

How to Avoid Marital Failure

LASTING LOVE



ALISTAIR BEGG

FOREWORD BY HOWARD HENDRICKS

Chapter Two



Before We Say “I Do”

Most of this book is for those who have already embarked upon the journey, those who have, as we say, “tied the knot.” So this chapter is for those who haven’t reached that stage. You are in the single world, which is filled with opportunities and fraught with dangers. You are aware that the decisions you make today contribute to the person you will be tomorrow. The number of disintegrating marriages causes you to wonder whether it is advisable to even consider it. And, besides, you have a number of projects to complete, plans to fulfill, and journeys to take before you reach the settling-down stage. At the same time, you would like to have clearly in your mind a strategy for relationships that will prevent you from making unwise decisions and

living with regret, and which will allow you to consider the possibility of meeting your partner for life somewhere along the journey. So let me try to help.

Does My Relationship to God Come First?

When we think about relationships, we should be very clear that our relationship to God must come first. We may well have to pause immediately and ask ourselves just where we stand when it comes to this aspect of our lives. Have we entered through the narrow gate, taken up our cross, and begun to follow Jesus? Or are we simply being kept afloat by the faith of our family? Are we seeking first the kingdom of God and endeavoring to do the right thing, or are we just living to please ourselves? Until we settle this matter, we are unprepared to make the right decisions about other relationships.

We must also recognize that our significance and fulfillment in life is not to be determined by whether or not we have a relationship with someone of the opposite sex. You will know of sad stories involving friends who rushed into relationships driven by fear of what others would say about them if they were not “dating” or “involved.” Settle the matter right now. There is no good thing which the Lord will withhold from those whose walk is blameless. There is no need for panic. It is He who makes everything beautiful in His time. To be unattached to someone of the

opposite sex may be God's best for you now and perhaps always.

To Marry or Not to Marry?

Of all the choices that we ever make, there is little question that the decision about whether to marry and then whom to marry is as crucial as any we will face. When we consider the desire to avoid marital failure, is it fair to say that one way to do just that is to opt for singleness? In order to answer that question adequately, we must pay careful attention to what the Bible teaches about the single state. This is a subject that is highly relevant and, for many, emotionally charged.

When Paul addresses it in 1 Corinthians 7, he sets this question in the larger scheme of things. Eternal verities control his response to practicalities. The present scheme of things is passing away and, consequently, he says, all of our contact with the world should be as light as possible. So, while we are to be involved in the world, we are not to be engrossed in it. A vibrant Christian faith changes the way in which we view all the elements of life.

Material Possessions

So, for example, when it comes to possessions, our concerns about our bank balance should not outweigh our interest in making deposits in the bank of heaven. When we buy "stuff" we should not hold on to it tenaciously but,

rather, treat it as if it really isn't ours to keep.

The Pursuit of Happiness

Our culture is preoccupied with whatever makes us feel good. While there is certainly no virtue in feeling bad or being morose as an alternative, the believer has a different perspective. When our gaze is on eternity and when spiritual victory means much, then the happiness that results from personal success, promotion, or financial gain dims in comparison.

Dealing with Death

Christian faith does not remove us from the experience of pain and loss and tears. But when we lose a loved one, we realize that it is only for a while and that we will be reunited. So we do not fall apart and lose our motivation for life, for we have a living hope and a vital purpose.

The Impact of Eternity

Paul does not develop any of these areas; he merely summarizes them to show the impact of eternity in these most practical areas, not least of all, as we shall see, the question of relationships. "There is no time to indulge in sorrow, no time for enjoying our joys; those who buy have no time to enjoy their possessions, and indeed their every contact with the world must be as light as possible, for the present scheme of things is rapidly passing away" (1 Corinthians 7:30–31 PHILLIPS).

