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**Core Seminar**

**Singleness & Courtship**

**Session 6: An Introduction to Courtship**

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**Introduction**

Welcome to week 6 of our class, where we shift from the subject of singleness to courtship or dating. Before we get into our material, I want to start with a question: **how should Christian dating look different from the world’s concept of dating?**

Depending on who you are, there are different reasons why you’ll want to stick with us for the next few weeks:

* Singles: Are you dating others in a way that is consistent with what is taught in Scripture (and hopefully also in this class)? Does your dating reflect worldly thinking in ways you haven’t realized? How does your dating reflect the Bible and the wisdom passed on to you by older godly men and women in this church?
* Married: Are you giving guidance to singles to date/court in ways that are wholly consistent with Scripture (and hopefully also this class)? Are you taking the time to talk with singles about getting married one day? (I’m not referring to racking them over the coals for being single, but encouraging them in their pursuit of a spouse.)

You’ll notice that today’s class is titled “An Introduction to *Courtship.*” That’s a blast from the past, isn’t it? “Courtship” brings to mind horse-drawn buggies and people in fancy outfits sipping tea. It feels like outdated terminology. And it certainly has its baggage. But then again, so does the more modern term of “dating.” So don’t get hung up on terminology; I’m less interested in what term you use than that we define it biblically.

But instead of using them as synonyms—which I could—I’m going to use “dating” as a broad term and “courtship” as something more narrow. A particular kind of dating with particular goals, which we’ll get to in a bit.

Today my goals is to simply introduce the idea of courtship. We’ll start by looking to see where it is in the Bible. Then we’ll go on a brief tour of how courtship and dating have evolved over the last century or so. And finally I’ll try to establish some biblical principles for what our dating should look like as Christians—which we’ll pack into the term courtship.

**Dating in Scripture**

So where is dating or courtship in the Bible? Well, we see probably our first instance of this in Genesis 24, where we watch how Isaac went about finding a wife. He didn’t borrow his dad’s camel to take a girl to the movies. Instead we read:

Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he had, “Put your hand under my thigh,3that I may make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, 4but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac.” 5The servant said to him, “Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land. Must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?” 6Abraham said to him, “See to it that you do not take my son back there. 7The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my kindred, and who spoke to me and swore to me, ‘To your offspring I will give this land,’ he will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. (v. 2-7)

So you’re thinking, “an angel! That’s what I need. Forget eHarmony. Forget D-Harmony (that is, Deepak). I gotta get me one of those!”

But back to Abraham and Isaac. As we keep reading in Genesis, we find Abraham’s servant traveling 500 miles away to find Isaac a wife in Mesopotamia. He meets her at a well and before long she’s agreed to the marriage proposal without ever meeting Isaac!

And you’re thinking…uh oh. I knew Deepak and Jamie had some strange ideas about dating. “Courtship” they say. They just want us all to go back to arranged marriages.

No need to panic. Certainly arranged marriages are described in the Bible—but they’re certainly not commanded. As Paul tells the widow in 1 Corinthians 7, “she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord.”

But here’s the point. Things were pretty clear for Isaac. But what about us? What do we do with that freedom in 1 Corinthians 7? Well, let’s take a quick tour of the last 100 years of dating to see how things have gotten less clear with time. This comes from Beth Bailey, a professor of American Studies at the University of New Mexico[[1]](#footnote-1).

**Brief History of Dating *1900s-2012***

*1900s -* In the early 1900s in America, a young man would schedule a time to meet a young lady in the parlor of her parent’s home. If the courting progressed, the couple might advance to the front porch, always under the eye of watchful parents. Such a process was meant to protect from danger (abuse, rape), involve the family in the courtship process, allow for the father to keep away the wrong kinds of men, and reduce opportunity for sexual immorality.

*1920s* – By the 1920s, urbanization provided a number of social outlets for meeting outside the home. Now men and women were able to go out together at places like restaurants, movie theaters, and dance halls. Casual dating began to become more common.

*1930s* – With the invention & proliferation of the automobile, dating changed dramatically with a newfound freedom to gather away from mom and dad.

