

RUF Bible Study – Dating Sex and Marriage
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Ephesians 5

Why are we talking about marriage?

Here is a story from my friend Ross Dixon, the RUF campus minister at Mizzou:

“When I was in 4th grade I had to do this solar system project. I thought I had it in the bag, telling my folks (especially my mom) that I didn't want or need their help. I was going to get a big piece of posterboard and draw a bunch of circles, one inside the other, with a planet on each circle, representing each planet's orbit around the others. Easy, right?

Well, my mom, wanting to help, said, “Are you sure that's going to work? You may want to try something like this...” as she explained a particular way of doing the project (which, of course, made sense, but I was stubborn). So, I said, “Geez, mom, it's fine.” Only, about four minutes into the project, it was a disaster. It looked more like an amoeba rather than nice, neat circles. I cried and felt terrible for messing up the project and especially eschewing my mom's help in a jerky sort of way. She hugged me, forgave me, and then showed me how to draw nice, neat circles using different sized bowls. Project completed, and I got a good grade.”²

Ross had never done a planet project before, but he had an idea of how it should go. His mother had wisdom, experience, patience and love, and she was willing to share with her son how to see and do such a project. He finally listened and it went much better for him.

You haven't done a marriage project before. But you have an idea, from somewhere, of how it should go. How quickly, like Ross, are you going to be in over your heads? How are you going to know what to do? I think you should listen to what God says about marriage, and I'm trying to help and love you. You don't have to listen. You can go your own way, and many of you will. Just because you're not married yet doesn't mean you don't have anything to learn. You have a lot to learn. Some of what you're hearing is about marriage, but it also bears on dating and all relationships.

Just like Ross, I can see disaster for some of you if you do things your way. Your vision for marriage is really, really messed up. Some of you know that, but others of you think you're fine. You think you have things figured out, but you don't. Listen. May I say something? Let me help you and show you the vision of what it is you should be praying for and thinking about.

Last week we talked about talking. We talked about weaving your lives together in a way of mutual esteem and love. So if you are dating and someone is talking to you with contempt and hiding things from you, what should you do? Confront those issues and if they don't get better you should break up. You don't want to be in a dishonest relationship or one that makes you feel small. It should be bringing out good things in you – and repentance as any relationship with someone will reveal your sin and sinfulness. You should be growing in trust not in suspicion. You should be experiencing and talking about healthy boundaries, not crossing them over and over. You are not owned by another person. Do you see how envisioning a healthy marriage helps you consider how your dating is moving in such a direction or not? So this matters.

What is marriage? Let me offer a few definitions:

Marriage is an exclusive relationship in which a man and a woman commit themselves to each other in a covenant for life, and on the basis of this solemn covenant now become one flesh.³

Marriage is a permanent and exclusive union, binding a man and a woman to each other in an exclusive lifelong companionship of common life and conjugal love.⁴

Marriage is meant to be a place where the most holy and intimate God shows himself as compelling and good. It is meant to work – not easy, not always and not without his presence. Nonetheless, marriage meant to be a relationship that shouts to the world: “He is glorious and good!” Marriage is meant to transform each partner and through the merger, the interplay of two beings, reveal our great and gracious and most surprising God. The goal of marriage is intimacy, union, oneness.”⁵

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For this series, I used several books as background reading and listened to sermons by as many people as I can find, especially Tim Keller, Les Newsom, Richard Vise, Jeff Ferguson and Jean Larroux. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

² From an email exchange between me and Ross Dixon on Sept 8, 2009. Thanks Ross.

³ *Concise Theology*, JI Packer

⁴ *Biblical Ethics*, David Jones

⁵ *The Intimate Mystery*, 52, 18

I personally appreciate this last one the most, although I supposed it piggy-backs on the others. The first two give us technical definitions. One man. One woman. Exclusive, lifelong, covenantal. The last one paints more of a picture of what those definitions do for us – they help us to know God and his love; they transform us with the gospel.

Marriage is the place for our sexually complementary companionship for deepest emotional and erotic fulfillment. Marriage is the God-intended way to bring children into the world in order to be fruitful and multiply. Marriage is the place for our fulfilling our mission to fill the earth and subdue it; it provides companionship and partnership to go out and make the world a better place and bring in the kingdom of God. Marriage involves complementary roles that divinely appointed and mutually beneficial for men and women, showing forth two complementary ways of being in God's image, of being human, neither of which is superior to the other. The biblical husband in a marriage is to be a servant leader, the head of the wife. He is instructed to love his wife with a dying, sacrificial love, to treat her as his bride and beloved. A biblical wife is to be the helper lover, to obey her husband as to the Lord, to respect him, and treat him as if he were "the man."

