

D LOVE, SEX & RELATIONSHIPS

1: Dating

Warm Up

- > How did your parents find each other?
- > What seems healthy and unhealthy about their methods?

Study

INTRODUCTION

Discussion Groups explore relevant life issues using the Bible as a reference point. This series explores the foundation of healthy dating relationships.

It is fascinating that even though the first man, Adam, was in perfect harmony with God, God still saw he was alone, and gave him Eve (Genesis 2:18). Fundamental to being human is our need for a soul mate. So what process will help us find that special someone? An old rhyme says, “First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in a baby carriage.” Present-day values have challenged traditional views of dating and marriage, but are they better? Let’s look at what a healthy journey toward marriage looks like.

1/ SINGLENESS

There is a joke, “Canadians don’t know who they *are*; they just know they’re *not* Americans.” Likewise, we can view singleness simply as the state of *not* being married. The Bible, however, says singleness is valuable in its own right.

1 Corinthians 7:38 “The man who gets married does well, but the man who does not get married does better.”

Perhaps singleness isn’t well respected because society idolizes romantic love. But unless we can be at peace while being single, we run the danger of engaging in a lifelong cycle of enmeshment and disappointment.

2/ FRIENDSHIP

After we learn how to need others in a healthy way, where should a romantic relationship begin? Friendship. Unlike dating, it allows us to get to know someone without the pressure of performance or the danger of rejection.

3/ DATING

Two forms of dating are unhealthy. First is recreational dating, where the goal is personal enjoyment. The problem is, it stops being fun when someone’s heart gets involved. Next, is dating that includes sex. The problem here is it undermines couples getting to know each other – making out is easier

than having meaningful, intimate talks! These are superficial attempts at relationship, which produce much heartache and little emotional connection.

Instead of using dating for personal pleasure, it is better used as a means to find our spouse. So whom should we marry? Dr. Gottman predicts (with 95% accuracy) which newlyweds will divorce: they are critical, condescending, defensive, and withdrawn. Good looks or common interests are nice, but the main quality to look for in a future spouse is relational maturity. So when you date someone, ask your self (and those you trust), “Can we work through difficult issues together? Do we respect and enjoy each other? Do we embrace a common life direction?” These are the basis for marital happiness.

The other side of dating is determining if *you* are ready for marriage. This has less to do with financial security, and more to do with being able to engage in an intimate relationship. Therefore, ensure that the maturity you look for in your future spouse is present in you.

4/ ENGAGEMENT

The purpose of engagement is to prepare for marriage. Sadly, many people focus on preparing for their wedding instead. But those who prepare for *marriage* commit to at least three things: staying sexually pure, building healthy communication patterns, and taking pre-marital counseling (the divorce rate falls to 5% for those who take *mentor-based* counseling).

CONCLUSION

Joshua Harris “Instead of savoring an unfolding love story – acquaintance, friendship, courtship, engagement, marriage – impatient couples mash the sequence together. Before they have built a friendship, they start playing at love. Before they’ve even thought about commitment, they’re acting as though they own each other.”

Proverbs 14:12 “There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.”

The dating process is like a set of dominoes – the ultimate destination determines each step. The danger is to make personal pleasure our goal. But when we set our sights on relational maturity, the steps we take will lead us to the marriage we’ve always longed for.

Discuss

- > Is it important to be content as a single person? Why or why not?
- > What are your opinions on recreational and physical dating?
- > What are the qualities of a good marriage? How can we work toward building those qualities into our own lives, as a single person?

Prayer

What can we pray for in your life?



LOVE, SEX & RELATIONSHIPS

2: Sex

Warm Up

- > What role does sex play in a love relationship?
- > Is there a difference between sex inside and outside of marriage?

Study

1/ THE PROBLEM WITH SEX

Society is consumed with sex. It sells everything from deodorant to cars. Children are experimenting younger and medications keep us active longer. Porn sites get more hits than Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined (the most popular site gets 32 million visitors monthly); and 30% of all data transferred across the Internet is pornographic. In spite of its prevalence, why does research tell us that society is less sexually satisfied?

