RELATIONSHIP GOALS

NEWSOUL GROUPS CURRICULUM

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WEEK 1: BECOME THE STANDARD YOU SET

Written by Matthew Taylor

Scripture:

"First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."
– Matthew 7:3-5

"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ… Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." – Ephesians 5:21, 25

"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." – Galatians 5:22-23

Focus: You cannot control who someone else becomes, but you can take responsibility for who you are becoming.

Key Points: Developing identity, emotional health, and purpose without expecting a relationship to complete you.

One of my greatest frustrations is wishing I had the power to change people. I want to change people in church who are

currently making poor decisions. I wish I could snap my fingers and make them wise.

I want to change my kids. Part of growing up is maturing and learning wisdom, but sometimes I wish I could download maturity directly into their souls.

And if I'm completely honest, there have been times when I wanted to change my spouse. Not because Sally isn't the best, but because there is a selfish part of me that wants her to conform to my ways—to think like me, respond like me, and do things the way I would do them.

Most of us would never say, "I want to control my spouse." We simply say things like: "I just wish they were more responsible."

I wish they communicated like I do.

I wish they cared about this as much as I do.

I wish they would finally understand.

I wish they would change.

Sometimes what we call "helping" is actually an attempt to make another person more like us.

WE OFTEN WANT GOD TO CHANGE OUR SPOUSE WHILE GOD IS TRYING TO CHANGE US

If there is one thing I have learned after seventeen years of marriage—and time flies when you're having fun—it is this: **I can't change Sally. But I can change Matthew.**

Ephesians 5:21 gives instructions for how husbands and wives should treat one another. It begins with:

“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

It then teaches wives about honoring and submitting to their husbands and commands husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church. Notice what the passage does not say.

It does not tell husbands to force their wives to submit. It does not tell wives to force their husbands to love sacrificially. God gives each person instructions concerning *their own obedience*.

My assignment is not to control Sally’s response. My assignment is to love her faithfully and sacrificially. Sally’s obedience belongs to Sally, and Matthew’s obedience belongs to Matthew.

GOD’S WORD IS FIRST A MIRROR FOR ME—NOT A WEAPON TO USE AGAINST SOMEONE ELSE

It is much easier to identify what our spouse needs to change than to recognize what God wants to change in us. But God often begins transforming a marriage by transforming one person who is willing to take responsibility.

HOW TO BECOME THE STANDARD YOU SET

1. Stop trying to control what is not yours to control.

Galatians 6:5 says, “*For each one should carry their own load.”* You can communicate what you need. You can establish healthy boundaries. You can confront destructive behavior. You can invite someone to grow. But you cannot control another person’s heart. You cannot force someone to become:

Spiritually mature.
Emotionally healthy.
Affectionate.
Responsible.
Honest.
Communicative.
Loving.

Trying to control someone normally produces resentment, defensiveness, or secrecy—not genuine transformation.

2. Pressure may change someone's behavior temporarily, but only God can transform the heart.

Of course, this does not mean ignoring serious problems. Abuse, manipulation, addiction, adultery, or destructive behavior require truth, boundaries, and often outside help.

But in the ordinary frustrations of marriage, we must learn the difference between inviting growth and demanding conformity.

3. Look in the mirror before looking across the room.

Matthew 7:3 says, *"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?"*

Jesus is not saying we should never help another person. He is teaching us to begin with honest self-examination.

Before asking, "Why doesn't my spouse communicate better?" ask, "Am I safe to communicate with?"

Before asking, “Why isn’t my spouse more affectionate?” ask, “Have I consistently shown affection?”

Before asking, “Why doesn’t my spouse serve me?” ask, “How am I serving them?”

Before asking, “Why won’t they apologize?” ask, “When was the last time I sincerely apologized?”

The easiest faults to see are usually the ones that belong to someone else.

Healthy people take responsibility before assigning blame.

4. Love your spouse—don’t try to remodel them.

1 Corinthians 13:4-5 says, *““Love is patient, love is kind… it does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered.”*

When we marry someone, we must resist turning them into a personal renovation project. There is a difference between supporting someone’s growth and continually communicating that they are not enough.

You can love someone as they are while believing for who they can become. That is exactly how God loves us.

God’s love does not ignore our need for transformation, but neither does He withhold love until we become perfect.

Ask yourself:

Does my spouse feel accepted by me?

Do they mostly hear what I appreciate or what I want changed?

Do I celebrate their strengths?

Am I trying to make them more like Jesus—or merely more like me?

Your spouse needs a partner, not a project manager.

IF YOU ARE SINGLE: SET THE STANDARD WITHIN YOURSELF

If you are single, you may have a list of characteristics you want in a spouse. You are praying and asking God for someone who is tall, dark, handsome, beautiful, godly, emotionally healthy, financially responsible, funny, romantic, spiritually mature, and somehow still available.

Having high standards for a potential spouse is important. Who you marry will influence almost every area of your life.

But I have a question: **What standards are you setting for yourself?**

You want someone godly—but are you living a godly life? You want someone who prays—but how is your prayer life? You want someone emotionally healthy—but are you dealing with your wounds? You want someone financially responsible—but how do you manage money? You want someone faithful—but are you faithful in your current relationships and commitments?

You want someone who communicates—but have you learned to communicate honestly? Instead of only writing a list describing the person you want to marry, write a list describing the kind of spouse you want to become.

DON'T SPEND YOUR SINGLE SEASON ONLY LOOKING FOR THE RIGHT PERSON. USE IT TO BECOME A HEALTHY PERSON. BECOME WHAT YOU WANT TO ATTRACT

Why did I want to marry Sally—besides her stunning beauty?

I was attracted to her leadership, godly character, passion for ministry, strength, and calling. Those qualities connected with the leadership, character, and calling God was developing in me.

The standards within me were attracted to the standards within her.

You cannot force your future spouse to appear out of thin air. You cannot control when you meet them. But you can allow God to prepare you for the kind of relationship for which you are praying.

This is not about becoming impressive enough to earn a spouse. Marriage is not a reward for personal development, and singleness is not evidence that something is wrong with you. It is about becoming healthy and faithful whether marriage happens soon, later, or not at all.

Becoming like Jesus is not just preparation for marriage. It is the purpose of every season!

<u>Discussion Questions:</u>

1. What is one quality that attracted you to your spouse while dating but occasionally frustrates you now?
2. Why is it easier to recognize what someone else needs to change than what needs to change in us?

3. Have you ever tried to make your spouse, family member, or potential partner become more like you? What did that look like?
4. If you are married, are you asking your spouse to live by standards you are not consistently living yourself?
5. Does your spouse primarily feel appreciated by you, or evaluated by you? What might need to change?
6. How can you express a genuine need without trying to control the other person?
7. Which fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control—would most strengthen your relationships right now?
8. If you are single, what characteristics do you desire in a spouse? Are you developing those same characteristics in yourself?
9. Singles - Are you using your current season to become emotionally, spiritually, relationally, and financially healthy?
10. Complete this sentence honestly: “My relationship would become healthier if I became more _____.”

Close with this WEEKLY CHALLENGE:

Married couples: Ask your spouse this question:

1. "What is one thing I could do to love you better?"
   Listen without interrupting, explaining, defending, or correcting their answer. Then choose one practical action and follow through this week.

Singles: Write two lists:

1. The qualities you want in a future spouse.
2. The qualities you want to develop as a future spouse.

Circle one quality from the second list and make a practical plan to grow in it.

Stop waiting for someone else's transformation and begin your own.

WEEK 2: BUILDING A HEALTHY FOUNDATION

Written by Andrew Martinez

Scripture:

“Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain.” – Psalms 127:1 (NIV)

Focus: Healthy relationships are built intentionally. Before we build a we need to know what we believe, where we are going, and why we are building together.

Key Points: Foundations for a healthy relationship

Let us be honest—when we think about relationships, we often make things more complicated than they need to be. We talk about chemistry, attraction, communication styles, love languages, red flags, green flags, texting habits…etc.

Although those things matter, they should not be at the core.

But before we get into all of that, there is a basic question we should ask: “What are we actually building?”

Think about building a house. You can spend a lot of money making the house look beautiful. You can have the nicest furniture, the best kitchen, and the perfect decorations. However, if the foundation isn't solid, eventually you are going to see problems.

Relationships are the same way. You can have great chemistry with someone. You can laugh together, enjoy spending time together, and even really care about each other. But if the foundation is not healthy, eventually the cracks start showing.

Psalms 127:1 says, *“Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain.”*

That is a powerful reminder for us all. If we are going to build a relationship, we do not just want to build something that feels good. We want to build something that is good, healthy, intentional, and centered on God. We are going to keep it simple and talk about three things:

Know your values. Clarify your vision. Build with a purpose.

1. Know Your Values.

Galatians 6:5 says, “*For each one should carry their own load.”*

What really matters to you? Not what sounds good. Not what you think you're supposed to say. Not what you see on TV or social media. What actually matters to you? Your values eventually show up in your decisions. For example, you might say, “My faith is really important to me.”

Okay—but what does that look like in real life? How do you exhibit that so others know it is true? Does that mean going to church every Sunday?

Praying regularly? Serving? Making decisions based on God's Word? Being willing to forgive? Putting God before a relationship?

Our values are not just things we put on a list. They are things we live out. They are part of our character. This becomes important in relationships because you can be attracted to someone without actually being aligned with them or even compatible.