Now it is in this wider context that he says: "From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none" (1 Corinthians 7:29). What does this mean? Paul is clearly not contradicting his earlier teaching, in which he stresses the importance of husbands and wives working hard to fulfill their obligations to each other. His emphasis is surely this: Marriage, in all its demands and benefits, should not be allowed to reduce the believer's obligation to the Lord and His work. The apostle is not about to allow us to use the responsibilities of marriage (and, we might add, family) as excuses for slackness in the service of the Lord Jesus. This teaching challenges the contemporary lists of priorities with which we have grown familiar and undoubtedly comfortable. The list is usually given as follows:

God
Family
The Lord's work/church
Work
Leisure

But what does item one really mean for most of us? It is number one on every believer's list, but what does it mean in practical terms? Does the fact that we may have neglected elements of family life in pursuit of the Lord's work justify the shrines that we have built to the family at the expense of corporate worship and fellowship and evangelism? It sounds so right to talk about being a family-centered church until we pause and realize that our only

focus is to be God Himself. We must try and come to a realistic understanding and application of the words of Jesus, which frankly turn a great deal of our comfortable preoccupations on their heads: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).

Consider the extent to which the cause of the Gospel is impacted negatively on account of our unwillingness to take Jesus at His word. Is it not true to say that, in the interests of “family,” increasing numbers absent themselves from the privileges and obligations of worship on the Lord’s Day, while those same people will rearrange breakfast and dinner plans so as not to miss the baseball practice, swimming lessons, and aerobic class?

The apostle is not teaching that we should neglect our family obligations, but he is making very clear that an eternal perspective will radically change when and how we spend our time together. While these relationships are as precious and meaningful as any earth affords, Jesus reminds us: “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven” (Matthew 22:30).

Calvin says:

All the things which make for the enriching of this present life are sacred gifts of God, but we spoil them by our misuse of them. If we want to know

the reason why, it is because we are always entertaining the delusion that we will go on forever in this world. The result is that the very things which ought to be of assistance to us in our pilgrimage through life, become the chains which bind us.¹

So it is that the longing of Paul's heart is to see men and women given over to God's service without distraction, and the single life provides unique opportunities in this regard.

If you have never been married, he says, in 1 Corinthians 7, then singleness makes good sense. There are peculiar troubles that attach to marriage both in life and death; and while children sweeten our joys, they make our misfortunes more bitter (for example, in the death of our spouse). Paul is not suggesting that celibacy is a more spiritual road to go, but it may, in light of the context he describes, be more sensible. So there are practical advantages for those who have been given the gift of singleness, and one of these is that they do not have the distractions of family responsibilities. Now admittedly, they do not experience the benefits. But when the issue is a single focus on the work of the Lord, there can be no question that the freedom from distraction is a huge advantage.

As a married man I have an inevitable two-fold concern: how to please my wife and care for her and how to please the Lord. The person who is single, free from this

dual obligation, is therefore able to be more fully devoted to the Lord's work.

There is in all of this an implicit challenge to the single community to discover the vital role they can and should play in the purposes of God. It must surely be a strange sight from the portals of heaven to see singles preoccupied with roller-skating and dating and commiserating too often what they regard as their sorry lot in life. The single individual, whether that state continues through life or is interrupted by marriage, has a strategic opportunity to "seize the day" and serve the Lord unencumbered by the privileges and responsibilities that make up marriage.

The Advice of Parents and Others

You have probably discovered by now that few relationships you form will be neutral. In most cases, the person will have either a positive or a negative effect on you. Just think back to high school and you should recall examples of both types. This simple truth becomes more obvious as you continue to make friends—especially friends of the opposite gender. Perhaps by now you also realize the value of your parents' advice. (If you're like many people, parental guidance wasn't really sought out or heeded during the high school years.) But whether or not you agree with them, your parents speak from experience.

If your family structure has been molded by confusion and strife, consider finding other trusted adults within your wider family circle or church. People with unhappy

home lives are particularly vulnerable to the temptation to hook up with someone prematurely as a means of escape. More often than not, these marriage partners have more negative than positive influence.

If you *do* choose to get married, your marriage will become an extremely high priority for you. It is likely to affect, and perhaps even negate, other things you had previously hoped to do. It's not that you won't do even better things, but just don't be naive enough to think marriage means you'll have a friend to "tag along" and do everything you always planned to do.

Wisdom comes from God (James 1:5). Don't leave a decision about whether or not to get married to instinct and logic. Be sure to see what God has to say about the matter. He may want to use you as a single person . . . or He may want to use you as a married person. Regardless of your marital state, you can be sure He wants to lead you through life and achieve all the potential with which He has gifted you.

Am I Rushing Into Marriage? And, If So, Why?

