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**Core Seminar**

**Singleness & Courtship**

**Session 11: Chemistry & Compatibility**

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**I. Introduction**

You could summarize last week’s class with the closing words of the book of Proverbs: “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.” Last week, we thought about the key phrase in that passage: “a woman [or man] who fears the Lord.”

But what about charm and beauty? Or, if you’re a woman, whatever equivalents you might be tempted to prioritize. Do we just ignore them? Pretend they don’t exist? We all know that character matters more than looks and personality. But we’d be wrong if we pretended that the Bible’s message is basically, “charm bad, character good.” That’s not entirely how the Bible sees things. And that mindset leaves us confused with what to do about the attraction we feel for someone’s beauty and personality. No. We need to understand the value *God* places on things like beauty and charm. On chemistry and compatibility, which are the words I’ll use in today’s class. Only when we can see these things through God’s eyes can we value them appropriately when we consider who to marry.

So how do you think about chemistry? That is, the way you’re attracted to that person, physically, emotionally, and otherwise. How do you think about compatibility. That is, the degree you feel like your personalities are a natural “fit” with each other. More important, how does God think about these things? That’s our topic for this morning. In that sense, last week was the Bible’s take on what the Bible sees as paramount in choosing a spouse; today is the Bible’s take on what the *world* sees as paramount in choosing a spouse.

**II. What does the Bible say about chemistry?**

Anyone who thinks that the Bible doesn’t value passion and chemistry in marriage just hasn’t read the Song of Songs. Desire and attraction run all through this book. Emotional attraction, physical attraction. Just listen to the Bride in chapter 5, verse 16:

His mouth is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable.

This is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.

Or the beloved in chapter 4, verse 9:

You have captivated my heart, my sister, my bride;

You have captivated my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace.

Bloodless and passionless? I think not! There’s some serious chemistry going on in the Song of Songs. Desire is a wonderful thing in marriage. There’s an emotional attraction here: a desire to be together and close. And there’s physical attraction here: these two crave the physical intimacy of sex.

Well then. It’s in the Bible, right? So this is what we should be looking for, right? The emotional spark where your first date turns into six hours of staring into each other’s eyes in a coffee shop? The physical spark where you just can’t get your mind off how he looks or she looks? Is that our dating takeaway from the Song of Songs? Is that what you should be looking for? Of course, with some good character and fear of God thrown in for good measure?

Well, Scripture would sound two cautionary notes in how to think about chemistry.

*Caution #1: chemistry is more cultured than something that’s innate to a relationship*

One thing that should make us pause is that, quite often, when the Bible describes desire in marriage, it uses imperative language, not aspirational language. In other words, desire—even sexual desire—isn’t something you look for; it’s something that’s commanded of you. Listen to the words Proverbs 5 gives to young husbands:

Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the life of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe.

Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love. (v. 18-19)

Not, “look for someone who intoxicates you with her love” but “you see that wife of yours? *Be* intoxicated always in her love.” Imperative, not aspiration.

Talk to a wise Christian couple, and you’ll hear about attraction not simply as something they started with, but as something they’ve built over time. Yes, I was attracted to my wife when we were dating. But how much more now that I’ve seen her beauty and loyalty to me in moving around the country, raising a bunch of kids together, walking through hardship, and so on. Recently in the *Washington Post* there was the story of a man whose wife hired a photographer to take some racy photos of her, airbrush out her flaws, and presented the album as a gift to him. He wrote the photographer a letter that the *Post* published. Here’s an excerpt; I think it makes this point beautifully:

When I opened the album that she gave to me, my heart sank. These pictures…while they are beautiful and you are clearly a very talented photographer….they are not my wife. You made every one of her “flaws” disappear…and while I’m sure this is exactly what she asked you to do, it took away everything that makes up our life. When you took away her stretch marks, you took away the documentation of my children. When you took away her wrinkles, you took away over two decades of our laughter, and our worries. When you took away her cellulite, you took away her love of baking and all the goodies we have eaten over the years. I am not telling you all of this to make you feel horrible, you’re just doing your job and I get that. I am actually writing you to thank you. Seeing these images made me realize that I honestly do not tell my wife enough how much I LOVE her and adore her just as she is. She hears it so seldom, that she actually thought these photoshopped images are what I wanted and needed her to look like. I have to do better, and for the rest of my days I am going to celebrate her in all her imperfectness. Thanks for the reminder[[1]](#footnote-1).

That is a far more realistic description of attraction in marriage than anything you’ll see on the silver screen. It’s not like you look for the most chemistry you’ve ever felt for someone, and hope it will last through marriage. No: chemistry is something you hopefully start with, but most of what you’ll have in marriage is what *grows* with marriage.