You might really like someone, only to discover that you have completely different ideas about faith, money, family, communication, commitment, or the future. And many times we ignore those differences because we're thinking: “But I really like them.”

That is where we have to be careful. Feelings are real, but feelings **should not** be the only thing guiding our relationships.

Here is something worth asking ourselves: *“Do I know what I value before I start asking someone else to value the same things?”*

Sometimes we have a lengthy list of qualities we want in another person, but we have not stopped to ask whether we are becoming that kind of person ourselves.

If I want honesty, am I honest?

If I want someone who communicates well, do I communicate well?

If I want someone who puts God first, am I putting God first?

That is where it starts!

Know yourself. Know your values. And most importantly, know what God's Word says about the kind of person you are becoming.

Take a few minutes and write down your top 3 relationship values. Then ask yourself: Am I personally living these values?

2. Clarify your vision.

Now let us take it one step further. Once you know what matters to you, ask: “Where am I going with these values? How do they shape/guide my direction?” This is where vision comes in.

Imagine getting into a car with someone and they say, “Let's go!”

You ask, “Where?”

And they say: “I do not know. We will figure it out.”

You might think, “Okay… but at least tell me which direction we are going!”

Sometimes relationships can work like that. We are spending time together. We are getting closer. We are emotionally invested.

But nobody has actually talked about where the relationship is going. Eventually, one of you starts asking: “So… what are we?” And suddenly it’s awkward.

Healthy relationships need **clarity.** That does not mean you have to have your entire future planned out on the first date. It simply means that at some point, we should be able to have honest conversations about direction.

- What does marriage mean to us?
- Do we both want marriage?
- What does following Jesus together look like?
- What are our thoughts about family?
- How do we handle money?
- How do we deal with conflict?

These conversations are not meant to scare us. They are meant to help us understand whether we are actually intentionally walking in the same direction.

Because here is the reality: You can love someone and still not be headed in the same direction. And love does not automatically solve a lack of vision or create one. That is why clarity is so important.

We should not just ask: “Do I like this person?” We should also ask: “Can we build the kind of future we are both hoping for?”

Think about one area where you need more clarity in your expectations for relationships—faith, marriage, family, finances, communication, boundaries, or something else.

3. Build With a Purpose.

Now here is the big one: “Why are we building this relationship?”

It is easy for relationships to become all about what we want.

“I want someone who makes me happy.”

“I do not want to be lonely.”

“I want someone who understands me.”

“I want someone who supports my dreams.”

And although there is nothing wrong with wanting those things, as Christians, we are called to think bigger than ourselves. A healthy relationship is not just about: “What can you do for me?” It’s also: “How can we help each other grow closer to God?”

That is a completely different mindset. What if the goal of a relationship was not simply to make us happy?
What if the goal was also to help us become more like Jesus?

What if we were building a relationship where we could encourage each other, challenge each other, pray for each other, serve together, and point each other back to God! That's purpose!

And purpose does not mean your relationship has to look impressive. It does not mean you need to have some huge ministry together. Sometimes purpose looks very simple. It might look like creating a peaceful home. Raising children who know Jesus. Serving your church. Being generous. Supporting each other's God-given calling.

Actually be the kind of couple that makes people around you think: “There's something different about the way they love each other.” That is what we are talking about. We do not want to build a relationship that looks good on the outside. We want to build something that God can use.

And that is why Psalms 127:1 matters so much: *“Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain.”*

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some values that are really important to you in a relationship?
2. What are some values that you did not realize were important until you experienced a relationship or situation where they were challenged?
3. When you think about a healthy, Christ-centered relationship, what does it look like to you?
4. What do you think God wants a relationship to accomplish beyond simply making two people happy?
5. How could a relationship help two people grow spiritually and become more like Christ?

Closing:

“God, thank You for the relationships You have placed in our lives. Give us wisdom to know what matters, courage to have honest conversations, and patience to build relationships the right way. Help us not to be controlled only by our feelings, but to be led by Your Word and Your Spirit. Show us where we need to grow personally, and help us become people who love well, communicate well, forgive well, and honor You. We invite You to be the foundation of every relationship we build. In Jesus' name, Amen.”

WEEK 3: TECHNOLOGY, BOUNDARIES, AND DESIRE

Written by Hector Mancha

Scripture:

I have the right to do anything," you say, but not everything is beneficial. I have the right to do anything", but I will not be mastered by anything. – 1 Corinthians 6:12

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity…" – Ephesians 5:3

Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." **–** Proverbs 4:23

Focus: Learning to follow Jesus faithfully in a digital world by establishing healthy boundaries around dating apps, pornography, social media, direct messages, emotional relationships, and sexual desire.

Key Points:

- Anything we repeatedly give access to our hearts can begin shaping our desires.
- Biblical purity is bigger than simply avoiding sex outside marriage.
- Boundaries are not punishment, they are wisdom.

- Emotional unfaithfulness can develop long before physical unfaithfulness.
- Secrecy gives temptation power, confession and community bring things into the light.
- Christian freedom asks more than “Is this allowed?” It asks, “Is this forming me into the person Jesus is calling me to become?”

Technology has changed relationships dramatically. Previous generations did not carry unlimited access to entertainment, pornography, dating prospects, former relationships, private conversations, and thousands of people in their pockets twenty-four hours a day. We do. That doesn't make technology evil. But it does mean discipleship has to reach into our digital lives.

Paul writes: *I will not be mastered by anything.” – 1 Corinthians 6:12.*

That is an incredibly relevant question for the digital age. What has mastery over me? Can I put my phone down? Can I stop scrolling? Can I delete the app? Can I end the conversation? Can I resist looking? Far too often we accept what has become normalized in society and culture and fail to see the lack of boundaries and unhealthy habits that have been created.

Proverbs 4:23 says, *Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”*

Our digital habits are not spiritually neutral. What we repeatedly watch, follow, search, like, fantasize about, and

communicate with shapes us. Jesus goes beneath behavior and addresses desire itself.

In Matthew 5:28, He says: *Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."* Jesus cares about what is happening inside us, not simply what we have physically done. Our Christian faith therefore cannot be reduced to: "How far is too far?" A better question is: "What is this producing in my heart?" Is it producing love or lust? Contentment or comparison? Self control or compulsion? Faithfulness or secrecy? Technology often promises connection while quietly training us toward consumption. This is why boundaries are necessary when it comes to living in a digital age.

1. The lie of Pornography.

Pornography is particularly destructive because it trains sexual desire away from covenant and toward consumption. Biblically, sexual desire itself is not evil. God created sexuality. But Scripture consistently places sexual intimacy within the covenant of marriage, where sexuality becomes connected to faithfulness, sacrifice, intimacy, vulnerability, and commitment. Pornography separates sexual gratification from all of those things. There is no covenant. No sacrifice. No responsibility. No mutual intimacy.

The other person becomes something to consume rather than someone to love.

Paul writes*, It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality."* – 1 Thessalonians 4:3.

The Christian life is not simply behavior modification. It is sanctification. God wants to transform our desires. That is why simply promising, “I'll never do it again,” often isn't enough. We have to ask deeper questions.

When am I most vulnerable? When I'm lonely? Stressed? Angry? Rejected? Bored?Tired? What am I actually searching for when I turn toward this? Freedom requires that we address the sinful behavior. The bible teaches us the freedom comes from repentance and confession.

James 5:16 says, “*Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed*.” One of pornography's greatest weapons is secrecy. We sin. Then we feel shame. Shame tells us to hide. Isolation makes us vulnerable. We fall again. Then we hide even more. Repentance and confession interrupts this cycle and moves us towards the pathway of transformation and sanctification. It means we refuse to build a life around hiding. There should be people in your Christian community who know the real condition of your soul. Not so they can condemn you. So they can walk with you toward Jesus.

2. Digital boundaries are relational boundaries.

Pornography is not the only digital danger. Many times the relationship that crosses a boundary never begins physically. It begins with a notification. A private message. A reply to a story. An old friend reconnecting. A coworker who understands you. A conversation you begin looking forward to. None of those things

automatically constitutes sin. But emotional intimacy develops gradually. And this is where wisdom becomes important.

Ask yourself: Would I be comfortable if my spouse or the person I am dating read this conversation? Why am I looking forward to hearing from this person so much? Am I sharing things with them that should primarily be shared with my spouse? Would I communicate differently if someone else were standing beside me?

Am I hiding, deleting, minimizing, or explaining away the relationship? Secrecy is often a warning light. We rarely wake up one morning and decide to destroy a relationship.

Compromise usually happens one small decision at a time. That is why boundaries should be established before emotions become involved. Many people establish boundaries after something goes wrong. Wisdom establishes them beforehand. Joseph gives us a powerful picture in Genesis 39.

When Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce him, Joseph doesn't remain in the room and see how strong his self-control is.

Genesis 39:12 says, *He left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house.*" Sometimes the most mature response to temptation is not fighting longer, it's leaving sooner. Paul tells Timothy: *Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace…"* – 2 Timothy 2:22.

Christian holiness isn't simply removing sinful things. It is replacing them with something better. We don't simply pursue less pornography. We pursue purity. We don't simply pursue fewer inappropriate messages. We pursue faithfulness. We don't simply

pursue less screen time. We pursue presence. We don't simply pursue less lust. We pursue self-control. The goal of boundaries is not just restriction. The goal is freedom and sanctification.