As an adviser to people wishing to be married, I am far more cautious during premarital counseling now than when I first began. I have witnessed an alarming number of broken marriages, and many of them failed in the early years. Consequently, a significant number of couples who

go through our church's marriage preparation part company rather than get married. Our view is that we would rather see a split prior to marriage than to allow the couple to rush into marriage—and just as quickly into divorce. Essentially, we encourage couples to think through the same questions dealt with in this chapter. When they put serious thought into these matters, some of them cannot in good conscience commit to marriage.

One of the first danger signals as a couple approaches marriage is the “hurry-up offense.” If two individuals have only known each other for a few months, more than likely their attraction is based on sheer emotion that may fade as quickly as it appeared. There are exceptions, of course, but in most cases they aren't ready to pledge themselves to each other for life. If their love for each other is genuine, they will be willing to wait and be sure. We ask couples to allow seven months of lead time in order to adequately complete the premarital process. Resistance to such advice is usually a danger sign.

Sadly, one of the reasons couples rush to get their marriage license is an unwillingness to establish and maintain sexual purity in the dating relationship. One of the tragic aspects of contemporary life is the number of young people who have become sexually sophisticated while remaining emotionally immature. Slowing down the process will often uncover these and other problem areas that must be dealt with if the marriage is going to have any chance of success.

Are My Expectations Realistic?

“I know that once we are married, we’ll be able to take care of that.”

This statement, heard again and again, is usually fueled by wishful thinking rather than honest evaluation. If a young woman has never been able to balance her checkbook and has run up significant credit card debt, how realistic is it to expect that she can establish and maintain a frugal budget during marriage? If the young man’s temper has frequently gotten him in trouble with teammates and authority figures, how can he assume that a marriage license will cure that? Or if the couple’s dates have been almost all physical activity and little if any conversation, do they really think a wedding will “fix everything”?

It should come as no surprise that most people are on their best behavior during the dating phase. To be more honest, they aren’t really themselves. They go out of their way to smile and accommodate—not wanting to risk offending the other person prematurely.

Potential life partners also need to see each other in various situations. Here are just a few:

- Late for an appointment because of congested traffic
- Visiting a hospitalized loved one
- Playing with the kids on the street

- Being around his or her parents
- Being around his or her “regular” friends
- Participating in a competitive sport
- Handling various stressful situations

It’s not as if these things aren’t going to come up during a marriage. The sooner one’s prospective spouse sees how the other performs under such conditions, the better he or she can estimate the potential success of marriage. It’s also good to have a few disagreements and arguments prior to the wedding. Otherwise, when they come up during marriage (and they will!) you will not be prepared to see the other person in this different light.

The more two people attempt to be real with each other, the more realistic their expectations will be as they enter marriage.

Am I Marrying a Person or a Body?

This isn’t exactly a frequently asked question, yet it is an important one for every potential bride or groom to consider. Western society is obsessed with externals: facial features, figure, muscular composition, weight, hairstyles, and so much more. Most magazines we pick up have an article related to our bodies. Consequently, young women quickly assume that their significance is directly related to their shape and dress size. Young men frequently model themselves after professional athletes and are

disappointed with any features they feel rate less than "perfect." Essentially every model for products aimed at young people is tanned, attractive, and thin. The covert, yet clear, message is that how we look is more important than how we behave. Image is preferred over character and substance.

It therefore becomes very important for young people especially to determine whether the attraction they feel for their prospective spouse is *purely* physical. Now, clearly, no one would want to suggest that this aspect is irrelevant, but we must recognize that it does not deserve the attention it receives. So the more significant questions are:

- Do I enjoy conversing with this person?
- Can this person carry on an intelligent conversation?
- How do I feel when I introduce this person to some of my father's business associates?
- Is he or she a social misfit?
- Does this person have a growing interest in godly things, or is he or she still a spiritual infant?

These questions get to issues that are enduring. Age will take its toll on everyone. Physical beauty is passing. If we invest in a person who is little more than a physical "package," what will we do when that package begins to sag and droop over time?