*1960s* – In the 60s, the feminist movement the sexual revolution come on the scene. Casual sex is becoming more normal. Pornography is sold in stores. By the 1970s, abortion and no-fault divorce are legalized (1973, 1974). But here’s what’s key for our purposes. Sex, dating, marriage, and children had historically been connected. With the advent of the sexual revolution, they weren’t any more, and things become confusing. Dating doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with marriage, sex isn’t necessarily connected to children, and children aren’t necessarily *un*related to dating. Of course, we’re still seeing evolution in the same direction; at least in the 1970s your sexual identity was seen as a given, but today even that is a matter of individual preference.

Now the point of taking a brief look at the development of dating like this is not to suggest that we need to adopt the dating techniques of a century before us. Rather it is to highlight a fact that we all are keenly aware of—that the norm in our culture is a relatively new phenomenon. And of course, normal doesn’t mean right. But beyond that, it’s important to realize that our views of dating are probably affected a lot more by the world we live in than we realize—either in absorbing what the world thinks or reacting against it. So we can’t afford to be passive in our thinking about marriage or dating – instead we need to do the hard work of thinking Biblically about these things. Paul reminds us in **Romans 12:2:**  “Do not be conformed to this world,but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

So we’ve moved from the clarity of angelically-guided dating by Isaac, to the unclarity of how our world thinks about dating today. How can we get back to clarity? Let’s see what basic principles the Bible would give us for pursuing marriage. As I mentioned earlier, we’re going to use the word “courtship” to describe those principles.

**Defining Courtship – *What are we talking about?***

Before you leave on a trip, you need to determine where you’re heading. Well, we have 6 more weeks on this journey of talking about courtship, so a good place to begin is to define our terms. So how do we define courtship? Courtship is a relationship between a man and a woman with three important characteristics: (1) it always has marriage as its goal; (2) it’s conducted under authority; and (3) it is led by the man.

Let’s see where each of these three come from in Scripture.

**First**, courtship has marriage as its goal. In other words, it’s not just casual dating. And in other words, you don’t start courting someone until you’re ready to get married. Where do we see that in Scripture? Mainly by the lack of any other category. Jesus extols marriage and singleness in Matthew 19, as does Paul in 1 Corinthians 7. As we talked about in the singleness core seminar, one of the revolutionary ideas put forth by Christianity was that *both* marriage and singleness are good, honorable, God-glorifying states in which one could live for a lifetime. But what we don’t see in Scripture is a model of men and women pursuing a romantic relationship without marriage in mind. There’s no third category in other words: just marriage and singleness. Beyond that, we see Paul’s warning to young men against *defrauding* their sisters in the Lord (1 Thes. 4:6). In other words, don’t take what is only yours in marriage and act as if it’s yours outside of marriage.

So if courtship is a relationship where a man and a woman are actively considering marriage, does that mean marriage is the destination? Is a successful courtship one that ends in marriage? In some respects, we could say the answer is ‘yes’ they’re not out to *just* have a fun weekend; they’re looking towards marriage. But, on the other hand the answer is ‘no,’ because the goal is to determine if God would have them be married, and if a couple finds that the answer is ‘no, we shouldn’t’ and were able to date in a way that they honored God and have no regrets afterwards, it was a success.

That means that we shouldn’t make courtship a bigger deal than it is. In other words, going out for dinner or coffee is *not* the same thing as a marriage proposal. We need to give each other breathing room and understand there is space between the beginning when two people are just getting to know each other, and the end of a courtship when two people decide to get married. There are some people in our church who would do well to take courtship—or at least, the early stages of courtship—*less* seriously.

At the same time, we shouldn’t take courtship too lightly either. Though a dating relationship should not let intimacy outpace commitment, there is a level of commitment in dating because the two people aren’t playing games; they’re making one of the most important decisions in their lives. Courtship is not American style casual dating that in many cases has no serious consideration of marriage in it.

**Second**, courtship is conducted under authority. The authority of the woman’s family, or perhaps the church or wise friends. It’s not something that exists merely between the two of you. Where do we get this idea? Well, we can start in the Old Testament where we see the authority of a father in his daughter’s life as she’s thinking about marriage. For example, if the young couple end up sleeping together before marriage, the Old Testament law give the father of the girl the ability to step in and stop the presumptive marriage from taking place (Exodus 22:17)—presumably as a way to protect her. As we move into the New Testament where the family of the church begins to fill some of the roles played by the nuclear family of the Old Testament, we lose some of that straight-line authority. Many young women in this church, for example, don’t have Christian dads who will understand what is good for them. But that doesn’t mean that we don’t still live life under authority. We have authority over each other, to help protect each other from sin (Hebrews 12:15). And we have a responsibility to submit to the leadership of our elders in everything (Hebrews 13:17). For the Christian, there’s no aspect of life that should be purely private, beyond the accountability of other brothers and sisters in Christ—and surely not for something as important as the decision of who to marry. We’ll talk more about this in two weeks.