3. The consumer and comparison mindset.

One of the most subtle ways technology affects our relationships isn't simply through pornography or inappropriate conversations. Technology can change the way we see people. We live in a consumer culture. If you don't like the movie, choose another one.

If you don't like the restaurant, find another one. If you don't like the song, skip it.

If you don't like what you're watching, swipe. Swipe left, swipe right, scroll…There is nothing inherently wrong with having choices. But if we aren't careful, a consumer mindset can move from how we interact with products to how we interact with people. Dating apps can unintentionally reinforce this mindset.

Swipe. Swipe. Swipe. Too short. Not attractive enough. Wrong job. Don't like their clothes. Maybe there's someone better. If we're not careful, dating can begin to feel less like getting to know another person and more like shopping for the person who best satisfies our preferences.

Paul writes, *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others*." – Philippians 2:3–4.

Covenant relationships cannot flourish with a consumer mentality. A consumer relationship says, “I am committed as long as you continue meeting my expectations.” Biblical covenant says: “I am choosing faithfulness even when loving you costs me something.”

Marriage certainly requires wisdom, mutual responsibility, healthy boundaries, and safety. Covenant is never permission for abuse or destructive behavior. But healthy relationships eventually require something consumer culture struggles to understand, commitment. This may be one of technology's greatest effects on desire.

When we constantly consume extraordinary images, ordinary life can begin to feel inadequate. Normal bodies don't look attractive enough. Normal marriages don't look romantic enough. Eventually comparison creeps in and we view the world through our digital lens. We can become dissatisfied with something good because we continually compare it to something curated.

2 Corinthians 10:12 says, When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.”

It is no longer a question of should we have boundaries with technology, but instead a question of is this pushing me closer to becoming like Christ?

Discussion Questions: Split Men & Women

1. What boundaries have you established or need to establish to protect your purity and relationships?
2. Where is the line between a normal friendship with someone of the opposite sex and emotional unfaithfulness? What warning signs tell you the relationship may be crossing a boundary?
3. Which area of technology presents the greatest challenge for healthy relationships today? Pornography, dating apps, social media, private messages, comparison, or something else? Why?
4. Why do you think secrecy gives sexual sin and unhealthy relationships so much power?

Closing Application:

1. Audit Your Digital Life

Ask yourself honestly, what accounts consistently create lust, comparison, jealousy, or dissatisfaction in me? What apps consume more of me than they should? Where am I most tempted toward secrecy?

2. Move From Secrecy to Community

Find someone mature and trustworthy enough to know where you struggle. Accountability isn't surveillance. It is refusing to fight alone. Who can you build Godly relationships with to help you fight? Write their names down and set up a coffee or lunch.

3. Ask a Deeper Question

Instead of constantly asking, “Is this technically wrong?” Begin asking, “Is this pushing me closer or further from Jesus?” Evaluate your digital life through that lens.

Pray with one another.

WEEK 4: THE BAGGAGE CHECK

Written by Samuel & Ivy Rodriguez

Scripture:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." – Matthew 6:25 (NIV)

Focus: Baggage comes from what we believe about ourselves.

Key Points: Try placing a piece of paper on the ground and write either a 6 or a 9 on it. Stand on one side of that paper and have someone else stand on the opposite side. Ask each person what the number is based on their perspective. Who is right and who is wrong?

Perspective can be a powerful tool in shaping how we experience life.

Samuel's Perspective: I grew up in a stable and successful home. My parents shared stories of their childhood poverty but never had to experience that myself. My parents are still married and best friends 40 years later. My sisters and I all love each other and we have healthy and wonderful marriages.

Divorce and physical abuse were things that happened in movies. This is what I was exposed to growing up. This is what I observed and believed to be normal. A husband is devoted to his wife, he loves, works hard and provides.

Someday I'm going to love and provide for my bride. Someday I'm going to be the best father, just like my father was for me.

Ivy's Perspective: I was raised by a young single mother who had little to no support from most of her family. My family upbringing was very hectic, there were many broken marriages, infidelity, abuse and domestic violence. We grew up in scarcity and insecurity for most of my upbringing, really the only constant was my mom. As the eldest of three, I saw much of what my mom had to go through to get us to a safe place which made me grow up quickly. My view on life was pretty dime, with little hope of dreaming big and constantly waiting for the heartache or disappointment.

Needless to say, I never hoped to get married or even have children but by God's grace my story did not stay in despair but rather in living hope.

Insecurity plagued the first several years of our marriage. We had the same arguments over the years. Accusations of infidelity, accusations that Samuel didn't really love Ivy, accusations that he did not want to be married to Ivy. I remember getting to the point of telling Ivy, "I exhausted trying to convince you that I love you". Ivy

believed these lies because she was carrying baggage from her childhood.

For Ivy, that baggage made sense. That was how the world told her things were supposed to be. She perceived the baggage was validated through her childhood experiences. What changed in Ivy's life was a miracle called salvation. No matter what the baggage is, the Blood of Jesus is more powerful.

When we gave our lives to Christ, we were born again. The old things, the old identity, the old baggage passed. God wants to provide for his children, and this includes taking that baggage off your shoulders. Often, we are the ones standing in His way.

When you find yourself believing something about yourself that is critical or negative, it is often rooted in baggage. Somewhere, somehow, you may have believed a falsehood about yourself. Now you have a decision to make: "I am going to believe my perspective or what God says about this?"

"*I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness."* – Jeremiah 31:3

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." – Romans 8:1

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither

height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” – Romans 8: 38-39

So. A little more about Baggage.

1. Baggage comes from years of our experiences and perspectives.

Life had taught me (Ivy) that marriage was a means to an end. It was not treasured and was not something lasting. Moreover, marriage in my experience often meant infidelity and abandonment.

As a result, I never longed to be married and my friendships were very shallow. I was scared for being vulnerable, I was terrified of being rejected.

2. You must be aware and pursue change.

2 Corinthian 5:7 says, "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”*

My view on both marriage and friendships was wrong yet I couldn’t see it because it was all I knew. I had become accustomed to it and even comfortable in my negative view. It wasn’t until I surrendered my life to Christ, that His Holy Spirit began to soften my hard heart to see how broken my view was.

It was only with the help of God and His people (the church) that I began to walk in freedom. You see, God wants us to live in freedom, not bound to old ways of thinking or being but truly set free.

3. **You must start internally with Christ and allow Him to take your baggage.**

"*Cast your cares on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken."* – Psalm 55:22

It was easier for me to continue living guarded and insecure, in fact it become what felt safe but it was only hurting me more. I was consistently skeptical of everyone and never trusted others. In laying down my life and my "securities" to God, He replaced it with true assurance. He's got me and no matter what may come I am His. He really will be the only one to sustain me and hold me.

I can trust him to protect me and be my guard. In believing God and trusting him, that old stuff I was carrying, doesn't hold me down anymore. I am not shaken anymore by the temptation of believing the lies, instead my heart and mind are filled with God's truths.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are things you believe about yourself which are critical or negative? What baggage to you carry?
2. Think and if comfortable, share about a time when you were guarded or rejected a friend because of the baggage you were carrying?
3. How would you redo that scenario today if you had a second chance?

Closing:

It is God's heart to set the captive free and bring you to himself. He genuinely loves you and wants you to walk in freedom, free from the bondage and baggage of the past.

Will you accept his invitation to walk freely by walking in your new identity as a son or daughter of the one true king? Life begins anew as you lay your old self, your old baggage down and pick up your cross and follow Him.

WEEK 5: FRIENDSHIP: THE FORGOTTEN RELATIONSHIP

Written by Matthew Taylor

Scripture:

"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends… I have called you friends."– John 15:12–15

"One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." –– Proverbs 18:24

"As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." – Proverbs 27:17

Focus: Building meaningful community and avoiding the belief that romantic relationships are the only path to intimacy.

Key Points: God never designed us to discover our purpose, experience healing, or follow Jesus, alone.

What if I told you that the purpose of life is relationships? Would you believe me, or would that statement feel too strong?

When Jesus was asked to identify the greatest commandment, He answered relationally: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind…*

And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.” – Matthew 22:37–39.

Jesus said everything God desires for us hangs on two relationships:

Our relationship with God.

Our relationships with others.

The Christian Life is deeply personal, but it was never meant to be private.

One of the most important—and often most neglected—relationships in our lives is friendship. We spend a lot of time talking about marriage, dating, parenting, and family. Those relationships matter deeply, but friendship is often the foundation underneath all of them.

My wife was my best friend before she was my lover. That foundation of friendship has brought so much joy, strength, and health into our marriage. Romance may create attraction, but friendship creates connection.

If I can be transparent, there was a season when I gave up on friendship. After experiencing heartache, betrayal, and unhealthy relationships, friendship began to feel like more trouble than it was worth. I didn’t consciously decide that I would never have friends again. I simply started building walls. Deep down, my fear of being hurt or betrayed was changing me. I became a more cynical, guarded, and insecure version of myself. Walls may keep some pain out, but they also keep love out.

The same walls that protect us from being hurt can also prevent us from being known.

But God has a strange and beautiful way of finding us and healing us.

My restoration began with a Bible college classmate named Jimmy. A couple of times a week, Jimmy and I would sit down for coffee between classes and talk. At first, most of the talking came from Jimmy. He would openly share about his life, his struggles, and what God was doing in him.