The apostle Peter offered some good advice to the

women of his day. He emphasized characteristics that are internal and mature with time:

Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. (1 Peter 3:3–5)

In watching and listening to older couples, it quickly becomes apparent that their marriages endured the test of time because of an attraction based on depth of personality, not shallow physical appeal. They learned to share secrets as they treasured time spent together. They are happy to hang out together. There is no one they would rather have coffee with, for they have become best friends for life.

Physical intimacy and romantic love are not what keeps couples together. It's the emotional and spiritual aspects that make a marriage sweet.

What Should I Look For in a Husband?

This is no easy question to answer, yet it is an important one. While we could brainstorm any number of desired qualities, space only allows for some of the most

essential traits. Here are the top six things women should look for in a potential husband.

1. The man should be committed to growing in his relationship with Christ.

Speaking for God, the prophet Amos asked: “Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?” (Amos 3:3). This question can be applied at many levels, not least of which is the lifelong commitment of marriage. It is difficult to overstate how vitally important this is.

Even secular research confirms the need for shared beliefs, attitudes, and values in order to have a successful marriage:

According to David H. Olson, professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota, it’s possible to predict as early as the day a couple becomes engaged whether that marriage will last. Olson questioned 164 courting couples on their values and checked again three years later. Fifty-two of them had never married, and of those who did, 31 had already separated, while 22 described their union as unhappy. After reviewing all of the initial interviews, Olson found he could identify which couples had been seriously mismatched. “People often believe that important differences will go away with time,” says Olson, “but marriage does not automatically bring people closer.”²

Some well-intentioned women enter marriage knowing the groom is not where he needs to be spiritually, but they intend to “take him on” as a discipleship project. Bad move. The intensity of a marriage relationship is challenging even for two spiritually mature people. It is far too great a challenge to learn to be a good husband and a good Christian simultaneously.

Women should not seek out husbands who merely have mastered “Bible trivia,” but rather should look for those who are serious about growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus (see 2 Peter 3:18). Does this mean that he should be more spiritually mature than she is? Ideally, yes. But if he isn’t, prior to the marriage he should seek out a male mentor to help him prepare to fulfill the God-given role of husband and spiritual leader.

2. A husband should be an individual of obvious integrity.

Many years ago I was staying with a family when a young man came for a date with one of the daughters. While waiting for her, he sat confidently in the living room and talked with the mother. He boasted about how well he was doing in sales and explained how it was necessary to tell “little white lies” to customers. For example, to keep from losing business to the competition, he would promise delivery dates when he knew there was no possibility of meeting them. He seemed quite pleased with himself.

The girl was drawn to his good looks and eager for a relationship. They went out on the date, and eventually the two of them got married. Sadly, their decision was premature, and a messy divorce followed. The girl had known about the guy's predilection for little untruths, but wasn't concerned. In the interest of advancing the relationship, she figured she could get married first and work on her husband later. But she discovered that he was much more masterful at deceit than she had expected. The marriage crumbled around them.

No matter how some men try to justify their use of untruths, those lies should serve as neon signs to prospective brides. What makes us think that if a person would lie to a customer, a boss, a teacher, or a parent, he wouldn't also lie to a wife? Women should watch and listen closely when they enter a serious dating relationship. It should be patently obvious that a prospective husband is honest to the core. If he isn't, the woman should keep looking until she finds one who is.

3. A husband should be able to lead boldly.

Not everyone will be able to marry the high school quarterback or the class president. That's not the kind of leadership to which I'm referring. Every woman should look for the kind of man who can think for himself, weigh options, and make good decisions.

Clearly, no one person *always* makes the best decisions. We all make mistakes. Many times good leadership

requires willingness to take counsel, change one's mind, and then proceed with a different course of action. So don't expect perfection in a husband.

Nor should a woman settle for "leadership" that is selfish and domineering. Christian leadership is marked by an attitude of servanthood and submission to others. On the other hand, a young woman should be more than a little concerned if the man she is dating has to check with his mother constantly before deciding where to eat or which T-shirt to buy!

A woman should witness genuine affection between the man and his family members, but at the same time she should detect a readiness on his part to step out on his own. It is unlikely that he will ever cleave to his wife if he is unable to leave his family.

4. A husband should display the ability to love sacrificially.

Women should seek out men who display the quality of self-sacrifice without feeling the need to say, "I'm a very self-sacrificing person, you know!" Self-sacrifice is detected in subtle ways that vary from person to person.