**Third**, courtship is led by the man. Now, this is actually kind of tricky. In Ephesians 5:22, Paul writes, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” In other words, if he’s your husband, you are to follow his lead. But if he’s not your husband, you’re not in submission to him—and that includes boyfriends. But does that mean that our relationships are entirely egalitarian until the wedding day when suddenly we throw the “leadership and submission” switch? Of course not. Because throughout the process of courtship, you’re trying to figure out if you should get married. And surely a key aspect of that as a woman is deciding if you can—and want to—follow this man. Or if you’re the man, if you can—and want to—lead this woman. So the closer you get to marriage, the more you will take on the roles God will assign you once you’re married.

So, what’s courtship? A relationship between a man and a woman where marriage is the goal, that’s conducted under authority, that’s led by the man..

Now, with a simple definition like that you may be left with some questions. “But, how do we get close to someone in order to make a wise decision about marrying them *without* stealing the privileges of marriage?” Or you may be asking, “How do we find a spouse without leaving a trail of regrets and broken promises?” That’s where we need to remember that what we need most is wisdom, not rules. Our definition serves as a simple skeleton that we’ll flesh out over the next few weeks. And my hope is that as we explore these biblical principles, you’ll gain wisdom in how to pursue marriage well. But if you’re looking for a dot-to-dot path to the perfect marriage, you’ll need to recalibrate your expectations.

**Questions?**

OK. With courtship defined, let’s compare it with modern, casual dating to see if we can’t understand the Biblical model a little better.

**What is the difference between Christian courtship versus worldly dating?**

The two are different in their goals for intimacy. Christian marriage has as its goal to be emotionally and physically intimate with only one member of the opposite sex—your **spouse**. So the goal of Christian dating/courtship is not immediate intimacy, but *future* intimacy. A worldly dating philosophy not only assumes that there will be more than one intimate relationship, it advocates “playing the field” in order to determine “what one wants” in a mate, and one of the ways you find out what you “want” is through intimacy. Even Christian dating can get into trouble here, when we assume that the main difference between Christian dating and worldly dating is that Christians don’t have sex before marriage. The trouble there is that the Christian will try to bring as much marital intimacy as possible into the dating relationships so long as they don’t cross that line of premarital sex. Courtship isn’t about getting as much intimacy as is lawful—but a focus on *future* intimacy.

Christian courtship understands that biblically, commitment comes *before* intimacy. Worldly dating assumes there will be a high level of emotional involvement in a dating relationship, and some level of physical involvement.

The two are different as well in their methods. Courtship is trying as much as possible to take its cues from Scripture. On the other hand, worldly dating is trying to find just the right person using our own corrupt judgment. It fails to see that its style & method of determination is promoting a damaging selfishness that will play itself out in the rest of marriage.

There’s a difference in how time is spent. Worldly dating assumes that the only way to get to know a person is to spend exclusive time with him or her. Worldly dating assumes that you will spend a great deal of time together (most of it alone) because you need to get to know the person more deeply than anyone else in the world to figure out whether you want to be with him or her. *Courtship* will value more time in group settings early on, so that men and women are protected from too much intimacy too soon. Christian courtship assumes that long periods of time together are not usually needed, because what you’re after is the **appropriate level of knowledge needed in order to decide if further commitment is desired and in order**.

Then, of course, there’s a difference in roles. Christian courtship is complimentarian. God has created men and women differently and has ordained that each of these spiritual equals will play different roles in the church and in the family. Worldly dating is egalitarian. There are no differences in make-up or roles even though the expectations & capabilities of each sex are vastly different.

There’s a difference in goal. Christian courtship understands that personal happiness is not the greatest (and therefore controlling) goal in the relationship. Christian courtship should be more focused on holiness and spiritual growth. Worldly dating assumes that a good relationship will meet my needs, a bad one won’t. It focuses on being the right person to meet my future spouse’s needs. Needs I might emphasize that are frequently driven by sin and needs that God in His providence may not chose to satisfy.