After weeks and months of conversations, Jimmy began confronting my lack of vulnerability. He noticed that I would listen to everything he shared without ever really letting him into my life.

Slowly, I began to open up. The walls started coming down. Through that friendship, I began to rediscover the tender and warm version of myself that had been buried behind years of pain. What started with Jimmy soon spread to other relationships. I opened up to people again. I made friends again. I laughed again.

Matthew was back.

God used a friendship to restore something in me that isolation had stolen. Sometimes God heals us in His presence. Sometimes He heals us through another person. Often, He does both at the same time.

Friendship is worth the risk.

I'm not going to lie friendships aren't always easy.

They take time and work. Sometimes they feel one-sided.

People disappoint us. And yes, every meaningful friendship creates the possibility of hurt and betrayal. But friendship is still worth it. You cannot experience the joy of being fully known, while refusing the risk of being vulnerable.

Friendship is one of the greatest forms of intimacy we can experience.

If you're single, don't fool yourself into believing that marriage will replace your need for friendship. If you're married, your spouse cannot satisfy every relational need in your life. That is too much weight to place on one person.

Marriage should contain friendship, but marriage should not eliminate every other friendship. Building healthy, God-honoring friendships can be life-changing and destiny-altering.

Some of God's greatest gifts, will come into your life through people.

HOW TO BUILD FRIENDSHIPS AND BE A GOOD FRIEND

1. You have to be available.

Proverbs 18:2 says, "*A man who has friends must himself be friendly."*

Friendships rarely happen by accident. Someone has to initiate.

Asking someone to lunch or coffee can require the same courage as asking a cute guy or girl on a date. You risk awkwardness. You risk being told no. You risk discovering that they don't feel the same connection you do.

But it works.

Friendship requires space in your calendar. You cannot build meaningful friendships while remaining constantly busy, unavailable, or waiting for everyone else to initiate. Invite someone to lunch.

- Stay after church and have a conversation.
- Join a small group.
- Send the first text.
- Follow up when someone shares something important.
- Accept invitations when you normally stay home.

You cannot pray for community while continually avoiding people.

2. Friendship requires healthy vulnerability.

James 5:16 says, "*Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."*

There is such a thing as oversharing. Not everyone has earned access to the deepest parts of your life. Healthy vulnerability is gradual and built on trust.

But without vulnerability, relationships never move beyond the surface. You can be surrounded by people and still feel completely alone because no one actually knows you.

Vulnerability means being willing to say:

"I'm struggling."

"That hurt me."

"I need prayer."

“I don’t have this figured out.”

“This is what is really happening in my life.”

Being around people, is different from being known by people. We should not share everything with everyone, but everyone needs someone with whom they can be honest.

3. Accept that some friendships are seasonal.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, “*There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.”* Some friendships last a lifetime. Others are connected to a particular season, assignment, location, or stage of life.

People move. Jobs change. Children grow. Interests shift. Sometimes friends simply begin walking in different directions.

That does not mean the friendship was fake or unsuccessful. A friendship does not have to last forever, to have been from God. Too often, we place lifetime expectations on relationships God intended for a season. We become bitter because someone did not continue into our next chapter, instead of being grateful for what God gave us through them in the last one.

Honor what the relationship was. Grieve it when necessary. Forgive where needed. Then allow God to bring the right people into your new season.

4. Be the friend you want to have.

Luke 6:31 says, *“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”*

We often have long lists describing the kind of friend we want but rarely stop to ask whether we are becoming that kind of friend. Good friendship is not only something you find, but also something you become.

- If you want loyal friends, become loyal.
- If you want friends who listen, learn to listen.
- If you want people who celebrate your success, celebrate theirs.
- If you want friends who show up during difficult seasons, show up for them.
- If you want friends who initiate, stop waiting and initiate.

Friendly people tend to make more friends—not because every relationship works, but because they continually create opportunities for relationships to grow.

5. Allow different friendships to serve different purposes.

Not every friend needs to be your best friend, and not every friendship needs to be deep. I have friends I adore but only speak with once or twice a year. Yet whenever we talk, the conversation is deep and meaningful.

I have other friends who are simply fun. There may not be a lot of depth, but there is plenty of laughter. Sometimes you need those people too.

Different friends may bring different gifts into your life:

- Friends who challenge you.
- Friends who encourage you.
- Friends who pray with you.
- Friends who make you laugh.
- Friends connected to your work or calling.
- Friends who share your hobbies.
- Friends who have known you for years.

One person was never meant to meet every relational need in your life. When we expect every friendship to provide the same depth, availability, or connection, we create unnecessary disappointment.

Appreciate each relationship for what it genuinely is.

6. Don't only look for people like you.

Like romantic relationships, opposites often attract in friendship. I lean toward being an introvert, but many of my closest friends are extreme extroverts. It just seems to work that way sometimes.

Put two quiet people in a room and the silence can become monk-like. Put two extreme extroverts in a room and a few laws may be broken by the end of the night.

God often brings people into our lives who think differently, communicate differently, and possess strengths we do not have.

Proverbs 27:17 says**,** *"As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."*

Iron cannot sharpen iron without contact—and contact

creates friction. Not every difference is dysfunction. Sometimes the people who frustrate you are developing something in you. Healthy friendships do not merely affirm who you already are; they help you become who God has called you to be.

The best friends don't just make you feel better, they help you become better.

7. Healthy friendship needs both grace and boundaries.

Proverbs 4:23 states, *"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."*

Being a good friend does not mean tolerating manipulation, control, abuse, or dishonor.

Grace forgives people. Boundaries determine what access they have to your life. You can love someone without trusting them immediately. You can forgive someone without returning the relationship to the way it was. Trust can be broken quickly, but it is rebuilt through repentance, consistency, and time.

Healthy friendship requires:

- Honesty without cruelty.
- Loyalty without enabling.
- Grace without pretending nothing happened.
- Correction without control.
- Boundaries without bitterness.

Forgiveness is given freely, trust is rebuilt faithfully.

FRIENDSHIP CAN CHANGE YOUR DESTINY

Throughout Scripture, God used friendships to shape people's futures:

- Jonathan strengthened David during one of the darkest seasons of his life. Ruth refused to abandon Naomi.
- Barnabas believed in Paul when others were afraid of him.
- Paul discipled Timothy and called him a true son in the faith.
- Four friends carried a paralyzed man to Jesus when he could not get there himself. Jesus did not only gather followers—He called His disciples friends.

Your friendships influence your faith, decisions, habits, confidence, and future. 1 Corinthians 15:33 says, "*Bad company corrupts good character."*

If unhealthy relationships can corrupt our character, healthy relationships can help strengthen it. Godly friends remind you who you are when you forget. They confront you when you drift. They carry you when you are weak. They celebrate you without competing with you. They pray for you when you cannot find the words to pray for yourself.

Discussion Questions:

1. Growing up, was friendship easy or difficult for you? What shaped your experience?
2. Do you currently struggle with making or maintaining friendships? Why?
3. When you experience relational hurt, do you tend to withdraw, become guarded, confront the issue, or move on quickly?
4. If you are completely honest, are there walls you have built to keep people from truly knowing you? What are those walls protecting?
5. What is the difference between healthy vulnerability and oversharing? How can trust be built gradually?
6. Do you consider yourself a good friend? What is one friendship strength you possess and one area where you need to grow?
7. Have you ever expected a romantic relationship or marriage to satisfy all your relational needs? Why is that unhealthy for both people?
8. Have you experienced a friendship that was meaningful but seasonal? Is there a relationship you need to release without bitterness?
9. Which type of friendship is currently missing from your life: someone who challenges you, encourages you, prays with you, or simply has fun with you?
10. How might God use friendship as part of fulfilling your

purpose?

11. Who has God used as a “Jimmy” in your life—someone who helped bring healing, joy, confidence, or openness back into you?
12. What practical step can you take this week to begin building or strengthening a friendship?

Weekly Challenge:

Choose one:

- Invite someone to coffee or lunch.
- Reconnect with a friend you have neglected.
- Share something honest with a trusted friend.
- Apologize for where you have failed as a friend.
- Encourage a friend by telling them specifically what they mean to you. Join a group or place yourself in an environment where friendships can grow.

Don’t just wait for the friendship you want. Take a step toward becoming the friend someone else needs and see that friendship doesn’t form.

WEEK 6: CHANGE WITHOUT GROWING APART

Written by Sally Taylor

Scripture

"Then the Lord God said, It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him." So the Lord God formed from the ground all the wild animals and all the birds of the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would call them, and the man chose a name for each one. He gave names to all the livestock, all the birds of the sky, and all the wild animals. But still there was no helper just right for him. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep. While the man slept, the Lord God took out one of the man s ribs and closed up the opening. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib, and he brought her to the man. "At last!" the man exclaimed. 'This one is bone from my bone, and flesh from my flesh! She will be called woman,' because she was taken from man.'" This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one. – Genesis 2:18

Focus: How to change without growing apart.

Key points: In a Christ-centered union, the goal is not to lose your individual identity, but to give each other the space to grow together over the seasons of life while staying connected.

Have you ever found yourself worrying that you and your spouse were growing apart? I think everyone has this fear at some point in their marriage. With the fullness of life, it is easy to go our separate ways.

Sometimes it can feel like you are two passing ships. Maybe you feel like you aren't talking enough, the romance is non-existent or maybe it feels like you are becoming too different to continue on as a couple.