Watch at the end of an evening with friends to see if he is quick to organize and spearhead the cleanup. Listen carefully as his elderly aunt mentions whether her nephew has been faithful in his visits to the nursing home. Observe the way he relates to children, his willingness to hold doors for passersby with full arms, and his attitude

with waitresses and other service people. Watch his eyes as he sits in a café and observes the obvious ravages of AIDS in the body of the young man at the counter.

Most prospective husbands will express the intent to sacrifice for their wives. However, if a woman detects that a man hasn't practiced this attitude with other people, she has the right to be wary.

5. A husband should be able to laugh heartily.

Humor is a vital element in preventing marital failure. The ability to laugh does not mean being a class clown or even a joke teller. In fact, the poor guy may be hopeless at telling jokes, needing the woman's help when he forgets punch lines and gets vacant stares. But it *is* important that he like to laugh.

A key trait to look for is his willingness to laugh at himself. If he takes himself too seriously, a marriage will probably have problems. Can he tell a story where someone else is obviously the hero while he comes off looking foolish? Is he willing to reveal pictures of himself when his teeth protruded and his ears stuck out—in much the same way they still do? And when he laughs at the comic misfortunes of others, can he do so without becoming cruel or crude?

In *Ragman: And Other Cries of Faith*,³ Walter Wangerin tells of how he and his wife lived in a small apartment when they were first married. Whenever they had a disagreement he would storm out and walk around the block until he cooled down.

One time he trapped his coat as he slammed the door behind him. It was raining, so he had two options. He could slip the coat off and walk in the rain without it, or he could ring the bell and have his wife open the door. Choosing the latter course of action, he rang the bell. As the door opened his wife was laughing uncontrollably, realizing what had happened. In that moment, he writes, he could simply have laughed with her and humor would have provided the bridge to reconciliation. But refusing to do so, he gathered up his coat and walked off into the rainy evening, a prisoner to his own refusal to laugh.

We all face opportunities to make those decisions whether or not to laugh at ourselves. We don't always get it right the first time, but we can learn to do so with a little practice. A husband who cannot laugh when *he* makes a mistake is not likely to be any less severe with his wife's blunders.

6. A husband should model genuine humility.

Oscar Wilde was asked by the customs officer at an airport whether he had anything to declare. His reply was, "Nothing except my genius!" How would you like to live with someone who had that kind of attitude?

Simply put, a good husband should not be stuck on himself, and his attitude should be genuine. Watch out for people who attempt to manufacture humility by debasing themselves. Such people constantly declare their shortcomings and inabilities in order to draw attention to themselves. Even when the focus is on "my" big mistakes, "my"

failures, and “my” lack of talent, the emphasis remains on “me.” Those people hope to have others contradict their negative statements and make a big fuss over them.

Genuine humility keeps its focus on other people. Watch to see if the other person can share the joy of a competitor’s success. Can he be a good understudy without being critical of the person to whom he reports. Does he discuss the talents of his co-workers, or only their faults? Does he enjoy the competition of sports, or does he make excuses every time he loses?

Humility can also be detected in his prayer life and in the way he approaches opportunities for which he is naturally talented. Is it clear that he really believes that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom? Does he really believe that apart from the Lord’s enabling he can do nothing?

The absence of humility can be quickly detected. So can the presence of false humility.

This list of what to look for in a husband is clearly selective and by no means exhaustive. But these factors make an excellent beginning to a checklist.

What Should I Look For in a Wife?

Again, any list I provide for such a broad question is going to be selective, but I believe the following aspects are six of the most important things men should look for in a potential wife.

1. A good wife must have personal faith and trust in the Lord Jesus.

I begin this list with the same requirement as the list for prospective husbands. It is the basis for any and all other qualities on the list.

