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**Core Seminar**

**Dating & Courtship**

**Session 4: What to Talk About**

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### **I. Introduction**

Good morning! Welcome to the Dating and Courtship core seminar. If you’re conducting a relationship with Biblical goals, the main point of your relationship is to figure out whether you should get married. And the most important tool you’ll have in that endeavor are your ears, followed by your mouth. Most of your relationship is going to be about talk. So what do you discuss? When? That’s our topic this morning.

We’ll start with your goals for communication at various stages in your relationship. Then we’ll look at what you need to talk about as your relationship progresses. In that sense, today’s class isn’t *how* to communicate, but *what* to communicate. For a good *how-*focused class, read the communication class in the Marriage core seminar on the CHBC website.

**II. Goals for your talk**

If dating is mainly about a decision to get married, your conversation early on will involve a lot of talk about potential deal-breakers. In other words, don’t have a great, fun dating relationship for three months before you discover that he wants to be a career military officer and she can’t ever imagine leaving the town she grew up in.

In fact, one sign that your relationship is moving on to a new stage is that you’ve worked through any big potential deal-breakers. And so, as you can see in your handout, your conversation turns from how the relationship might *not* work out to what it will look like if it *does* work out. Quality of the relationship. And this will be most of your courtship. Do you enjoy being together? Are you becoming great friends? Does your relationship lead you to love Jesus more? And so forth.

But then as your relationship matures, you’re back to deal-breakers. At some point, you progress from asking the question, “do I want to get married to this person?” to the question “why *wouldn’t* we get married?” If you’re in a tyipcal relationship, you’ll have some specific answers to that “why wouldn’t we” question. As in, even though we eventually make up, our fights are big and tumultuous. Or, she’s really struggling to trust him. Or, her parents drive him crazy but she’s always pictured them having a day-to-day role in her married life. You go from talking about deal-breakers early in the relationship—to talking about the quality of your relationship—to talking about a new set of dealbreakers.

It’s obviously not perfectly clean-cut, as you can imagine. But that’s the general shape of most relationships. In all these stages, the guy is going to take the lead. How and when he leads into difficult conversations, and how she responds, is going to be a big part of figuring out whether they’re a good match. And, of course, she can help him by sharing her view on what issues they need to spend time on. If your relationship follows typical gender stereotypes, she’ll often be the one more attuned to these issues than he is.

In all this, we need to seek transparency and honesty rather than posturing. The answer you’re looking for is not, “what do I need to say so she’ll still like me” but “how can I serve her by showing her who I really am?” Think of how often the Bible exhorts us to be honest and humble in relationships. Just a sampling:

“Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment.” (Prov. 12:19)

“Before destruction a man’s heart is haughty, but humility comes before honor.” (Prov. 18:12)

Do you want to be honored by this person in lifelong marriage? Then humble yourself and present who you really are.

*Questions?*

**III. Dealbreakers (early-stage)**

If you’ve been around CHBC for a while, you’ve heard about Deepak’s famous Fs. Faith, family, finances, future, fights, foolishness, fun, friendship, fears, and feedback. That’s what you should talk about in your relationship, and that’s what we’ll talk about for the rest of our time this morning. Some will come up just a few times early on; some will come up many times in your relationship.

So which “Fs” are potential dealbreakers? Here are the most common.

**Faith.** One of the most important issues you need to settle early in your relationship is the question of whether you two can both prosper as members of the same church. Do you believe the same things about the Bible? Do you both value the same things in a church?

Consider *doctrinal differences*. John is a Baptist and Betty is Presbyterian. They dated for a long time before they bothered to even talk about their doctrinal differences. Baptism seems like such a secondary issue, right?

Well, it’s true that baptism is not a gospel issue. But doctrinal distinctives will define where you can go to church—and John’s leading this relationship into unnecessary heart-ache. Late in the relationship, your emotional attachment to each other is going to make it really hard to honestly assess what the Bible says.

I know this may sound pretty intense, but you may find it useful to walk through your church’s statement of faith together. Or maybe read through something like Grudem’s *Systematic Theology* together. Figure out what you believe and how tightly you each hold to those beliefs.

And a couple should consider their *church preferences*. Julie goes to First Baptist. Her church has traditional hymns, long prayers, and dense expositional sermons. She’s really grown in her church. Matt goes to Redemption Church, which values contemporary music, a fast-paced service, and sermons that are short and practical. His church talks a lot about social action. He loves his church. And he doesn’t like Julie’s church. Well, if they can’t figure out how they can be happy in the same church, they need to break up.