Maybe we've been told that sex no longer needs marriage to be satisfying, yet the truth remains: intimacy requires trust, and trust requires commitment (marriage). This is why we don't tell strangers our deepest secrets – we know it's not appropriate or wise to open our hearts to people we don't trust. The point is, sex outside the safety of a committed, trust relationship can't fully express unguarded intimacy; instead, it uses lovers to satisfy our lusts.

Some might not think this is a problem, but consider its effect on marriage. Lust plants a seed of mistrust in the relationship – “Do you want to *love* me or *use* me?” – making vulnerability unsafe. While that seed might take years to mature, that selfishness produces suspicion, resentment, and emotional disconnection. No wonder satisfying sex is so rare in marriage.

It gets worse. Why do many men return to pornography after marriage? It is because years of self-centered sex make them unable to engage in the vulnerability of making love. Lust is a power that is not easily defeated. In fact, 56% of all divorces involve a spouse with an addiction to pornography. For sex to express true intimacy, “mutual consent” must not be the only limit we impose on sex. Sex must be reserved for the marriage bed.

2/ BUT IT FEELS GOOD!

Even though the way of lust is costly, why do we still choose it? It feels good! The Bible describes the thrill of lustful adventures this way:

Proverbs 9:17 “Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious.”

Interestingly, counselors now view sexual addiction as drug addiction. Sexual experiences release four chemicals in our brains: adrenalin, dopamine, and endorphins give us good feelings and dull us to the consequences of our behavior. Finally, oxytocin is called the “bonding drug.” If we have sex with or fantasize about multiple partners, we get bonded (addicted) to drug-induced feelings instead of a real person. The point is, when our feelings are not guided by a higher morality, we end up harming others and our selves.

3/ MAKING LOVE

The Bible describes sex as serving at least three purposes: bonding (Genesis 2:24-25), pleasure (Song of Songs 4:10), and procreation (Genesis 1:28). The best context for all three is marriage. When we use our single years to practice restraining ourselves from lust, when we commit ourselves to one person for a lifetime, and when we pursue sex for our *spouse's* benefit, having sex becomes making love. We are a safe place for our spouse to be vulnerable, giving, and playful. Not only is mutual connection and pleasure the result, we create new life. And children birthed in that kind of setting have the best chance to reproduce that secure, self-giving, satisfying love in their own lives.

Hebrews 13:4 “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.”

CONCLUSION

Most of us have regrets in the area of our sexuality. And often the shame and guilt are as damaging as our poor choices. There are two helpful ways to respond. First, it is never too late to recommit to sexual purity.

Job 31:1 “I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl.”

Second, we can find forgiveness and wholeness in Jesus Christ.

Acts 13:38-39 “Therefore my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sin is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin.”

Thankfully, God's ways enable us to find a healthier, more satisfying experience of sex.

Discuss

- > How can we tell the difference between lust and love? Why does lust hurt relational intimacy?
- > Why is a marriage commitment the healthiest place to experience sex?
- > How should we deal with our sexual regrets?

Prayer

What can we pray for in your life?

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3: Feelings

Warm Up

- > How important are feelings in a love relationship?
- > When do feelings help and when do they hurt a relationship?

Study

INTRODUCTION

Never has society more highly valued personal feelings than now. They are the criteria by which we choose our friends, lovers, life goals, even morals – “It can’t be wrong if it feels good.” In spite of valuing feelings so highly, we remain emotionally immature and disappointed. *Psychology Today* says, “This generation of kids is advanced intellectually, but behind emotionally.” We see this in companies who struggle to find managers because they can’t find relationally mature people. The same immaturity shows up in marriages and families where we don’t know how to process hurt well. It seems the harder society demands feeling happy the more distant it becomes.

1/ FEELING-BASED RELATIONSHIPS

When it comes to dating, three main feelings seem to motivate us. **Laughter** is first. Most couples are just looking for a good time, so when the fun ends so does the relationship. The result is a love/hate reaction to our lovers: we feel used in their pursuit of pleasure, yet we know we do the same thing.