It is hard to overstate the importance of ensuring that we not enter into an intimate relationship where one person is a Christian and the other is not. The Bible refers to this situation as being “unequally yoked” (2 Corinthians 6:14, KJV). Jay Adams explains:

To be unequally yoked is to be unable to pull together. That means two divergent standards, two opposite goals, two radically different interpretations of life, two incompatible masters to serve, and two contrary powers at work. Unbelief allied with belief in Christ means just one thing—there can be no real intimacy in matters that really count. The two cannot pull together because they are not truly together.⁴

Paul commands believers to marry “only in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:39, KJV). A marriage with only half the people committed to godly things cannot be regarded as “in the Lord.” Young men wanting a wife need the same warning as women looking for a husband. It’s not as common as the reverse situation, yet sometimes a man finds himself in a deepening friendship with an unbelieving

woman. Despite the counsel he receives to the contrary, he desperately wants to believe that he will win her over to Christianity once they become husband and wife. More often than not, the woman makes little effort to pursue spiritual things once the ring is on her finger. The man is left to go to church and work on his spiritual life alone—or worse yet, to eventually stop trying altogether.

2. A wife should possess beauty that is deeper than the skin.

I don't know of anyone who sets out to find a spouse who is physically unattractive, yet it is important to remember that beauty is often in the eye of the beholder.

Earlier in this chapter, I quoted from Peter's letter about the importance of "a gentle and quiet spirit." A wise man looks for a woman who possesses a natural radiance rather than a glow which comes from a bottle. It is less important to find a woman whose beauty comes from time spent in front of a beauty parlor mirror than someone who is regularly before the mirror of the Word of God.

I recall walking on the beach with Sue's dad before she and I were even engaged. Sue was out in the water. As we reached the spot where she was swimming, she walked toward us, tossed her head back, and shook the water from her long hair. Her father said, "What a beautiful girl inside and outside!" I agreed with his opinion then, and I still do!

While external features might get our attention, it's

the person's inner qualities that should cause the real attraction.

3. A wife should be an initiative taker with an attitude of submission.

This parallels the previous statement that the man should be a sacrificial leader. A wise man desires a woman with ideas, abilities, hopes, plans, and dreams—a whole panorama of abilities she brings to marriage. In many areas he will be dependent upon her knowledge, insight, courage, faith, and expertise.

The word *submission* is so frequently misunderstood that it has become a sensitive issue for many people. God's intended role for the wife, as I discuss in a later chapter, is not to wait around for her husband's directives, as if somehow she were paralyzed without them. She is God's gift to the man as a companion and helper. There will seldom be a day when he does not have occasion to thank God for his wife's wisdom and grace.

However, it is also important not to fall into the clutches of a bossy, self-opinionated woman who is clearly unprepared to submit her heart, mind, and lifestyle to the clear teaching of God's Word. Some of the radical elements of feminism have been accepted by certain sectors of the church, even though they are in conflict with God's Word. Later in this book we will see how the roles of husband and wife are not interchangeable. Certain expectations for each role are clearly spelled out.

4. A wife's behavior should build her husband's confidence.

Trustworthiness stems from character. A woman's intrinsic qualities are revealed by her actions. She knows, for example, the difference between dressing to look attractive and deliberately trying to appear seductive. When a man tells me his wife chooses swimsuits that make her the object of male attention at the neighborhood pool, I know there are serious issues that need to be faced in that marriage.

A woman concerned with purity and reverence will always be alluring to a godly man. Even if she becomes a Christian after marriage, such qualities will be instrumental in convincing her husband to become a believer as well.

One key to trustworthy behavior is a controlled tongue. Some women are known for their capacity to gossip and slander. A man who wants to get married will do well to look for a woman whose speech is full of wisdom. It is much easier to put one's complete trust and confidence in such a person.

5. A wife should display kindness that touches others.

While women do not have exclusive ownership of the characteristic of kindness, it seems that they do a much better job of expressing compassion than most men do. It appears that God has fashioned women to be capable

of special tenderness. Men are frequently intent to “keep moving” and get to where they are going. Women are usually more willing to stop in the cause of compassion.

No doubt we can list a number of women in our lives who have at one time or another impressed us with their tenderness. It might be harder to form such a long list of men. When Paul wanted to emphasize the extent of the gentleness he and his fellow ministers had tried to show one group of people, he compared it to the gentleness of a mother caring for her little children (1 Thessalonians 2:7).

As our culture continues to promote effeminate men and masculine women, we as Christians must be prepared in the face of ridicule, abuse, and probably persecution, to be unashamed in holding firm to the guidelines of Scripture when it comes to these things. There were very clear reasons for the Old Testament commands relating to the distinction between the sexes, and we do well to pay more careful attention to them at this time.