Sadly, this is where many people give up on marriage. We tell ourselves, "we are just too different" or "we aren't the same people we used to be."

If you have ever found yourself feeling this way, God is not done with you yet. Change is not bad. Change is part of the human journey. So what do we do when we feel the drift?

Remember that what God brought together nothing can separate. God brought you together.

In fact, your differences can actually make you stronger. The things I lack, my husband balances out and vice versa. I am more laid back and love to have fun. My husband is more disciplined and regimented. We can either try to change each other or learn from each other.

1. **Root your identity in Jesus not each other.**

When you look to your spouse for absolute fulfillment, you place a burden on them that only God can bear. This will result in unmet expectations and much frustration.

Prioritize your personal relationship with God. Abide with God and let him fill you with his love. Spending time with God in prayer, worship and scripture will naturally make you a better spouse. The holy spirit will convict you of areas like patience, kindness, gratefulness, forgiveness, etc.

Bring a full cup to the marriage. Investing in your own spiritual, intellectual, and emotional maturity ensures your spouse a healthy version of you.

2. Support each other's individual callings.

A Jesus centered marriage is a partnership of purpose. God creates each person with distinct gifts, talents, and assignments.

Be your spouse's number one fan. Ask them about their dreams and goals. Encourage and celebrate them as they pursue what God has put in their heart and in their life.

Give each other space to breathe. Allowing time for separate healthy friendships, ministry opportunities or individual hobbies keeps the relationship energized. When you both feel free to thrive independently, you return to the marriage refreshed.

3. Fight the "Drift" with radical intentionality.

- Pray together often.
- Have check-ins to make sure you are staying aligned in your values and vision as a couple.
- Try spending at least 30 minutes a day alone together (without phones) just talking and connecting.

- Learn together, try new things together, travel somewhere new together, serve in ministry together, or attend a marriage retreat. The key is to keep growing and keep connecting.
- Express gratitude often. This will increase emotional connection. Kiss each other goodbye, offer compliments, and say thank you often.

4. Learn to pivot during life transitions.

Major life changes will disrupt your established routines, shifting how you interact and testing your emotional reserves. It's important to pivot together during these seasons.

Examples of life transitions:

- Becoming a parent: this is one of the most beautiful but exhausting transitions.
- Career shifts, job loss, or financial strain
- Traumatic event
- Spiritual doubts or life struggles

Discussion Exercise:

Each couple find a space to talk through key points. Individually rate from a scale of 1-10 how you think you are doing as a couple and why you gave it that rating. This is not a time to bash each other, but to come together on ways to stay connected and feel loved.

WEEK 7: HOW TO FIGHT FAIR

Written by Samantha Ortiz

Scripture:

"*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."* – Proverbs 15:1 (NIV)

"Forgive as the Lord forgave you." – Colossians 3:13

"Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry…" – James 1:19–20

"First go and be reconciled to them." – Matthew 5:23–24

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up." – James 4:20

Focus: Basics of Biblical Confrontation and Confrontation Styles

Key Points: Managing conflict, listening well, repairing hurt, apologizing sincerely, and forgiving wisely.

Did you know that fighting can be healthy?

In the years that Robby and I have done pre-marital and marriage counseling, we've met many couples who think that the

sign of a healthy relationship, is to “never fight.” Some feel guilty when they do and others are proud if they managed to avoid it up until then.

But not only is that an unrealistic standard to maintain, but “not fighting” also often a sign of something deeper, such as an inability to be vulnerable, a lack of psychological safety, or fear of rejection.

Conflict, in general, is inevitable, and not inherently bad. It’s simply a sign that you care about something deeply, even if you and your partner are on different sides of the issue.

Sometimes it can even be healthy; when fighting is done right, the end result can be unifying, clarifying and productive. Done poorly, however, can lead to wounds and dysfunction that take a long time to heal.

In this lesson we’ll go over the basics of Biblical Confrontation, take a look at your Confrontation Styles, and peer into the benefits of a fair, healthy fight.

Basics of Biblical Confrontation

In any relationship, it takes time to learn what your partner needs from you (or doesn’t need from you!) in a confrontation. But some basics that never fail are outlined clearly in the bible. When in conflict:

1. Avoid Escalation.

You'll recognize escalating language because it will bring the temperature in the room up a few notches. Using words like, always, never, calling names, being derisive or dismissive ultimately escalate a fight. An escalated fight, almost always leads to regretted words and actions.
"*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."* – Proverbs 15:1 (NIV)

2. Do your best to listen.

Even when tempers are high, do your best to "hear" what the other is saying. Repeat it back and seek clarification. "What I hear you saying is…" It may be corny, but in the middle of conflict, it can be extremely helpful.
"Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry…" – James 1:19–20

3. Apologize sincerely

When you've done something wrong, apologize sincerely and take measures not to repeat the offense. Our own pre-marriage counselor back in the day told us to create a challenge around "who can apologize first" after every confrontation. To this day, it still comes to mind in fights and can calm to seas of the storm quickly.
Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up." – James 4:20

4. Repair hurt

Sometimes things are done and said that cause a wound. Make the repair attempts necessary until the wound is healed. This may not happen immediately but do the work (and learn for next time how holding your tongue is easier than the time it takes to recover from things you didn't mean to say).
"First go and be reconciled to them." – Matthew 5:23–24

5. Forgive wisely.
Sincere apologies are vulnerable. Do not hold the axe over the chopping block and make them wait for forgiveness. Forgive as easily as you wish to be forgiven and you'll create a safe and steady culture in your marriage.
"Forgive as the Lord forgave you." – Colossians 3:13

Confrontation styles
So, those are the basics, for the basic levels of confrontation most of us experience. But a deeper level of fighting fair is understanding your CONFRONTATION STYLE. Everyone has a confrontation style. Many times that style is learned from family members or as a result of our past.

In John Gottman's book *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail* he goes into the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse confrontation styles (because they lead to fights that feel like the end of the world), and how to work to cure them in your relationship.

1. Criticism: The first horseman is Criticism. Criticizing your partner is different than offering a critique or voicing a complaint. The latter two are about specific issues, the former is an attack on your partner at the core of their character.

Criticism Antidote: The gentle start-up. Voice your opinion, but avoid using always, never and character statements and instead, use "I" statements that keep the confrontation as factual and positive as possible. "*I was worried when you didn't let me know you were running late. I thought we'd agreed to do that."* Rather than: "*You never care about what we agreed to; you only care about yourself."*

One is productive, the other will escalate and damage.

2. Contempt: The second confrontation style is contempt. Contempt is fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about your partner. It is the single greatest cause of divorce and has the power to do lasting harm to any relationship.

Contempt Antidote: Work on building a culture of mutual respect and support, long before you get in a fight. Remind yourself of your partners' good qualities when those contemptuous thoughts start showing. You have control over the "evidence you're gathering" against your partner, positive or negative. Grievances are inevitable in a relationship.

But honor, not contempt, is of the Lord.

3. Defensiveness: We've all been defensive. It's hard to take criticism of any kind, especially if we had a particularly critical household growing up. When we feel unjustly accused, we grab for excuses and play the innocent victim as long as possible so that our partner will back off.

Defensiveness Antidote: Take responsibility for your wrongdoings and apologize. Especially if a criticism is valid, defensiveness only delays the healing. Refusing to take responsibility at all, destroys trust and psychological safety. Admitting the truth in your partner's statements (even if only parts are true) has the power to leech conflict out of the air and foster a better conversation.

4. Stonewalling: The last confrontation style is stonewalling. Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction, shuts down, and simply stops responding. This is often a sign of "fight or flight" coping mechanisms and is seen the most in those who have experienced an abusive upbringing. But it can also come about with long-standing and unresolved issues of criticism and contempt.

Stonewalling Antidote: While stonewalling is often a psychological response (something that isn't easily controlled) it is important to prioritize resolution when you've calmed down. Take a break, walk away, calmly ask for time, and then reconcile. If you're a

stonewaller naturally, establish boundaries with your partner during a fight (i.e., if I shut down, I will go to the other room for 20 minutes. I won't leave the house, but you need to give the space).

Healthy Confrontation:

The truth is, sometimes things get heated in our conversations. None of us are made the same, think the same, are same tempered, and God brings all kinds of people together under one household.

But conflict can be good when it brings up critical issues, helps inform us about the deeper thoughts and feelings of our partner, and leads us to having a more thoughtful, unified relationship going forward.

In fact, sometimes, when the fighting stops, that can be a sign that one or both of you have given up on the relationship. And that is a much worse place to be.

Next time, rather than trying to avoid the fight all together, set up parameters for a healthy fight and call each other on it within the fight. Hold each other to the new standards.

Because fighting isn't bad. Fighting unfairly can be. So do a little digging, and next time, fight fair.

Discussion Questions:

1. Of the Confrontation Basics, were there any that you struggle with in normal confrontations?

2. Do you identify with any of the confrontation styles? Were you surprised to see your coping style on the list? How does having an antidote make you feel?

3. Could you recognize any of the confrontation styles in the house you grew up with? Did you inherit any from a family member?