Are you both members of this church? Congratulations! Already, from day one of your relationship you’ve got an answer this all-important question. Yes: you can both prosper in the same church. That makes everything so much easier going forward.

And I hope this goes without saying, but Scripture is very clear in 1 Corinthians 6 and 7 that Christians can only marry other Christians. If you’re even asking whether he or she is really a Christian, you have no business dating.

**Family**

In the category of family, an important potential deal-breaker is your views on gender roles in marriage. To enter a marriage assuming you’re on the same page on this issue only to find out that you’re not could lead to a great deal of friction in how you make decisions, raise kids, spend money, and care for each other. So, it’s worthwhile to understand what the Scriptures say and how you apply that truth.

The Bible affirms that men and women are equal in dignity because they’re both created in God’s image. And it also affirms that God has assigned men and women different roles both in the home and church. In these roles we *complement* each other rather than competing with each other.

So, at the very beginning the husband was given the responsibility to compassionately lead, provide for and protect his wife. She’s given a role that complements the man’s is his helper and source of strength for him to carry out his responsibilities. This is her primary orientation. That means that while this doesn’t specifically say *what* she does with her time (e.g. when she’s a mom, does she hold another job or not), it says *how* she does those things (she is a helper to her husband).

Do you agree with what Scripture says about these roles? Where in Scripture do your beliefs come from? And—this is important—to what extent are you comfortable with them? It’s just fine to proceed by faith here. As in “honestly, this feels oppressive to me, but it’s clear in Scripture so I’m going to trust God on this one.” But if that’s where you’re at, talk about it.

At this stage it’s good to talk about how you envision these roles operating in your life. Sometimes couples are quick to talk about what they *don’t* believe about these roles instead of what they *do* believe or assume. Like, “I don’t believe that this obligates a woman to quit her job once she gets married.” OK, fair enough. Hardly anyone would dispute that. But what *do* you assume about your marriage? If you really can’t picture working after you become a mom, talk about that! If you’ve always hoped that your wife will homeschool your kids, talk about that! Just because Scripture doesn’t *require* something doesn’t mean it can’t be important to you.

A similar deal-breaker at this stage is discussion about children. If you want to get married, you need to be open to children. But is that a desire that comes naturally, or is it a struggle of faith? Do you picture having a big family or a small family? How much have you thought about how you’ll discipline your kids? Would you consider adoption? Is there some medical reason why as a married couple you probably won’t be able to get pregnant? These are good things to talk about early in your relationship.

**Finances**

In the “deal-breaker” stage of your relationship, the main financial topic is debt. If one of you has a large amount of unsecured debt (like student loans or credit card debt), now is the time to talk about it. Talk about what you’ll do about that debt if you get married.

**Future**

Also at the beginning of your relationship, you need to talk about any fixed ideas you have for your future. Does one of you plan on being in the military? Going into politics? Being a missionary? Being a pastor? Living overseas? Living an especially simple life? Raising your kids in your hometown? If you have well-formed preferences about your future, this is the time to talk about them.

**Feedback**

One of the best things you can do at this stage of your relationship is to not just talk with each other about these things, but with others who know you both well. They may see deal-breakers quickly that you’ll take weeks or months to figure out.

*Questions?*

**IV. Quality of your relationship**

But let’s say you get beyond these initial deal-breakers. What do you talk about now? Let me give you some more Fs—some of which we’ve seen already.

**Fun**

When you say “I do,” you don’t merely intend to *tolerate* each other for the rest of your earthly lives—but to enjoy doing it. It helps if you have common interests. But much more than simply enjoying the same things is enjoying time with each other. If you don’t, then it’s okay to say “no thanks” to the relationship. Sometimes people seem like a perfect match on paper, but there’s just no spark in the relationship. If that’s the case, you’ve got some hard thinking to do. Maybe the problem is that you’re not attracted to the right things. In which case perhaps you need to give the relationship some more time and see what develops. But if your enjoyment of each other isn’t growing with time, you should probably call it quits.

**Friendship**

If you get married, your spouse will be your best friend for the rest of your life. So your boyfriend or girlfriend needs to be a good friend *long before* they becomes your spouse. So talk about your friendship. What do you enjoy about your friendship? In what ways does your friendship need to grow?

