

## CHRISTIANS DATING NON-CHRISTIANS: *Why Who You Date Affects How You Love*

Scripture doesn't speak to dating (because dating wasn't a thing then), but it does speak definitively to marriage in at least two ways. And so it seems to me that this wisdom—the clearest words on marriage from the most foundational resource of our faith—would be our best guidance to follow when considering a dating relationship:

- 1) Scripture says that marriage is characterized by and dependent upon **mutual submission and service** (Ephesians 5:21-25)
- 2) Scripture says that **marriage is a binding act**, that two become so intimately connected that they become one (Matthew 19:5-6).

Let's start with serving one another. Most parties would agree that folks in a relationship should support one another, considering the other's needs as their own. If you can't get on board with this understanding of a relationship, then you need not read any further, because the following assumes this idea to be intrinsic to relationships.

Still, an agreement to serve one another doesn't really mean anything unless "service" and "submission" are mutually understood. The reality is that someone who is a follower of Christ and someone who is not will ultimately have different ideas of what it means to serve one another. And this is because Christ is not only the reason that someone in a Christ-following relationship serves ("submit to one another out of reverence for Christ," v. 21), but he is also the model for how we serve. **Christ's example teaches us how we are to serve one another**—by what means and to what extent.

The means by which we serve one another is self-sacrifice: that much is made clear when Paul calls us to "love... as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." But this is also a call to continue in this love despite any circumstance and to the furthest extent, just as Christ loved us despite our brokenness, all the way to the cross.

It might be easy to say, "Yes, I'd die for my husband," or "Of course I'd lay my life down for my wife." These promises are easy to make. But can you honestly say that you would remain faithful and steadfast in love when your partner lets you down in ways that are deeply hurtful, or when you feel distant from them? Well the kind of love and the extent of love to which followers of Christ are called in marriage stretches this far, because it's a covenantal love.

**Christians are to understand marriage as a covenant**, a vow that promises unconditional and unrelenting love. In the same way, the atoning self-sacrifice of Christ is a covenant of unconditional love and grace. So marriage and the Gospel are both covenants, each designed to be fulfilled by the same means and under the same condition: they are both covenants that promise grace and love that are unconditional.

For this reason, Tim Keller insists, "the gospel of Jesus and marriage explain one another." The understanding of the two are interconnected—to understand the overwhelming love of the Gospel is to understand the love that we are called to replicate and live in pursuit of in marriage (and therefore in our dating relationships). This also means that as we grow in our understanding of the Gospel we grow in our understanding of our relationship with our spouse,

and that the ways we learn to love in our relationship reveal further and further insight into the nature of Christ's love for us. The interconnection of these two covenants becomes a cyclical growth that slowly transforms us into the image of Christ. And this cycle both explains and fulfills the ultimate purpose of a marriage. **Marriage is to be a tool that unites and transforms relationships that are seeking after and modeled after the love of Christ.** It is to be a union in which each individual serves in making the other (and therefore their relationship) more Holy, a better reflection of Christ. This is the kind of love we're supposed to be working toward in our dating relationships.

Love that is literally unconditional is a tall order. In fact, this type of love seems, if not impossible, at the very least unreasonable—but then so does the Gospel, and that's exactly the point. Love understood as a covenant modeled after Christ is extended to this measure because its ultimate aim is different—its aim is extended beyond one's spouse to God Himself, as a response to and an expression of the love he has extended to us through Christ. And this is where service looks different in Christ-centered relationships: you aren't just serving one another's *desires*, but you are serving one another's *need* to grow closer to the Father.

This difference will manifest itself in any number of small ways in any number of situations, but the ultimate difference is that, as Keller puts it, understanding marriage in light of the Gospel "frees us to see our spouse's sins and flaws to the very bottom—and even speak of them—and yet still love and accept our spouse fully."