Closing:

God, help us to understand our past and present so that we can intentionally create a better future with you at the center. Help us learn healthy confrontation in all areas of our lives so that we might grow from strength to strength and resist stagnation. Thank you that you are in everything we do. Amen

WEEK 8: THE MARRIAGE CHECK UP

Written by Robby Ortiz

Scripture:

A fountain of gardens,
A well of living waters,
And streams from Lebanon.
The Shulamite
16 Awake, O north wind,
And come, O south!
Blow upon my garden,
That its spices may flow out.
Let my beloved come to his garden
And eat its pleasant fruits. – Song of Solomon 4

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace…
Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ." – Ephesians 4:2-3; 15

Focus: Tending marriage as a garden

Key Points: Marriage always requires maintenance, humility, and honesty.

The first job Adam and Eve are co-workers in, as husband and wife, is tending the garden and growing their family.

How apt is this metaphor for our own marriages.

A garden, when tended daily, weeded, watered, nurtured, and protected yields life, fruit, and beauty. So too, will our marriages produce fruit when so tended. And how peaceful and lifegiving is the marriage which is well tended?

However, just like a garden, just one season of neglect can lead to overgrowth, decay, infestation, and destruction. To assume everything is fine because everything is green above, is to allow the weeds to spread below and show themselves in inconvenience places.

We are all likely aware that our marriages require work and consistent vigilance.

But how good are we at being humble, gentle, and patient during this work?

- Do we fully listen or wait to respond?
- Do we speak in love or in anger?
- Do we refuse to change and require the other simply ‘submit’ or curb to us?
- Do we seek unity or equilibrium?

Today, with a spirit of repentance and humility, let us ask sincerely and answer these questions honestly; all in love and always toward seeking unity.

1. Gardens require daily attention.

Yes, life is busy. We do our best to keep a date night on the schedule, down time together, or a check in conversation weekly. But it can be easy to let things slide and think that, because everything is okay now, not much work is needed.

But even the healthiest garden will quickly turn to ruin without daily care.

What practices have you put in place to ensure you're caring for your marriage daily?

It can be simple, like a 10-minute check-in after dinner before jumping into dishes or Netflix. Or making sure you kiss your spouse goodbye before you leave for work.

Everyone will be different. My wife's love language is physical touch and there's hardly a day that goes by that I don't rub her feet at the end of the night. I myself am not a big touch person, but I know this makes all the difference in daily connection.

2. The Garden is a two-person job.

Adam was incomplete without Eve. They were both needed to tend the Garden.

Likewise, your marriage cannot rely on one person initiating every conversation, every date, every act of service, etc.

Think to yourself. Who initiates more between the two of you? When was the last time you made a gesture of connection or intimacy?

And what is an area that YOU can be more active in serving your marriage? Take a step forward this week with one thing for your spouse.

3. Humility, Gentleness, and Patience are Godly; not gendered.

Generally, these traits would often be ascribed to women. But scripture does not make this distinction. These are fruits of healthy gardeners.

> **Humility** in marriage means being willing to admit when you're wrong, listen before defending yourself, and consider your spouse's needs alongside your own.
>
> **Gentleness** means using your words and tone to bring peace rather than winning an argument, even when you have every reason to be frustrated.
>
> **Patience** means giving your spouse room to grow, extending grace when they fall short, and remembering that God is still working in both of you.

Give a though and read the rest of Galatians 5 together. Which of these, or other fruits of the Spirit are you lacking in your marriage? Focus in prayer on one this week.

Discussion Questions w/ your spouse:

1. What is it like on the other side of me when I'm stressed/tired/coming home?
2. When you express your needs, do you feel heard? How can I demonstrate that better?
3. What are our current goals as a couple (not family) and are we still aligned in that?

Closing:

Pray together as a couple and then answer the following:

What can we agree to commit to for the next month that we both agree will improve our relationship?

WEEK 9: DREAMING TOGETHER

Written by Eddie Leighton

Scripture:

"For I know the plans I have for you says the Lord. Plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope." – Jeremiah 29:11

Focus: Revisiting shared purpose when couples feel stuck in routines or survival mode.

Key Points: Dreams are necessary. It's okay to dream new dreams. The space between the start and the goal is where life happens.

When my wife and I first got married all we had was dreams of the future. I remember spending hours talking about where we wanted to travel and places we wanted to see. We would visit the book store frequently just to dream through all the different magazines (that we could not afford). From rock climbing adventure in the alps, road trips through the northwest, custom homes, to 4x4 jeeping.

You name it we dreamed it.

But even before we started dating, dreaming laid a significant part in us getting together.

Like most young adults, my time was spent thinking about the right here right now. I spent most of my energy on what I

wanted in the moment including the people I was dating and spending my time with.

I was just turning 20 years old when I had a conversation with an older friend and he challenged me to close my eyes and visualize my life at forty.

Forty!? At twenty I did not even realize people lived to be that old. Forty felt like a lifetime away.

But I took the challenge. I closed my eyes and at first, nothing. But after a few moments I began to see something. I saw a house but not just a house I saw a home. I saw people in the home. A wife, kids, and friends.

The visual honestly shocked me but it also challenged me. If I had kids what type of woman would I want to raise kids with? Do I want them raised as Christians? Where would we spend holidays? Where would I want to live? The questions kept coming and as they did the vision for my future began to take shape.

Dreams help us set a course for our lives.

From school to work, marriage to kids, having a guiding direction makes all the difference.

1. Dreams are necessary to get us started.

"Where there is no vision the people perish." – Proverbs 29:11

I will never jump into the chilly water of the lake and risk the swim if I don't identify a goal that is worth it.

I picture looking across a lake and setting a destination. I then jump in the water a begin to swim. As I am swimming I am challenged by

waves and wind. Every now and then I need to pop my head above the water and find my original destination and re-align my swimming to reach that goal.

2. Between The start and the goal life happens.

When I jump in the water to begin my swim the conditions of the water may be one way. It may be a warm calm summer day and the swim does not look so hard. But seasons and conditions change. Someone gets sick, you lose a job, your spouse changes and is driving you crazy. The list goes on.

It is in this moment that popping your head up above the water and revisiting you dreams and your goals is so important.

So many people are driven off course by the waves of life and never coarse correct. Then they wake up years later wondering how they ended up where they are lost with no land in sight.

3. You change, and it is okay to dream new dreams.

“They say the same man will never step in the same stream twice. For each time he steps in the stream has changed and so has the man.”

Like it or not you will change and so will your spouse. Friction happens when we don’t continue to dream and set goals together through the process of growth and change. When we are still trying to fit a new identity into old idea things feel off and unaligned.

When the alignment on your car is off, every time you release the wheel it will naturally want to veer off course. But when it is aligned and you release the wheel it will stay straight moving in the direction you set it with little effort.

Without alignment of vision and dreams our relationship can feel just like the car. We can't let go of the wheel even for a second or we end up in the ditch.

My wife and I are soon to celebrate 25 years of marriage (hold applause). I told her the other day that looking back on all the hard and tough things we have gone through I had realized that the only thing that could ever tear us apart would not come from an outside source but could only come from within. Not putting in the time to connect and continue to dream together would be the only way we could fail.

Discussion Questions:

1. Think about a dream or a goal you once had or currently have. What is worth the swim? What is worth the effort? Share with the group.
2. Think about what has taken you off course or what obstacles there are to seeing this dream come true. Share with the group.
3. Spend some time and dream new dreams. Dreams are free. Sometimes we don't allow ourselves to dream because we have been let down in the past. Set a time or a place in your

mind and ask, “what does this look like?” What does it feel like? Then share with the group or your spouse.

Closing:

God created us to dream and to build. Dreams give us hope that the future can be different than the present. Pray with each other that God continues to give you dreams and hopes for the future as we dream big dreams with Him.

WEEK 10: SINGLE AND READY TO MINGLE

Written by Sally Taylor

Scripture:

"*Promise me, O women of Jerusalem, not to awaken love until the time is right."* – Song of Solomon 8:4

Focus: How to prepare yourself as a single person for a future relationship. Are you ready for a relationship?

Key Points: As a Christian, dating in not merely a pastime; it is an intentional journey to see if two people are compatible for a potential future together. With that in mind, allow God to do a deep work in you before striking up a love connection.

Being single is an interesting season to be in, especially after high school. When I was 15 years old, I had a life changing encounter with Jesus and completely gave my life to him that day. My past, my present and my future. But I had to figure out what that looked like in real time.

Throughout high school, I watched many of my friends in and out of drama and heartache because they always *had* to be in a relationship. Because of that, I decided to dedicate my high school years to having a strong relationship with Jesus.

After high school, I felt the pressure from others to get into a relationship but personally felt I wasn't ready yet. I wanted to spend

my single years with full focus, devotion and in discovery of God's purpose for my life. So, I allowed God to a deep work in me during that season.

I also got involved in ministry and discovered my passions and giftings. Some of those included me becoming a youth pastor and seeing what a generation on fire for Jesus looks like.

I was also able to travel to the slums of Jamaica, backpack through the mountain cliffs and deserts of Morocco and jungles of south America to tell people about Jesus.

Still, the number one question I got in my twenties was *"when are you going to date?"* I also heard statements like *"I don't think you are ever going to get married. You don't put yourself out there."*

In transparency, I did try going on some dates but felt ZERO for the poor guys.

Then, when the timing was right, a love story beyond my dreams unfolded before me and I fell in love with the most incredible man.

My advice to you, is *do not awaken love until it is time.*

Not sure if you're ready for that? Here are some questions to ask yourself as you prepare yourself for a relationship.