Do you have this vision for marriage? Maybe you've grown up in a broken home and not seen a strong, healthy marriage. Maybe your parents never fought in front of you. I have a friend who has been married for about four years now. His wife started asking her dad about his marriage. When did you fight and disagree? Never, he said. She finally realized this meant they weren't nearly as close and personal as she thought. What had been valued was peace at all costs, an idealized marriage not a real one.

My wife's parents divorced when she was 12 but was non-functioning years before then. I remember when I first met her I asked her what she wanted to do with her life. She told me when she was 40, she wanted to be editor of Time Magazine, and she thought she would be divorced with one child. "You're *planning on* getting divorced?" I asked. She shrugged. That's just what happens to people.

You have some picture in your mind of what love is. What commitment looks like. How anger and disappointment get expressed. What faithfulness means. How fighting goes down. Does your family yell? Do you get the silent treatment till you shape up? Do you throw things? Do you hit? Do you leave the house? You do something. Why do you do that? Let's look again at marriage and how it looks.

Commitment

Marriage is commitment. It's a love commitment. You don't really love someone or something until you commit to it. It really is easy to say you love someone. Your mouth can make those sounds; the words can come off your lips. I remember I was really committed to not saying "I love you" until I really meant it. So I waited. Until I was 16 and said I love you to Cathy. And Daphne. And I really thought I did. I thought that's what love felt like. It's what the movies had taught me to feel, think and say. I really didn't have any other words for how I felt. "I really like you as far as I can tell for a 17-year-old" just didn't seem to cut it in the romantic department. So I told my 15-year-old girlfriend I loved her.

Big mistake. Because I didn't. How do I know I didn't? Because I didn't commit to her. You don't love things you don't commit to. Don't believe it when someone says he or she loves you and isn't committed to you.

And the only way to commit to someone is to promise, to vow to that person. You are vowing into the future. You are promising to be there for each other in thick and thin, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want. You will look so great on your wedding day. Every bride is beautiful. Every guy looks great in a tuxedo. We all believe you because you're so young and pretty. But it's vowing into the future that you're doing. You're committing to five, ten, twenty, forty years from now when you have wrinkles, saggy breasts, bigger bellies, balding and need Viagra. That's when you are saying you will love someone.

Marriage is commitment. It's standing in front of everyone and saying "I choose her!" "I choose him!" I am giving my whole life, even the parts I don't know to him, to her. That's a big deal, and that's scary to do.

The only way you can do that is if you both are submitting to Christ. That's what the text says in Ephesians 5:21: *submitting to one another out of reverence to Christ*. You should be scared to death to give all of your life in a vow promise to someone else. But if that person is submitting to Christ, then you have way more hope. He isn't out for himself. She isn't trying to get all she can get. You and the other person have someone else you're following. You're committed to something higher than your own comfort or pleasure or status or significance. That is so important. That is the only way you can really make it. You must both be submitting to Jesus, committed to Jesus in order to be able to submit to and commit to one another.

Intimacy

We make the ultimate human commitment. We leave our families and form a new family, a new unit in the world. We vow to the future and marry each other in public before God and witnesses.

If we do those things, we are joining our hearts, lives and bodies together in the ultimate friendship. That is what your spouse is to be – your best friend. The two of you are to walk hand in hand through thick and thin. This is to be someone who knows everything about you and still loves you. That doesn't mean this person is always happy with you or never gets in your way. Actually, if you are going to have a real relationship with this person, he or she will have to help you in ways you didn't think you needed. You will have to trust each other in love and forgiveness.

This is the place where sex goes, where nakedness goes. Adam and Eve were naked and not ashamed. That's what we're wanting. To be truly known, loved and cherished. For someone to draw us near and into themselves. To give ourselves

fully to someone despite our flaws, not trying to hide ourselves from that person to win or woo them. To be so honest. To cry together. To look into each other's eyes at that climactic moment. To feel heaven together. We become one flesh, the Bible says. Our legs, bodies and even souls become intertwined. Marriage is about intimacy. Sex is one reflection of that intimacy, a good barometer of how the marriage is going, but certainly not the only test.