**Faith**

Faith is still an important thing to talk about at this stage. But what you talk about is going to change. Less about what you believe, and more about what kind of Christian you are—both individually and together. So talk about your personal walk with Christ. What kinds of spiritual struggles do you tend toward? What things in the Christian life come easily and which are more of a challenge for you? What areas of ministry do you enjoy? Hospitality? Evangelism to international students? Discipling? A focus on unreached peoples?

And talk about how your spiritual lives fit together. Is it easy for you to talk together about spiritual things? In what way do you find that your boyfriend of girlfriend helps you follow Christ better? Do you enjoy serving together?

**Family**

I think there are two main areas of a potential family life that you want to explore during this stage of your relationship.

*Your relationship*

Talk about how the leader/follower and initiator/responder roles are working out in your relationship. As time progresses, does she feel that he’s understanding her better and leading better as a result? Does she find him easier to trust with time? Does he enjoy leading with her good in mind? Does she feel she is becoming a real help and support to him in how he leads the relationship?

*Your families of origin*

You can learn a lot about each other by talking about the families you were raised in. Like it or not, they have a huge influence on you. Some of us go into relationships wanting to be like our parents, and some of us go into relationships *fearing* that we’ll be our parents. Both are important things to discuss.

Talk about what kind of relationship you hope to have with your families if you get married. If one of you comes from an abusive or manipulative home, talk about the boundaries the guy intends to set to protect his wife and your marriage while still honoring your parents.

We’ll talk more about your relationship with his/her family later in the course. But let me point out that ideally, you’re developing a *relationship* with your families at this stage. All this discussion isn’t just in the abstract.

**Finances**

Beyond financial deal-breaker conversations, you should talk about the role that money plays in your life.

* You’ll want to talk about your financial *values*. How much do you value giving? Staying out of debt? Saving?
* You’ll want to talk about your financial *habits*. What do you tend to spend money on? What do you avoid spending money on? Is one of you hyper-generous and the other hyper-frugal? How will those qualities fit together in marriage? We need to really careful here because it’s so easy to take matters of Christian liberty and turn them into self-righteous rules. I don’t think any of us fully appreciate how much the money habits of our families have imprinted themselves on us. So one family spends freely on food; another on travel. It’s really easy for the girlfriend from the foody family to be appalled at the guy’s vacation habits—and for the guy to be appalled at the kind of restaurants she likes. Even though they may end up spending exactly the same amount. Beware of our tendency to self-righteous judgment—but also talk about how these habits can merge into a family. Will you just spend a ton on travel *and* food? That hardly seems like a good idea.
* You’ll want to talk about your financial *struggles*. Where are you tempted? Do you save out of fear or faith? And so forth.

**Future**

You’re going to continue talking about your future, all through the relationship. Hopefully you’re beginning to get a better feel for how your lives might merge in marriage.

**Fights**

The difference between good and bad marriages is not that good marriages don’t struggle. They *do* struggle. In fact, they fight just as much (maybe more) than bad marriages. The difference between good and bad marriages is that the good ones know how to handle conflict in a Christ-like, respectful, and humble way.

What kind of fighters are you? Who gets passive? Who’s aggressive? Who’s a yeller? Who retreats into their shell? Is the guy learning to lead through disagreement?

One thing that’s useful is to observe which of you is an internal processor and which of you is an external processor. That is, who tends to think things through very carefully before speaking and who thinks out loud? I’ve counseled dozens of couples through premarital counseling, and I’ve hardly ever seen a couple get married without one spouse being an internal processor and one being an external processor. So talk about how that internal / external processor dynamic works in your relationship. What does it teach you about how you manage through conflict?

**Feedback**

Once again, we need to talk through all of this not just with each other, but with others who know us well. It’s good to get feedback in two areas in particular:

* Where do your friends think you’re well-matched and where do they think you’ll struggle?
* What counsel do your friends have for problem areas in your relationship? It’s tough to discern which problems should move you toward breaking up, which are simply growing pains in the relationship, and which are issues you’ll never fully resolve but that won’t prevent you from having a perfectly wonderful and happy marriage. Don’t rely on your own judgment to figure this out; talk with married couples who know you well and see what they think. Depending on their own marriage, your parents may be helpful here—even if they’re not believers.

**V. Deal-breakers (late-stage)**

So you’ve been dating for a few months, and it’s really looking like you might get married. Scary, right? And exhilarating! There’s probably just a handful of issues standing in the way, and your question isn’t so much “should we get married” anymore, but “why would we *not* get married?”

So what do you talk about now?

Well, mainly, you talk about those specific deal-breakers. They could be in any of the categories we’ve already discussed. Talk about them not just with each other, but with other couples who know you well.