Lastly, there’s a difference in attitude toward authority. Christian courtship understands that biblically, a part of being a Christian is being a Church Member and a part of membership is being accountable to others (Church Covenant). You will find the advice, counsel, encouragement and prayers of the elders and older believers to be quite valuable. Worldly dating assumes that what I do and who I date is up to me entirely and is private (my family or the church has no formal or practical authority).

**Questions?**

**Am I Ready for Courtship?**

Well, with a better understanding of courtship, we’re hopefully better prepared to answer the important question: am I ready? And within this framework, the question, “am I ready to date” is really the question “am I ready to marry?” By which I obviously don’t mean, am I ready to marry *her* or *him*. But, if I begin this relationship and it moves forward to engagement at a reasonable pace, am I ready to get married? There could be a number of situations that would lead you to say “no.” In which case, you shouldn’t be dating yet.

* It might be that you’re a new convert and you need to get grounded in your faith and mature as a follower of Jesus before you’re able to lead a family spiritually (if you’re the guy) or be a suitable helper (if you’re the girl).
* It might be that you need to get help in overcoming a habitual sin such as pornography, substance abuse, or an eating disorder. Let me just say that habitual sins like this aren’t necessarily a reason to not pursue marriage—but sometimes they are. But don’t figure that out on your own; talk with someone in this church—like one of the elders—who can help you.
* It might be that you need to get a handle on your finances or put together a plan to get your debt under control. You certainly don’t need to be rich to get married. But remember that once you get married, the man is taking on ultimate financial responsibility for a family. If you’re a guy and you’re in no position to support a family—maybe you’re still a high school student—then you’re in no position to pursue marriage. Which means that you’re in no position to be dating. And just keep in mind that God may have different plans for the future than we do. There are many people who have had their career ambitions completely changed after the birth of a disabled child, for example—which may in God’s good providence be something he sees fit for you just months from your wedding day. Don’t presume that God’s better plan will conform to the one you’ve got in your head.

And of course, in balance to all of that, in all these categories, it’s important to realize we shouldn’t wait for perfection or else *none* of us would ever get married! And remember that marriage can be sanctifying, beneficial, and healing.

**Where we’re heading from here**

So how do we get from friendship to marriage? Flip over to the back of your handout to see where we go from here. Next week, we’ll walk all the way through a typical relationship to consider the various stages along the way. Week 8 we’ll look at intimacy—the idea that commitment precedes intimacy—and how accountability can help us do that well. Week 9 we’ll think through what you need to talk about in your relationship. Week 10 is what to look for in a spouse—and who you should be. Week 11 is about the intangibles in a relationship: compatibility, chemistry, and communication. Week 12 is about problems we can run into in this church’s dating culture. And then we’ll finish things up in week 13 with a panel q&a.

**Conclusion**

Some final thoughts as we close. We’re not going to advocate for a “one size fits all” approach to dating slash courtship. If you miss that, you’ll most likely leave this class paralyzed by the question of whether you’re dating the “approved” way, afraid to move forward for fear you’re doing it wrong; or you’ll simply ignore what you’ve heard because it seems like a bunch of impossible rules.

This is not about rules. Of course, there are some absolutes that you’ll violate at your own peril. Sexual immorality comes to mind.

Not rules but *principles.* These principles are either explicitly biblical or implied from the wisdom of Scripture. I’d encourage you to think of these principles not as shackles, but as the fence around the playground. They are meant to keep you on safe territory, to protect you from harmful things outside the fence. But once you figure out what those fences are, then go inside the playground and have fun. Courtship should be something you enjoy!

Now, I realize throughout the class, some of you will disagree or be frustrated at some of my statements. But ask yourself why that is. *What are you trying to hold onto that you think this model will take from you (privacy, secrecy, autonomy)?* The bottom line is that we don’t see dating as an exception to God’s rule in our life. God has spoken, and His word is sufficient for providing everything we need for life and godliness.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

We want you to think and act biblically in all areas of your life, including how you treat, befriend, and date brothers and sisters in Christ.

**Questions?**

1. Amy A. Cass, ed., Leon R. Cass, ed., *Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar: Readings on Courting and Marrying*, (University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), pgs. 27-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)