Again, this is something that is easy to *claim* to do. But actually recognizing and being subjected to the consequences of your spouse's faults and weaknesses, being charged with not only forgiving them but also helping to address and transform these imperfections, all while not letting them tarnish or diminish the way you value and love him or her fully and completely—now that is something immensely difficult to do. Still, it is made possible by the knowledge that the exact same is being done for you by your spouse, just as the deep and sacrificial love to which Christians are called is only made possible by the knowledge that each and every moment they are recipients of that same love from Christ Jesus. **This unconditional, sacrificial love defines what it means to be in a relationship and serve one another fully, and it stems only from knowing and imitating the sacrificial love of Jesus.**

In addition to being unconditional and unrelenting, the love of a marriage covenant is—again, modeled after Christ—also a reconciling love. In the same way that Christ's self-sacrificial love reconciled us to God, bringing us into union with the Father, the covenantal love of marriage is a unifying force. **Marriage unites us in such an intimate way that two become one**—not only legally, but also spiritually (and perhaps, in some wild way, even physically).

The idea is a challenging one because it doesn't assume that only the compatible parts of each individual will combine to make a whole. It's not just two pieces that fit neatly into one another. Instead, every aspect of each individual comes together in this unification. While this means taking on your partner's past mistakes and their future hopes, it also means that your worldview and theirs must become one. Our worldview is the way we understand our position in and relation to the world—and this understanding not only includes, but should actually be defined by, our view of God.

To anyone who has heard of Christ's love, their response to Him is formative to their view of God, and therefore to their worldview. In the most practical terms, you cannot claim indifference about Christ—you either believe he is God and Savior or you write Him off as an incredible (and probably despicable) hoax, the Gospels as a book of lies. These are the only perceptions that history leaves open to us as rational people (see C.S. Lewis's "trilemma" argument in *Mere Christianity* for more on this).

As a result, it's not naïve or silly or illogical to say that a differing perspective on Jesus is a factor that inevitably stands in the way of a relationship, because a different understanding of Christ means understanding the world through an entirely different lens. **In committing your heart to becoming one with someone who doesn't recognize Christ as Savior, you would be committing to the literal division of your faithfulness.** We are called to love Christ with *all* of our heart (and strength and mind), but how can you do so if you commit your heart to becoming one with someone who does not share that same purpose?

Whether you're a man or a woman, as a Christ follower you are called to submission and respect in marriage, and so your perspective of Christ cannot just eventually overwhelm your partner's. As a result, in dating (or marrying) a non-believer you are committing yourself to a heart divided between recognizing Christ as Lord and denying Him. You are committing your heart, your mind, your will, and your service to two competing ideas, no matter how lovely and kind and noble the other person may be.

In marriage you are not only uniting yourself to the other's personality and good intentions; **you are committing to becoming one with—submitting to being formed and shaped by—their very core,** their worldview, which is inextricably wrapped up in their perception of God. As a result, we cannot buy into the idea that an opposing opinion about Jesus is a small difference, one that shouldn't define the potential of a relationship. This understanding of our worldview is terribly inadequate, because it does not acknowledge the full weight of the gospel on the heart of a follower of Christ.

None of this is meant to convince you that someone you want to date who isn't a Christ follower is a bad person. Instead, the hope is that you might be able to better communicate to that person why you are so conflicted, why you cannot commit to loving him or her before she knows that they are first and foremost loved by Christ.

Nothing would be better than for the cute guy or girl you're pining for to come to know Christ as their redeemer and for the two of you to then have an awesome relationship. We know this is probably your desire—and you must remember that it is not at all insensitive, hateful, unkind, or unreasonable to desire this for them. Quite the opposite is true: **the most insensitive, hateful, unkind thing we could do, if we truly believe what we profess, is to not desire a relationship with Christ for everyone.**

It is unreasonable to feel the transforming and renewing power of Christ in our own lives and not deeply desire that same empowering peace for someone we value or admire. If we like someone enough to want to date them, we should certainly love them enough to put their relationship with Christ before our relationship with him or her.