As we submit to one another out of reference for Christ, we are saying we're truly, truly friends. We are equal. We're both made in the image of God. God made us male and female. One is not better or dominant. Marriage is for both of us, and the Bible sets for the glory of such a friendship, of such a love. Marriage is to be the place of your deepest friendship.

Are you looking for someone to be your best friend? Are you growing in friendship with people? Are you looking to befriend people who are hot or sexy or cool and trying to work things from that angle? Or are you open to deep friendships with all types and sorts of people, asking God to give you the person whom you can share your life with, share your heart with? I think many of you ladies want a knight in shining armor to come and take you away, a savior to solve your problems, a sugar daddy to keep you from having to have any wants, someone you can be a mom to, and a cheerleader who always tells you how great and wonderful you are

I'd say the men want angelic whores⁶. Someone who is good, pretty, nice, kind and an angel, but who will put out any time of day at the drop of a hat. Someone to take care of our babies and tell us how awesome we are. Who will stay out of your way unless you want to have a conversation.

These are not descriptions of intimate best friends. Our hearts were made for each other in friendship. All of our other friendships point to this one.

Interdependence – Mission

But marriage can also fall in on itself. I'd say the most common malaise of marriages is distance. The husband and the wife grow apart. Their lives drift away from each other. They stop loving each other really. They manage the kids. They eat separately. They have their own interests. They maybe have sex once a week, twice a month, once a month. They sit in different rooms and watch different tv shows and then sleep and do it all over again. Time passes and they don't know or care or love each other any more. I see this all the time. I would guess many of your parents have had this happen to them. They're really not best friends any more, and it's so sad.

But there is another problem. Sometimes a couple will be all about itself. They will think that the marriage is the thing they are to do together. They go to work and come home and they're just home.

I don't think that is the purpose of marriage. Marriage is for us to know Jesus better, and to go out into the world in strength so we can minister in and for the Kingdom of God. Marriage is a place for us to show hospitality because we are being shown that very thing. We invite people into our lives because we have more mission together than we had apart. Marriage gives us a base to show love and grace to people as we are being shown love and grace.

Does that make sense? We are to *work*. We have jobs to do as disciples of Jesus. Genesis 2 talked about taking dominion over the earth, of ruling and subduing it. So marriage is supposed to help us do just that. We should feel a sense of calling that our marriages help to empower us in. We are invigorated to work in and operate in the church and the world for good.

So while we look in to each other's eyes in intimacy, we then turn and look outward side by side in mission.

Are you looking for someone to partner with in ministry? Do you see that you need the help of other people, especially another person to fulfill that ministry and mission for God? Are you thinking of marriage as something just to make you happy, something that will complete your life? That's not the picture of marriage. It should be something that propels you into the lives of others, gives you strength to love those not like you, hope to believe in what is different and good in others.

Dynamics

Let me take a minute and highlight then what this Ephesians 5 passage says about roles. We didn't immediately jump there because I think there are so many other things going on and roles can tend to inflame and distract us. Our marriages are loving commitments to each other. They reflect and house intimacy and deep, gospel friendship. They have purposes outside of themselves of ministry and mission.

But they have a structure and the Bible shows us what that structure is. The dynamics of marriage are neither traditional or contemporary or liberal. So you're going to have some reaction to these, and you're either going to discount Paul or else you're going to fill in Paul's words with what you think he means.

Some of you just discount it. You don't want men and women to be different. You rightly have seen how this idea has been harmful to women. How it sounds like Paul is saying men are better than women and women have to serve men, and you have experienced and seen now this plays out. So you're raging against that machine. I want you know that I'm with you. I agree with you. These roles have been wrongly understood and wrongly applied and have caused a great harm for women. But that isn't because of the Bible. And the solution isn't to throw out or discount this but to rightly understand Paul.

⁶ This phrase is from John Stone.

Others of you nod your heads and are thinking this means we need traditional marriages. I don't agree with you. These verses don't mean that men have to drive the cars, women do the dishes and cook, men work and women don't. No. Those are not biblical distinctions nor are they manifestations of biblical marriages. Traditional does not equal biblical.

Remember that we have stressed again and again that men and women are equal. Both were created in the image of God – together. A man's way of living, relating, thinking and experiencing the world is not better than a woman's. Neither is a woman's better than a man's (though I admit it's tempting to think that way).