6. A wife should have a sense of humor that braves adversity.

This is another area that is equally important for men and women. The ability to laugh will get the couple through more than a few rough spots.

One of the qualities of “the wife of noble character” described in Proverbs 31 is that “she is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come” (v. 25). Along with this ability, the passage explains that she is ten-

der, but also tough. She can oversee numerous projects and handle all the variables. When the threat of discouragement or destruction looms, she is able to chuckle to herself because her dependence is upon God. She doesn't rely on her charm. She recognizes that physical beauty is fleeting, but that fact doesn't cause her to curl up in a ball or slump on a psychologist's couch. No, she laughs at the days to come.

It's no different now than it was in the days of Solomon. How blessed is the man who finds such a woman!

Where Am I Supposed to Find a Mate Like This?

If you wanted to meet tennis players, you would probably try a tennis club. So in seeking to meet Christians who live out the qualities previously described, the best place will be church. While seeking a mate for life is not in itself a sufficient reason for attending church, it is still a legitimate motivation in staying for coffee or joining a singles' group. Do not kid yourself that you are above such an approach.

I advise people to allow others to help them in their search for the right husband or wife. While we should never marry someone in order to please a third party, we should at least be willing to listen to the insights of those who know us best. As Sue and I watch our children grow, it is not difficult to determine which of their companions would be most likely to benefit them in marriage.

Siblings can also watch out for each other when it comes to potential life mates. My mother died when my sisters were fifteen and eleven. As an older brother, I took a peculiar interest in who they dated. Now, through the providence of God, I can say that Sue and I had a part in introducing both of them to the Christian men they married.

And finally, mature couples can play a role in helping their single friends. Some couples attempt to become matchmakers, but they can do much more by opening their homes to allow singles to meet one another in a nonthreatening environment. Also, the single people are offered a bird's-eye view of what marriage can be as they see it modeled in their hosts.

What Am I Supposed to Do About My Sexual Feelings?

The Bible is perfectly clear that sex is intended only within the context of marriage. In dating, it is important not to anticipate marriage in this sexual dimension. Do not be double-minded about this. How can you expect to marry a virgin if every other fellow you know is showing such scant regard for a girl's purity as you are doing in dating? You do not have to be sexually pure for the next five years, just for the next five minutes! To isolate sexual intercourse from the emotional, spiritual, psychological, and volitional elements of marriage is to create a monstrosity. Have a close friend hold you accountable. Deal

with your feelings at an early point before they sweep you past the boundaries you have set for yourself.

Perhaps you've already crossed those boundaries—if not into promiscuous sexual activity, at least into areas where you are not comfortable. If so, there needs to be repentance and restoration and the establishing of holy habits.

One reason sexual sin is so hard to overcome is that it often emerges from a habitually impure thought life. If our thoughts are continually on sexual involvement with others, it's difficult to act otherwise. Unless we deal ruthlessly and immediately with the problem, the chances for repeat behavior are high.

Sinful patterns of behavior are very resistant to discovery and correction because habitual activity tends to take place unconsciously, frequently, and automatically. Where there has been genuine repentance, then we need to follow Paul's example: "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13–14).

Sexual drives can be strong. God is far, far stronger.

What If I'm Not Romantically Attracted to Another Person?

What are we to say to the single person who sees all his or her friends falling in love and getting married, yet never

personally feels a romantic attraction toward anyone? I'll leave this answer to writer and theologian John Stott, who himself was single:

What about us? We too must accept this teaching, however hard it may seem, as God's purpose both for us and for society. We shall not become a bundle of frustrations and inhibitions if we embrace God's standard but only if we rebel against it. Christ's yoke is easy, provided we submit to it. It is possible for human sexual energy to be redirected both into affectionate relationships with friends of both sexes and into the loving service of others. Alongside a natural loneliness accompanied sometimes by acute pain, we can find joyful self-fulfillment in the self-giving service of God and other people.⁵

Don't worry if you don't feel the same romantic leanings as most of your other friends. God creates all kinds of people for all kinds of purposes. You can do far more harm trying to force yourself to be like "everyone else" than if you determine to fulfill God's plan for you as a unique individual.

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