Lust is second. Few people admit this motive, but lust and love *feel* similar. Our brains secrete the same chemicals during arousal regardless of our motivation. Sadly, good feelings can cause bad feelings. For example, pornography feels great but it destroys emotional intimacy. Living common-law feels logical but the divorce rate is double that of legal marriages. Being a virgin feels frustrating, but their divorce rate (including those who recommit to chastity) is only 3%. Initial feelings are poor predictors of lasting happiness.

Love is maybe greatest feeling that motivates us. We all want emotional connection. From fairy tales to love songs, we dream of someone special to “complete us.” In fact, the first idol recorded in the Bible is Eve, where Adam chose her over God. The truth is, however, no person can satisfy the deepest longings of our soul. That is why the main reason for marital breakdown is unrealistic expectations. In the end, the pursuit of feeling laughter, lust, and love leave us with a history of hurt. They don’t deliver on their promises.

2/ REALITY-BASED RELATIONSHIPS

What is the alternative to feeling-based relationships? There are three pillars that can support a truly satisfying relationship. The first is **maturity**. While it is tempting to think good looks, a sense of humor, or common interests are what to look for in a future spouse, a mature character is far more important. Maturity is about the ability to be other-centered, and to handle tension well.

Purity is second. As couples guard each other’s purity instead of push the line, they lay a foundation of trust in their relationship. When dating couples prove that something better than lust is motivating them, they create the safety necessary for emotional intimacy to flourish in marriage.

Faith is the third pillar of relational health. While the divorce rate in and outside the church is similar, when couples attend church *and* pray together, the rate falls to just .009%! When we trust God more than our personal feelings, we have solid basis upon which to build a healthy relationship. In that trust, the deepest longings of our soul are satisfied in him, our expectations of our spouses are realistic, and we find the resources we need to love others in difficult times.

CONCLUSION

The road to experiencing true love travels through dark, twisting valleys of pain and struggle. Yet those valleys are necessary to reveal our selfishness and work the kind of maturity into our hearts that makes true love possible. But if feelings are our ultimate motivation, we will stray from the road that leads to our dreams. The irony is, when we pursue maturity, purity, and faith instead of feelings, we end up feeling the peace and joy we’ve always wanted!

2 Timothy 2:22 “Run from anything that stimulates youthful lusts. Instead, pursue righteous living, faithfulness, love, and peace. Enjoy the companionship of those who call on the Lord with pure hearts.”

Discuss

- > What kinds of feelings do you think motivate a dating relationship?
- > Why are feelings an unstable foundation for a love relationship?
- > Do you think that the three pillars of maturity, purity, and faith are the foundation of a healthy relationship? Explain your answer.
- > Which of those three pillars do you personally struggle with the most?

Prayer

What can we pray for in your life?

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4: Loneliness

Warm Up

- > Do you think that society is becoming more relationally healthy?
- > Why do you think loneliness exists?

Study

INTRODUCTION

In this six-week series on Love, Sex and Relationships, our goal is to examine the foundation of healthy romantic relationships. This examination is critical, for the average divorce rate is 40% in Canada. 63% of common-law “marriages” end in divorce in the first ten years, compared to 14% of legal marriages. Homosexual “steady partnerships” last an average of 18 months, with an average of eight additional sexual partners per year. The number of lone-parent homes is on the rise, with a corresponding increase of children who experience suicide, rape, behavioral disorders, substance abuse, physical abuse, imprisonment, and death. One in three girls and one in five boys are sexually abused. These stats reveal that relational health is rare.

So what is a common response to the risks of relationship? Withdrawal. Two studies found that 40% of adults are lonely, double from 30 years ago. Beyond crippling heartbreak, loneliness is more physically damaging than smoking, high blood pressure, or obesity; even causing the elderly to die prematurely. It may be the greatest tragedy of the developed world. What is the solution? Let’s begin by understanding loneliness and its dimensions.

1/ SOCIAL LONELINESS

So what is loneliness? Quite simply, it is *emotional disconnection*. The most tangible experience of that is found in a lack of meaningful friendships. From apartment living to the breakdown of traditional family structures, people are finding it harder to experience satisfying connection.

