to becoming a child of God, choosing a life-long mate is the single most important decision you can ever make, so you must do so with much serious and mature deliberation. Firstly, seriously consider whether you have the gift of celibacy, then make a decision concerning whether you will make use of it or not. If you choose to make use of it, don't allow anyone to deter you from your decision, and if you choose to make use of it, don't date. On the other hand, if you don't have that gift or choose not to use it, then become marrying material: thoroughly learn the different types of love to be in a marriage, and be able to control and implement them, especially by practicing them in your present home.

Then begin dating. Know what you're looking for in a mate. Date various people. Avoid petting. Vary your dating experience. (The main thing is to get to really know your candidate!)

[Tony E. Denton, July 1998. ASiteForTheLord.com]