*Caution #2: attraction is not always good*

Can anyone tell me when the word “desire” first appears in Scripture? [wait for answer] Yes: Genesis 3:6. Eve saw the fruit was *desirable*, and she took and ate it. Sometimes we’re attracted to the *wrong* things. So that deep desire you feel for the person you’re dating? It’s not a trustworthy guide.

 “Culture says, ‘let your heart be your guide.’ Scripture says, ‘Watch over your heart with all diligence for from it flow the springs of life” (Proverbs 4:23)[[2]](#footnote-2). Desire for that person you’re dating is good—but something we should view with some skepticism.

**III. So what do we do?**

So what do we do with these two cautions about attraction and chemistry? Let me give you four implications.

1. Mature in what you’re attracted to. You shouldn’t—and frankly, can’t—ignore attraction when you’re dating. But ideally over time you are increasingly attracted to what is most worthy in that person. Some of this will come naturally as you grow in Christ. Becoming more Christ-like will involve renovating your desires.
* As you grow in wisdom, you’ll grow in what you’re attracted to.
* As you identify idols in your life—like an idolatry of comfort, of sex, of money, of security, for example—you’ll grow in what you’re attracted to.

But growth in what you’re attracted to also involves being careful with what influences you. For example, if pornography and lust begin to shape what you desire, you’ll be in a really hard place when you’re trying to make a decision about marriage. “Is the attraction I feel real? Or just something that’s been conditioned by all the porn I’ve seen?” And beyond influences like that that are obviously sinful, be wary of how the things you watch and read condition what you’re attracted to. That trashy novel, that movie, that totally unnecessary story you just clicked at CNN.com. If you’ve held onto an image of your future spouse as some kind of magazine model, no amount of self-talk in dating (“charm is deceptive, beauty is fleeting; charm is deceptive, beauty is fleeting”)…no amount of self-talk will keep you from being attracted to the wrong things. You need to sanctify your attraction *now*. Our moto of how to fill our thought life shouldn’t be Google’s (don’t be evil) but God’s (“whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” Philippians 4:8.)

1. When you’re attracted to someone, ask yourself what you’re attracted to in them. Ideally, make that into a conversation with a good friend. If you’re in love, it’ll be a fun conversation to have (at least for you; your friend may be sick and tired of talking about the object of your affection by now ☺). Do you recognize any idols in that attraction? A desire for control, for pleasure, to keep people happy, a lust for success, for money, for comfort. Those things are often behind the attraction we feel. We need to identify them as idols that compete with God, and repent of them.
2. Along those lines, be wary of dating if you have big gaping holes in your contentedness as a Christian. Are there huge idols in your life that you’re grappling with? Then now may not be a good time to look for a spouse. It’s going to be nearly impossible for your attraction to that other person *not* to be conditioned by their seeming ability meet idolatrous desires in your heart.
3. Don’t jump ahead physically in your relationship. The Song of Songs extols desire in marriage; but listen to the Bride’s advice for those who *aren’t* yet married (2:7, NIV): “Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you by the gazelles and by the does of the field: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.” OK, I recognize that that cuddling may not be *necessarily* sinful. But it is awakening desires that can only be met in a husband or wife? Once you open up the Pandora’s box of desire, you won’t be able to put them back. And those desires are going to seriously complicate the question of whether you’re attracted to that person for good reasons.

*Questions?*

**IV. What does the Bible say about compatibility?**

Leaving attraction aside, let’s look at another virtue that the world extols: compatibility. For many, this is what they’re looking for in a spouse.

Just like with chemistry, the Bible gives us one kind of compatibility that’s good, and another that’s bad.

So what’s the bad view of compatibility? Well, it’s the view that, according to the National Marriage Project, is our culture’s main view of compatibility. Above all, survey respondents said, compatibility means someone who shows a “willingness to take [me] as [I am] and not change [me].” Someone who will fit into my life as it is. As one man put it, “if you are truly compatible, then you don’t have to change.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The basic problem with that view of compatibility is that one of God’s plans for marriage is that it *will* change me. Marriage, like every other Christian friendship, has the great goal of Colossians 1:28, that “we may present everyone mature in Christ.” A key purpose of a husband laying down his life for his wife? That he might be changed. Of a wife being washed by the word that she might be without spot or wrinkle or any other blemish? That she might be changed.

Marriage *will* change you.

So think for a moment of how you may have bought into this world view of compatibility. Are you looking for someone where the two of you just naturally fit? Where you both love the same things and agree on everything? A relationship where you just get to be you? Those things are all fine—just recognize that’s not what your marriage will be if you get married. Marriage *will* change you.

But does that mean that we need to abandon compatibility as a virtue in relationship? Quite the contrary. In fact, at the beginning of Genesis where God introduces the idea of marriage, we see that marriage is about compatibility—just a different kind of compatibility. Eve was made to be “a helper fit for” Adam. Who completes him, who complements him. The Bible’s idea of a spouse who is compatible with you isn’t so much someone who will leave you as you are, but someone who completes you.