1. Do you love the Lord your God with all your heart?

Luke 10:27 says, *"The man answered, 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.' And, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"*

We must surrender everything to him. Allow him to access every space in your life. Allow him to be your primary source of joy and validation. Only when you become acquainted with God's love, will you be able to recognize true love.

2. Are you healthy?

Ask yourself and answer honestly. Do you always have to be in a relationship? If so, why? What kind of people are you in relationships with? Our relationships say a lot about what's going on inside, and the state of our mental, emotional, and spiritual health.

Two broken people in a relationship are set up for a lot of struggles.

- Are you struggling with your mental health?
- Are you healed from past trauma?
- Are you healed from past relationships?
- Are you struggling with addiction?

Do the work now, so when it's time, you are able to love with your whole heart.

3. Are you a good steward of what God has given you?

A steward is one who manages, cares for, and protects what God has resourced you with.

- Do you have a job?
- Can you afford to live on your own?

- Are you wise with your money?
- How is your physical health?
- Do you take care of the body God has given you?
- Is your room clean?
- Is your car clean?

How can we expect God to entrust us with a relationship if he can't trust us to be responsible with the basics?

3. Do you know your passions and giftings yet?

Get involved in church community. Start serving in church. Preach the good news to those around you and help make disciples of Jesus.

Take college classes to grow in skills and knowledge. Try different jobs until you find what you love.

If you know who you are, and who you're called to be, you'll be able to recognize more easily, the best person for your present and future.

Preparing yourself for a romantic relationship as a Christian means focusing heavily on your personal and spiritual health, emotional maturity, and clarity of purpose.

Discussion Questions:

1. Are there areas of your life that you have yet to surrender to Jesus?
2. Are there other people or things that keep you from being close to Jesus?

3. Are there areas in your heart that still need healing?
4. What areas of stewardship do you need to grow in?
5. Write a descriptive list of someone you would like to seriously date. Now ask yourself, “do I meet those expectations?”

Closing:

Break up into pairs and pray for needs that were brought up in conversation. Also take personal time to pray for God to do a deep work in your life during this season of preparation.

WEEK 11: LOVE, LUST, LONELINESS

Written by: Roniel Aquino

Scripture:

"Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance."– 1 Corinthians 13:4–7

Focus: Are you ready for a relationship or are you just lonely?

Key Points: Distinguishing genuine intimacy from attraction, infatuation, validation, and fear of being alone.

Being married is definitely a blessing. The bible says that *"He who finds a wife, finds a good thing,"* – Proverbs 18:22

That doesn't mean that being single is a curse. Being single can be a blessing in and of itself. Although we are created to be relational beings and have this deep desire to be in a relationship, we have to ask ourselves are we actually ready for a real relationship, or am I just lonely?

Society and Hollywood has painted a picture for us of what a relationship "should" look like, and yet we find ourselves in a society that has high divorce rates, people who only stay together

for their kids, and couples who can't stand each other because the feelings fade away, and the attraction stops.

Is it love? Is it lust? Am I just lonely?

1. Love is more than a feeling.

Our culture today defines love as a feeling. When we love someone we say things like…

"I love the way they make me feel" "I feel happy around them" "I've never felt this way with anyone before."

Love is NOT a feeling, but love IS a Person. God is Love.

Sometimes what we call "love" is actually:

- Attraction
- Infatuation
- Lust
- Validation
- Fear of being alone
- The desire to feel wanted

Our problem comes when we mistake these feelings for intimacy.

"*But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love."*

For us to know what love is, we have to know who God is first. What are His characteristics? How can we be like Him? The bible tells us that love has certain characteristics.

The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, *"Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no*

record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance."

Here, Paul isn't describing feelings, he describes characteristics and behaviors that love should embody. We learn here that love is a *decision*.

Real love is deciding to serve someone, rather than asking what we can get from them. Instead of thinking about what you can receive from someone else, think about who you need to become to serve them properly.

This is something that God has been personally taking me on a journey on now. Who you are becoming is more important than what you do. The process is more important than the finished product.

I love how at weddings, people get married at an altar. Did you know, historically, an altar is where things die and lives are surrendered? Think about what that means in a wedding context.

It doesn't mean two people just get together and live together. It means two people have decided, and will continue to choose, dying to themselves every day and being raised with Christ at the center. They're making a vow to serve one another until death.

2. Is it Love? Or is it Lust?

We've talked about what love looks like and Who Love is.

But how do you know the difference between love or lust? Well, Jesus outlines it for us.

"You have heard the commandment that says, 'You must not commit adultery. 'But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." – Matthew 5:27–28

Here Jesus talks about how lust begins in the heart.

Lust isn't just attraction. Finding someone attractive is normal. You'll probably find several different people attractive throughout your life.

Lust is what happens when sexual desire becomes self-centered, objectifying, or intentionally entertained in a way that overrides the way God had intended and designed it.

Yes. Sex was God's idea! But for it to be good, it needs to be in the right context. Fire in and of itself isn't a problem, the context matters. If fire was out of control and spreading across the west coast, it would be dangerous. In the context of a living room fireplace, it's warmth for your home during the cold winters.

Sex outside of the context of marriage is dangerous and destructive. When Jesus addresses this, He's not saying, "don't find someone attractive," He's addressing a much deeper issue.

What is the condition of your heart? What are you entertaining outside of the safe boundaries of marriage (and if you're not married, this still applies!)

3. Loneliness is real.

The fear of being alone can make you choose all the wrong things. Including the wrong person. Like I said earlier, we are relational beings designed for community. We long to be loved and accepted. A lot of times we have comparison issues too and we look around at others and see how “happy” everyone is and we genuinely want that for ourselves. This is what the bible says about that.

“*Then the LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him.” − Genesis 2:18*

Loneliness is real. In fact, we read the rest of the story of Genesis 2 we find something interesting. God makes the statement that it is not good for man to be alone, and what does He do next? He gives Adam an assignment. He creates the animals and says to Adam what should we call them? Only after Adam is doing his assignment does God put him to sleep and give him Eve.

Sometimes we get too focused on the fact that we feel lonely and we end up settling for who’s available, when God is asking you to be obedient and focus on the assignment, then He will bring you a helper to help with your assignment. And when we shift the perspective from us, to what God wants, that loneliness lessons. Once we can shift our perspective, God will give us the help that we need.

I would encourage you to, if you're not already, be obedient to what God last told you, start serving in the church if you haven’t

already. Get plugged into a community, a small group just like this one. Start doing the thing God wants you to do and watch how he will bring you someone to compliment the call on your life.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does it look like to find your identity and worth in God before looking for it in another person?
    a. Find out what God says about you before building a relationship. Pay attention to how often you feel you need someone's affection or approval. When you notice it happening, practice going to God first and not man.
2. What boundaries can help protect a relationship from lust?
    a. Establish physical boundaries before you're in the moment. Be intentional about things like being alone late at night, texting, or environments that make it harder to maintain your convictions.
3. Why can loneliness make someone more vulnerable to unhealthy relationships?
    a. Give yourself permission to walk away from a relationship that isn't healthy, even when being alone hurts. Build community. A healthy community can meet many of the relational needs that loneliness creates without requiring a romantic relationship.

Pray with one another.

WEEK 12: SINGLE NOT STUCK

Written by Samantha Ortiz

Scripture:

"*An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife."* – 1 Corinthians 7:32-34

"Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." – Psalm 37:4

"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." – Ecclesiastes 3:1

"Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails." – Proverbs 19:21

Focus: Living a full, purposeful life rather than treating singleness as a waiting room.

Key Points: Don't live in the future, singleness is a part of God's plan too, God's purpose endures in all seasons.

When I was in high school, I had my first serious boyfriend. We dated for several years and continued dating into college. We both loved Jesus, were involved in Christian organizations and leadership, and spent a lot of time talking about the future. We

talked about marriage, ministry, life plans, kids, where we might live, and what our life together might look like.

And at first, those conversations were exciting. It felt good to dream together. But toward the end of the relationship, I began to realize that was almost all we talked about.

We weren't really living in the present with one another anymore. In fact, we didn't even realize when we were growing in different directions. Because we were always looking ahead to the "one day."

And when that relationship ended, which it inevitably did, the future I had imagined ended with it.

I was left to grieve, not only the relationship, but also the life I had pictured in my head. I had spent so much time imagining a future that didn't exist, that I felt like I had lost years of my life that hadn't even happened.

This experience taught me something I have tried to carry with me ever since:

I don't want to live in the future.

I don't want to spend today waiting for tomorrow to finally make my life feel complete. And this lesson has followed me in many ways; with my dreams, aspirations, career, motherhood, and yes, all my relationships too.

I think the most tempting place to do this, is with our singleness. We can become so focused on the relationship we hope to have *someday* that we accidentally stop living the life God has given us *today*.

If you're single today, then there is purpose in being single today.

That doesn't mean you have to stop wanting marriage. It doesn't mean you have to convince yourself that you don't care about having a spouse or family. Those desires can be good and God-given.

But it *does* means we don't allow a future desire to steal the present season God has actually given us.

So what does it look like to live fully in the season we're in? To be single, and not feel stuck?

1. Delighting in God reshapes your desires and brings fulfillment.

"Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." – Psalm 37:4

There is a difference between wanting something and believing you need it to be happy. You may deeply desire marriage. You may pray for a spouse. You may long for a family. There is nothing wrong with that.

