

Courtship vs. Dating

Defining Courtship and Dating

Let's begin by defining courtship. Courtship ordinarily begins when a single man approaches a single woman by going through the woman's father, and then conducts his relationship with the woman under the authority of her father, family, or church, whichever is most appropriate. Courtship always has marriage as its direct goal.

What then is dating? Dating, a more modern approach, begins when either the man or the woman initiates a more- than-friends relationship with the other, and then they conduct that relationship outside of any oversight or authority. Dating may or may not have marriage as its goal.

The Differences Between Courtship and Dating

What are the differences in these two systems? For our purposes, there are three broad differences between what has been called "biblical courtship" and "modern dating."

1. *The Difference in Motive*

The first difference lies with the man's *motive* in pursuing the relationship. Biblical courtship has one motive — to find a spouse. A man will court a particular woman because he believes it is possible that he could marry her, and the courtship is the process of discerning whether that belief is correct. To the extent that the Bible addresses premarital relationships at all, it uses the language of men marrying and women being given in marriage (see Matt. 24:38; Luke 20:34-35).

Numbers 30:3-16 talks about a transfer of authority from the father to the husband when a woman leaves her father's house and is united to her husband. The Song of Solomon showcases the meeting, courtship, and marriage of a couple — always with marriage in view. I am not advocating arranged marriages; rather, I am pointing toward the biblical purpose for why young men and women associate with one another. These passages do not argue that marriage should be the direct goal of such relationships so much as they assume it.

Modern dating, on the other hand, need not have marriage as a goal at all. Dating can be recreational. Not only is "dating for fun" acceptable, it is assumed that "practice" and learning by "trial and error" are necessary, even advisable, before finding the person that is just right for *you*. The fact that individuals will be emotionally and probably physically intimate with many people before settling down with the "right person" is just part of the deal. Yet where is the biblical support for such an approach to marriage? There is none. How many examples of "recreational dating" do we see among God's people in the Bible? Zero. The category of premarital intimacy does not exist, other than in the context of grievous sexual sin.

The motive for dating or courting is marriage. The practical advice I give the singles at our church is, if you cannot happily see yourself as a married man (or woman) in less than one year, then you are not ready to date.

2. The Difference in Mind-set

The second major difference between biblical courtship and modern dating is the *mind-set* couples have when interacting with one another. What do I mean by that? Modern dating is essentially a selfish endeavor. I do not mean maliciously selfish, as in "I'm going to try to hurt you for my benefit." I mean an oblivious self-centeredness that treats the whole process as ultimately about *me*. After all, what is the main question everyone asks about dating, falling in love, and getting married? "How do I know if I've found the one?" What is the unspoken ending to that question? "For me." Will this person make me happy? Will this relationship meet my needs? How does she look? What is the chemistry like? Have I done as well as I can do?

I cannot tell you how many men I have counseled who are terrified to commit, worrying that as soon as they do, "something better will come walking around the corner."

Selfishness is not what drives a biblical marriage, and therefore should not be what drives a biblical courtship. Biblical courtship recognizes the general call to "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3, NIV). It also recognizes the specific call that Ephesians 5:25 gives men in marriage, where our main role is sacrificial service. We are to love our wives as Christ loved the church, giving himself up for her. That means loving sacrificially every day. Biblical courtship means that a man does not look for a laundry list of characteristics that comprise his fantasy woman so that his every desire can be fulfilled, but he looks for a godly woman as Scripture defines her — a woman he can love and, yes, be attracted to, but a woman whom he can serve and love as a godly husband.

In other words, modern dating asks, "How can I find the one for me?" Biblical courtship asks, "How can I be the one for her?"

3. The Difference in Methods

Third, and most practically, modern dating and biblical courtship are different in their *methods*. And this is where the rubber really meets the road. In modern dating, intimacy precedes commitment. In biblical courtship, commitment precedes intimacy.

According to the current school of thought, the best way to figure out whether you want to marry a particular person is to act as if you are married and see if you like it. Spend large amounts of time alone together. Become each other's primary emotional confidantes. Share your deepest secrets and desires. Get to know that person better than anyone else in your life. Grow your physical intimacy and intensity on the same track as your emotional intimacy. What you do and say together is private and is no one else's business, and since the relationship is private, you need not submit to anyone else's authority or be accountable. And if this pseudo-marriage works for both of you, then get married. But if one or both of you do not like how it is going, go ahead and break up even if it means going through something like an emotional and probably physical divorce.

Such is the process of finding "the one," and this can happen with several different people before one finally marries. In the self-centered world of secular dating, we want as much information as possible to ensure that the right decision is being made. And if we can enjoy a little physical or emotional comfort along the way, great.

Clearly, this is not the biblical picture. The process just described is hurtful to the woman that the man purports to care about, not to mention to himself. And it clearly violates the command of 1 Thessalonians 4:6 not to wrong or defraud our sisters in Christ by implying a marriage-level commitment where one does not exist. It will have a damaging effect on the man's marriage and hers, whether they marry each other or not.

In Biblical relationship, commitment precedes intimacy. Within this model, the man should follow the admonition in 1 Timothy 5:1-2 to treat all young women to whom he is not married as sisters, with absolute purity. **The man should show leadership and willingness to bear the risk of rejection by defining the nature and the pace of the relationship.** He should do this before spending significant time alone with her in order to avoid hurting or confusing her.

He should also seek to ensure that a significant amount of time is spent with other couples or friends rather than alone. The topics, manner, and frequency of conversations should be characterized by the desire to become acquainted with each other more deeply, but not in a way that defrauds each other. There should be no physical intimacy outside the context of marriage, and the couple should seek accountability for the spiritual health and progress of the relationship, as well as for their physical and emotional intimacy.

Within this model, both parties should seek to find out, before God, whether they should be married, and whether they can service and honor God better together than apart. The man should take care not to treat any woman like his wife who is not his wife. Of course he must get to know his courting partner well enough to make a decision on marriage. **However, prior to the decision to marry, he should always engage with her emotionally in a way he would be happy for other men to engage with her.**

In all these ways, a biblical relationship looks different from a worldly relationship. If this is done well, Christian women will be honored, even as they are pursued. Christian wives will be honored. And God will be glorified.