What does that look like? What does it look like to discover that this person you’re dating is the one who will complete you? In Genesis 2, it is completion for a purpose, isn’t it? Completion not simply so that Adam can feel nice and complete—but so that Adam can do what God’s asked him to co. It is compatibility with the purpose of ministry for God.

**V. Compatibility for Ministry**

This is the guiding framework in Paul’s famous chapter on singleness and marriage in 1 Corinthians 7. Here’s Paul’s advice for the unmarried:

The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord. (v. 32b-35)

Paul’s quite clear: he has no “marriage agenda” or “anti-marriage agenda here.” No restraints either direction. He simply wants us to be undivided in our devotion to the Lord. So if you remain single, why should you do that? In order to serve the Lord. If you get married, why should you do that? Because you can serve the Lord better together than apart. That’s biblical compatibility. All about service to the Lord.

*What compatibility (mainly) isn’t*

This is a simple concept that a lot of Christian couples grab onto. “We should get married if we can do more for the Lord together than apart.” But this helpful principle is often misunderstood. So a dating couple ask themselves, “How do we figure out if we’re better together than apart?” “I guess we should do some ministry together!” So they host a dinner for their neighbors. And as they’re cleaning up several hours later they try to answer their question. “Well, I guess the conversation went more smoothly because she was there.” “I guess the gospel came up more because he was there.” “Does that mean that 1 Corinthians 7 would tell us to get married? Does that mean we’re better together than apart?”

There’s nothing wrong with that. But if that’s the *main* way we think about 1 Corinthians 7—or about Eve being “a helper fit for” Adam, we’re totally misunderstanding how life works. As a married couple, you will certainly do ministry together sometimes. But you’re still going to spend a lot of your life apart. And you’ll spend very little of your life doing things that at least the hypothetical couple I just mentioned would call “ministry.”

*What compatibility (mainly) is*

The main way that a married couple is more devoted to the Lord together than apart isn’t so much what marriage allows them to *do* but who marriage allows them to *be*. We too easily think of ministry as a small number of events scattered across the calendar. But in reality, it is everything we do. “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” 1 Corinthians 10:31. Let me give you a few categories for what this looks like—for how Genesis 2 and 1 Corinthians 7 typically work out in a marriage. What it looks like for a couple to complete each other.

1. Marriage teaches you to love a stranger. That is, your spouse. Who you thought you knew really well on your wedding day—but who you learned so much more about since then. Marriage teaches you to love someone who’s different from you. To understand someone you don’t understand. It teaches you to live your whole life mindful of what another person is thinking or feeling. To be considerate. For many people, marriage forces them to get outside their own head and their own personal drama and learn to truly love some one. And that will spill over into devotion to the Lord in all aspects of their life. That is one of the main ways that a man and a woman are compatible in marriage. They learn to love a stranger.
2. Marriage gives you insight from a different perspective. My wife’s counsel for me is unbelievably valuable. That’s because she’s wise, to be sure. But it’s also because she’s different. She’s a woman; I’m a man. She sees the world differently than I do. And that allows her to observe and note things that I never would have noticed in my relationships with others and in the decisions I need to make.
3. Marriage brings the strengths of two different people to every challenge. We talked about this last week. My wife is naturally more considerate than I am. She makes friends faster. I joke with people that most people who are my friends only gave me a try because of my wife. Through marriage, her strengths complement some of my deficiencies—and vice versa.
4. Marriage allows two people to raise a family. As a father of young children, this is perhaps the most obvious way today that my wife completes me. Ephesians 6 clearly places the weight of raising children on my shoulders. Genesis 2 clearly places the weight of provision on my shoulders too. How can I do all that? Because my wife, like the woman of Proverbs 31, has chosen to come alongside me to help me bear those responsibilities. Given my responsibilities as a dad, I can’t imagine I could ever be your pastor if my wife didn’t play such a huge role in raising our kids. She is busy at home (Titus 2) so that I can be busy helping you.

It’s worth noting that because the Biblical idea of compatibility is one of complementarity, this is going to look different for a man than for a woman.

* If you were to ask me how my wife and I complement each other, I would point out how she makes up for deficiencies in my character. She focuses her life on our home so that I can give attention to priorities outside of our home. She gives me wise advice and counsel. In other words, she is my helper.
* And if you were to ask her the same question, she’d probably point to how she feels I provide a steading influence in her life. How I lead our home life to be Godward in its orientation. In other words, that I lead.

As you ask the question “are we compatible” you need to think through the lens of helper and leader.

*Questions?*

**Close with prayer**

1. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2015/10/16/husband-to-photographer-who-airbrushed-wife-you-took-away-everything-that-makes-up-our-life/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Earnie Baker, *Marry Wisely, Marry Well* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Quote from Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, page 24 (paperback) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)