But when we make marriage the thing that will finally fulfill us, we put an enormous weight on something that was never designed to carry it.

Because a spouse cannot be your identity. A relationship cannot determine your worth. And marriage cannot (and should not) replace your relationship with God.

Psalm 37:4 begins with delighting in the Lord. Our fulfillment starts there. As we grow closer to God, He begins to shape our hearts. Our desires become more aligned with His.

We learn that we can genuinely experience joy and purpose while still waiting for things we hope will come. And even when they don't.

2. Singleness is part of God's plan, with its own season and purpose.

"To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." – Ecclesiastes 3:1

Scripture tells us that there is a time and purpose for every season. That means, yes, even singleness has purpose.

It is not simply the period between being single and being married. It is a season of your life that God wants to use. In fact, there may be things you can do in this season that would look completely different in another season!

You may have more freedom with your time. You may be able to serve in ways that would be difficult with a spouse or children (and trust someone who has been in ministry for years with children, it is a different ball game!).

You may have opportunities to travel, pursue a career, invest deeply in friendships, grow spiritually, or discover more about who God has created you to be.

Sometimes the purpose of (any) season is simply growth, or healing. Sometimes it is preparation. Sometimes it is simply learning to enjoy the life God has given you.
I just encourage you to entertain the idea that this season has a purpose. Don't miss it because you're too busy waiting for the next one.

3. Your plans may shift, but God's purpose remains.

"Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails." – Proverbs 19:21

I think most of us have some kind of timeline in our heads that we measure our current life up against. I know I do.
We assume we'll be married by a certain age, that we'll have children when we desire them. We thought our career would be more established at our age, or that we'd be further along in our finances, our jobs, that we'd own a house or land or whatever our idea of success is.

And honestly, sometimes the hardest part isn't being single. It's realizing that the life you planned isn't unfolding according to your timeline.

But our plans are not promises. And our lives were not meant to be "linear."

We can make plans and hope and pursue good things. But we have to leave room for God to author a story that looks different than the one we imagined.

That can be difficult, especially when we have spent years picturing what our future would look like. **BUT there is freedom in realizing that God's purpose does not depend on our plans going perfectly.** In fact, that is where the excitement is, the hope, and the peace. Trust his plans and timing.

And the good thing is, we don't have to know what the next chapter holds to be faithful in the chapter you're currently living.

4. Singleness offers room for devotion to God.

"An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife." – 1 Corinthians 7:32-34

In this verse, Paul isn't saying marriage is a lesser spiritual choice. But he is pointing out that different seasons of life come with different responsibilities. Marriage brings beautiful responsibilities and commitments.

Singleness brings a different kind of freedom. If you're single, there are ways you can use that freedom to pursue God wholeheartedly.

I know this may sound rich coming from a married woman, and don't get me wrong, I love my marriage and my children with all my heart. But I never had anyone paint me a picture of a life lived solely for God and never had a chance to truly consider that as an option.

As I got married and had kids over the years, there have been many things I've laid down because my children became my mission, and there are things that had to transform to be more in line with my spouse, because my dreams were no longer just mine, but ours.

Now, those things are absolutely part of God's plan for my life and there's no regrets here. But being someone who loves serving God and doing the work of his ministry, I do think there's something so beautiful and pure about that kind of life lived for Him.

Overall, it can be an incredible opportunity to give yourself fully to God and to the things He has placed in front of you. Allow God to paint a picture of that kind of life for you.

Remember, God has given you today. Go live it with Him.

Discussion Questions:

1. Where are you tempted to live in "one day"?
   What are you waiting for before you allow yourself to fully enjoy, pursue, or invest in your life?
2. What desires or expectations about marriage do you need to surrender to God? How can you pursue those desires while still finding your fulfillment in Him?
3. What is one opportunity or purpose God may have placed in front of you specifically in this season of singleness?
   What would it look like to intentionally pursue it instead of waiting for your circumstances to change?

Pray with one another.

WEEK 13: DATING WITH CLARITY

Written by Justin Duenas

Scripture:

“*Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.” – Proverbs 4:23 (NIV)*

Focus: Approach relationships with intentionality rather than assumption. Biblical dating isn't about finding a perfect formula for finding “the one.” Scripture gives us wisdom about who we are becoming, how we treat others, what we value, and how we make wise decisions.

Key Points: Know your intentions before you pursue someone. Look beyond chemistry to character, compatibility, convictions, and calling. Create clarity through honest communication and healthy pacing.

Dating can be exciting, but it can also be confusing.

One of the biggest problems in modern dating isn't necessarily that people don't want relationships, it's that people often don't know how to communicate what they want from a relationship.

You might be interested in someone, but you're afraid to tell them, because you don't want to scare them away. You might be dating someone who says, *“I'm just seeing where things go,”* while

you're already emotionally invested. You might be spending every day together, talking constantly, acting like a couple, but neither person has actually defined what the relationship is. That's where mixed signals begin.

Proverbs 19:2 says: *“Desire without knowledge is not good—how much more will hasty feet miss the way.”*

There is nothing wrong with desire. Attraction and desire are part of how God created us. But desire without wisdom can cause us to move faster than we should. Dating should give you an opportunity to learn who someone is, not simply become emotionally attached to the version of them you hope they'll become. Clarity doesn't mean rushing a relationship. Clarity means being honest about what is happening.

1. Know Your Intentions

Before asking, “Who should I date?,” we should ask, “Why am I dating?” Are you dating because you're lonely? Because you want attention? Because you feel pressure to be in a relationship? Because everyone around you is getting married? Or are you dating with the desire to genuinely get to know someone and determine whether you could build a healthy relationship together?

Your intentions matter because they affect how you treat people.

Matthew 6:21 says, *“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*

What we're pursuing reveals something about what's

happening inside of us. If you don't know what you're looking for, it's easy to unintentionally lead someone on. You don't necessarily need to know, *“I'm going to marry this person.”* That's impossible to know at the beginning. But you should be able to communicate things like: “I'm interested in getting to know you intentionally.” or “I'm not looking for a serious relationship right now.” Both are forms of clarity. You don't have to know the destination to be honest about the direction.

2. Don't Let Chemistry Make the Decision

Chemistry matters. Attraction matters. You should enjoy being around the person you're dating. But chemistry alone isn't enough to build a healthy relationship**.** Someone can give you butterflies and still be completely wrong for you. That's why it's important to look at five areas:

<u>Character</u>
Who are they when nobody is watching? How do they treat people who can't do anything for them? How do they respond when they're wrong? Do they take responsibility? How do they handle conflict? You aren't just dating how someone treats you. You're getting to know how they treat people. Matthew 7:16 says, “By their fruit you will recognize them.” Character is revealed over time. Don't just ask, “Do I like them?” Ask, “What kind of fruit is present in their life?”

Compatibility

Do your personalities, lifestyles, goals, and expectations work together? You don't need to be identical. But major incompatibilities shouldn't be ignored simply because the chemistry is strong. Amos 3:3 asks: *"Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?"* Relationships require some level of shared direction.

Chemistry

Is there attraction? Do you enjoy spending time together? Is there emotional connection? Chemistry is important, but it should be one part of the equation, not the entire equation. Attraction and romantic desire are good gifts within God's design for relationships, but attraction was never intended to be our only source of wisdom. Chemistry can tell you that you're attracted to someone. It can't tell you whether you're compatible with them.

Convictions

What do you believe? What values guide your life? What role does faith play in your decisions? What are your convictions about relationships, sex, marriage, family, money, church, and your future?

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 6:14, *"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers."* This passage is broader than dating, but the principle of spiritual alignment matters deeply when considering marriage and a life partnership.

Some differences are preferences. Others are foundational. Don't compromise convictions to preserve chemistry.

Calling

Where is God taking each of you? You don't need identical dreams, careers, or personalities. But it's worth asking: “Can our lives move in the same direction?” Proverbs 16:9 says, *“In their hearts humans plan their course, but the LORD establishes their steps.*” A relationship shouldn't require you to abandon what God has called you to. The question isn't simply, “Do I want to be with this person?” It's also: “Can we pursue God together?”

3. Pace the Relationship

One of the easiest ways to lose clarity is to move faster emotionally than you move relationally. You can know someone's love language, childhood trauma, favorite song, and five-year plan before you've actually seen how they handle conflict.

You can become emotionally attached before you've had meaningful conversations about values. That's why pacing matters. Proverbs 14:15 says, *“The simple believe anything, but the prudent give thought to their steps.”*

Healthy dating gives you time to observe. Time to ask questions. Time to see consistency. Time to involve trusted people. Time to discover whether the person you're attracted to is actually the person you're getting to know.

Proverbs 15:22 says, *“Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with*

many advisers they succeed.”

Don't isolate your relationship from wise people. A healthy relationship should be able to survive wise questions from people who genuinely care about you. A relationship doesn't become healthier simply because it becomes more intense. Sometimes the healthiest thing you can do is slow down enough to actually see clearly, and clarity requires conversations.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does clarity in dating look like to you?
2. Which of the five areas: Character, Compatibility, Chemistry, Convictions, or Calling is easiest for you to overemphasize or overlook?
3. What are some conversations you think people avoid having early in dating that actually need to happen?

Closing:

Dating doesn't have to be a guessing game. You don't need to know on the first date whether someone is going to be your spouse or force a relationship to move faster than it's ready for. Instead, date with clarity, and give relationships enough time for reality to reveal itself.