But in addition, let me mention two additional “Fs” for this late stage.

**Foolishness**

It’s important to talk about sin you’ve struggled with. Why? Because it’s important that the other person actually knows who they are marrying. No secrets. Don’t hide your sin. Your goal is to become one flesh (Gen 2:24), and you can’t do that if you let sin get in the way. In fact, if your sin is a serious potential deal-breaker for the relationship, you should already have shared that earlier on. But by now, your goal is to come clean about everything—even if you’re pretty sure your confession isn’t going to end the relationship.

*Current Foolishness.*  Foolishness that is *on-going* needs to be discussed in some detail because it has implications for the *immediate* relationship.  You need wisdom to know how much detail to discuss, so talk with a wise married person before you to talk to your boyfriend or girlfriend. You’ll need communicate enough details so they’ll know: (1) how to be an ally with you against your on-going sin; and (2) if they want to marry into this problem.  Every husband and wife has problems (because everyone is a sinner!), but one of the choices you make in picking a spouse is which set of problems you *choose* to get married to.

*Past Foolishness.* Significant sin from a previous season of life.

Sexual sins are the most common sins people need to share about their past, but other sins also fit in this category (financial mismanagement, addiction, eating disorders, etc.). *Most people are scared to share because they fear rejection.* But if we’re honest, and if God has already forgiven us, your future spouse can also forgive you for your sins. God has first forgiven us, and that overflows to our forgiving others (Eph. 4:32).

When you share with your boyfriend or girlfriend, a general rule of thumb is to be more general and not specific about your past sin. There’s rarely a need to go into specific detail. Sometimes we buy into the lie that knowing more about a past sin of my potential future spouse will help me get beyond it—which just isn’t true. You may think that more detail about your boyfriend’s past sexual relationship will make you feel more secure in his affection, but I promise you it won’t. Your security will come through your trust in his character and God’s perfect care for you, not the details of his past. Share enough detail to communicate the nature of the sin-- what it was, and when it happened in your life. After that, seek their forgiveness and move on.

In regards to sexual sin from the past, we break it down into three categories: (1) Pornography; (2) Premarital sex; (3) Scandalous sins – like buying or selling sex. For pornography and premarital sex, be more general about your past sins. For more scandalous sexual sins, you probably need to go into more detail and let them ask any questions they want. And these scandalous sins are probably the ones you should have shared earlier in your relationship. But just because your sins were scandalous doesn’t mean they’re beyond forgiveness. But it likely means that forgiveness will be a longer process. Meaning, the words “I forgive you” don’t as much mean “I’m OK with that and I can move on” as much as “I’m committed to beginning to grapple with what’s happened *so* that we can move on.”

Being this vulnerable is really hard. Please realize though, your future spouse would much more prefer *honesty* instead of *lying*. Hiding your past is lying to them. When you get married, you expect that you know your spouse. And being vulnerable about past sin sets a good pattern for openness and honesty in the relationship. Aside from that, if those struggles return, a spouse equipped with knowledge about your past problems can more readily help you fight them. Rather than simultaneously coming to grips with your past *and* trying to help you in the present.

As your boyfriend or girlfriend confesses his/her past sins, consider this: Does he live *now* in a way that realistically takes into account his past sins and struggles? For example, consider a young man who struggled with pornography in his past, but doesn’t have any protective software on his computer or accountability with friends? Is he foolish and ignorant about the power of sin? His girlfriend shouldn’t stay in the relationship if his attitude towards his sin doesn’t change.

**Fears**

The second thing you want to talk about, especially at this stage, is the fear you each have about getting engaged. Why? Well, sometimes you may be able to share information that helps to alleviate fear. Or if the fear seems irrational, to help your boyfriend or girlfriend trust God rather than giving into fear. But in addition, you need to know where the other person tends toward fear in your relationship so that you can be mindful of that in how you lead (if you’re the guy) or in how you support him (if you’re the girl).

When you’re sharing your fears, it’s a good idea to label how significant they really are. If it’s something that you know is irrational, but you just can’t push it out of your head, explain that. If it’s something that you think could keep you from getting married, explain that too. A lot of miscommunication can happen when we sense fear in the other person and treat it as a bigger deal than it really is. And a lot of miscommunication can happen when we stew on our fears rather than talking about them. Remember, perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). Ultimately, that’s God’s love for us—but as a reflection of that, our love for each other can deliver us from fear as well.

*Questions?*

Next week: what to look for in a potential spouse.