So we're equal, but we're different. That seems pretty obvious to me. Men and women are not the same. The weird thing is that we're really close to being the same. Our stomach, lungs, spleens, skin, brains and eyes are all nearly identical. We share something like 98% of similarity features. But those differences – wow. They're great. I'm a big fan. I love the soft skin, the fuller hips, the breasts and the rest. I think it's just amazing. And how women view the world is just not the same. Many scientists have said that women grow in maturity and wholeness as they create interdependence. They are interested in and moving towards relationships with people and things. Men, however, feel mature and whole when they move toward independence, standing on their own two feet. I'm not sure if that is how God created us, but it's a very different way of looking at the world and moving about in the world.

The Bible seems to get this. Paul gets this. He tells both the men and the women they both need to submit to Jesus. Then he gives an order, not a power play or a hierarchy but an order of roles.

He tells the husbands they are to lead and love their wives. Husbands are to be servant leaders. They are to lead their wives in love. How are they to do this? As Christ loved the church. How did Jesus love the church? Jesus *died for* the church! So many husbands think they lead their wives by making all the decisions and lording power over their wives. But Jesus did not do that. He gave his life away. He loved his bride so much that he went through agony, hell and death for her. That is what leadership looks like. It looks like love.

So many husbands respect their wives. They know their wives are good people, capable, strong, loving and wise. The wives run the show and the husbands happily give over to their wives' leadership. But Paul tells the husbands to do the harder thing that that, the thing that runs counter intuitive to them – to love their wives and lead them. This is so difficult for husbands. They'd rather just give up and do nothing. They're afraid of responsibility and actual true leader. Sure, wives sabotage this, but husbands need to actually love their wives by dying for them with their time, energy, words and showing their wives true spiritual leadership as a loving shepherd, not a jerk dictator or emasculated wimp.

Women, if your husband were leading this way, wouldn't you want to follow him? If he were leading like Jesus leads the church, how could you say no you're not interested in that? Jesus himself submitted to the father. Submission is not in and of itself a bad word. If you submit to someone who loves you and serves you, then it is a delight. Don't take the reins from him, which is your tendency. Women, Paul calls you to do the hard thing, the counter intuitive thing. Many women love their husbands. They serve them, help them, run the kids around for them and do things of genuine love for them. But they don't respect them. They think they're idiots who couldn't spend a day without help. They treat them like fools. There is no respect. Husbands are to love and respect their wives. Wives are to respect and love their husbands.

It's not always going to feel good or be easy to submit to and respect your husband. The text says that husbands sanctify their wives cleansing them with the water of the word. This ministry isn't the picture of a soothing bubble bath but a bristled scrub brush. Are you willing to be washed? Are you actually wanting to be in charge? Are you presenting an environment where your husband can lead with your love and help and will you follow him? Not off a cliff. I'm not saying that. Not into sin. But will you follow him?

The Bible does not say girlfriends submit to your boyfriends. It does not say boyfriends lead your girlfriends. We all submit to Jesus. We submit to our elders and pastors of our churches. We obey our parents and the authorities over us. We lead out in areas of life. Is this person you're interested in able to follow others? Is he or she a good leader? Will he or she minister to and receive ministry from others? Is she teachable? Is he teachable or too independent?

These are important questions to think about as you move toward the biblical view of marriage.

Gospel

Now remember that we can't say everything at once, so we have to stop at some point. My biggest encouragement to you would be to talk to people about this. Look for good marriages, and try to spend time with those people. Wrangle your way into their lives. Ask if you can go over to help fold laundry, run errands, work in the yard. Ask questions when you're there. Ask if you could come over early to help make dinner so you can get some extra time. Watch how a couple relates to each other. Ask questions.

I want you to see one more thing from this passage. It's easy to start to think you can discover some sort of secret formula. Okay – so if I don't have sex before I'm married, and if I am really good friends and am honest, and we have a mission statement and we understand and embrace our roles – then we'll have a perfect marriage! Badow! I'll get to work.

Nope. It won't work. First, your marriage will not ultimately make you happy. It will not be the secret ingredient to add to your life that will finally, finally give you contentment. Your soul doesn't work like that. It's too much pressure for your marriage and anything else to bear. You'll crush under the weight.

Your soul was meant for God alone. You must find your rest in him. Your marriage comes out of that foundation. Are you on the rock of faith or on the sinking sand of something else, anything else but Jesus?

Next, there's just no way you can do all that rightly. You have to be able to experience and understand forgiveness and grace. Unmerited favor for those who deserve wrath. You are not a good delightful person who deserves a good delightful spouse. You are a bad person who deserves hell. You need grace. You need Jesus to love you and forgive you. You need a father who gives good gifts to his children. Do you understand grace?

The weird thing is that marriage is a picture of grace. You might think it is a bonus for good people. But it's actually in itself a picture of grace.

Paul says this when he says something just crazy. He quotes Genesis 2:24 and then says, *This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and his church.*

Huh? That is a pretty profound mystery then. Marriage is about Jesus and the church.

Most of you aren't married. I don't think I need to inflame more desire in you to get married. One of you was worried last semester when I said I was going to do this series. "Doug, don't feed the beast," you said. People in our community want to get married, and I think that's good and healthy.

Realize though that this marriage stuff is gospel stuff. It's dying so you can live. It's the last will be first. It's taking up your cross to follow him. It's temptation and suffering. It's the confusion of following Jesus' words when they don't seem to make sense to you. It's the joy of resurrection. It's Trinitarian community of roles and equality. It's union, oneness.

Jesus came, lived and died for his bride. The church. Do you love the church? Are you just interested in your own success, your own agenda, your own life and happiness? Are you thinking a big wedding will make you more whole? Then you're not ready. That's not what marriage is about. It's about love, and the biggest best love is giving your life to someone else, which is what Jesus did for you.

Do you understand this? Do you want this in your life? Do you understand the gospel for you today? That's the first step in marriage – the gospel itself.

This matters to you today. You're not married, but in everything you do and in all your relationships you're practicing. You're becoming who you will be right now.

If you lay tiles in your kitchen, you can't just eyeball it and go from there, hoping for the best. You have to measure and think and set out chalk lines. The first tile you lay is very important. So is the fifth and the seventh and the twelfth. They all have to fit together to have a good floor.

When you want to graduate with a major, you have to look and see what classes to take. You can't just take whatever classes and hope it turns out to a certain degree. You have to have a plan and ask for direction.

There's a commercial that ran last year on ESPN. It showed some of the most dramatic plays and outcomes in sports. Michael Jordan hitting a game winning shot. NC State's win at the buzzer over Georgetown. Appalachian State's victory over Michigan. And, ahem, Boise State's statue of liberty play verses OU. But then it shows each of those people and teams practicing over and over. In the dark. Late at night. With sweat and pain.

Those dramatic plays didn't "just happen." They were practiced and drilled.

A good marriage for won't just happen. You must have and take the wisdom of others. You need to submit yourself now to the reverence of Christ and following his ways. You must ask for forgiveness in your relationships now, be honest now, seek mission and ministry now, be faithful in little ways now, repent now, be trustworthy now, be content now.

That's only possible because of Jesus. He will help you. The gospel is true for you today and for your marriage in the future.

Marriage is a very powerful metaphor for the gospel. It should speak to us and shape us in regards to our faith itself. Giving ourselves to another. Commitment. Intimacy. Union. Mission. Roles. These aren't just marriage ideas, they are *Christian* ideas. Marriages reflect the gospel. When your marriage is filled with love and grace and trust, you move out into the world in strength and confidence even if the world seems and feels against you. When your marriage is unloving and poor, you move out into the world in weakness, even if all the world seems for you and going just your way. Marriage has power.

Marriage is the promise of a day in which the pain of our failures will be wiped away. We will be full, flaming holy beauty that lives and moves to serve the King of Kings. Meanwhile, today I get to love my wife, hold her hand, feel the pulse of her wild and gorgeous heart, and feel alive, sensual, erotic, bold, full and brave as I protect and provide for her body and soul.⁷

Beloved, by Derek Webb
beloved these are dangerous times
because you are weightless like a leaf from the vine
and the wind has blown you all over town
because there is nothing holding you to the ground

⁷ *The Intimate Mystery*, 25

so now you would rather be
a slave again than free from the law

(chorus)

beloved listen to me
don't believe all that you see
and don't you ever let anyone tell you
that there's anything that you need
but me

beloved these are perilous days
when your culture is so set in it's ways
that you will listen to salesmen and thieves
preaching other than the truth you've received

because they are telling lies
for they cannot circumcise your hearts

(chorus)

beloved there is nothing more
no more blessings and no more rewards
than the treasure of my body and blood
given freely to all daughters and sons