2/ PERSONAL LONELINESS

Beneath social loneliness there is a deeper isolation, where we can feel alone even in crowd. Actor Stephen Fry wrote this after his attempted suicide:

Lonely? I get invitation cards through the post almost every day. I shall be in the Royal Box at Wimbledon and I have serious and generous offers from friends asking me to join them in the South of France, Italy, Sicily, South Africa, British Columbia, and America this summer. I have two months to start a book before I go off to Broadway for a run of *Twelfth Night*... In the end loneliness is the most terrible and contradictory of my problems.

Ironically, what begins as a circumstance can lead into a choice, for social loneliness can lead to social evasion. A cycle of pain → fear → withdrawal leads us further away from the love and connection we desire. Sadly, as we seek self-protection over social interaction we become less and less able to give and receive love.

3/ COSMIC LONELINESS

A third level of loneliness might explain the origin of isolation. What if social and personal loneliness stem from a disconnection with God? Just as teens bond inappropriately to peers when parental attachment is impaired, maybe we can’t rightly relate to others when we lack a healthy connection with God. This makes sense if He is the source of love – when there is not a constant stream of acceptance, affirmation, or empowerment flowing from God into our lives, our other relationships become dry and destructive. Fortunately, God is eager to connect with us.

Revelation 3:20 – “Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends.”

God is not a cosmic force or a distant deity; He is a loving Father who desires intimacy with us. That spiritual connection has direct social benefits:

Psalms 68:6 – God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.

The good news is, when we first attach to the source of love, we find the strength and safety we need to pursue and experience meaningful connection with others.

Discuss

- > When have you experienced loneliness?
- > In what ways do people respond to loneliness?
- > Do the three levels of social, personal, and cosmic loneliness make sense to you? What do you think is the source of loneliness?

Prayer

What can we pray for in your life?



LOVE, SEX & RELATIONSHIPS

5: Performance Anxiety

Warm Up

- > What does the fear of loneliness drive people to do?
- > What does anxiety look like in romantic relationships?

Study

INTRODUCTION

Last time we explored the challenges of loneliness. It is so devastating because our deepest desire is for, as researchers say, “a satisfying love relationship.” Our hearts long for true love; not just for “mutually beneficial alliances.”

Sometimes, the strength of this desire pushes us into performance anxiety. We so fear loneliness and rejection that we strive for acceptance. We flirt, brag, people-please, manipulate, compromise, lie, or work out. Behind the many faces of performance anxiety, the underlying question is, “Will anyone love and respect me?” And if our effort doesn’t produce a positive answer, we fall into self-loathing, cynicism, depression, withdrawal, and self-comfort.

1/ RECEIVING AND GIVING LOVE

What drives performance anxiety is a misunderstanding of how true love is experienced. True love is a *gift*, not a *reward*. So every step we take toward performing for love is another step away from finding the unconditional love we really want. This is why, even if we succeed at our seduction, we remain empty – deep down we know that we manipulated the “love” we received.

The problem is that in our anxiety, we confuse *giving* and *receiving* love. Whereas giving is about performance, receiving is about vulnerability. So if we give in order to get, we frustrate ourselves with a method that undermines instead of enhances our ability to receive love. Instead, we must untangle the two, where we genuinely *give* love to others for their benefit, and genuinely *receive* love from others with a grateful, open heart.

2/ HONESTY

If performance anxiety is the enemy of giving and receiving love, how do we reduce it? We reduce our anxiety through *honesty* and *trust*.

Rather than hide behind under or over functioning, we need to be honest about our need for love. It takes courage to admit we need others. It takes even more courage to be honest about how we manipulate others to get their love. But without honesty, we can’t be known and accepted for who we are.

3/ TRUST

After we are honest about ourselves, we need to choose to trust someone else. Trust means opening our hearts to let someone love us. The old methods we use to protect ourselves from hurt not only block out pain, they also block out love. At some point, we must drop our guard and let someone in.

But the question is, who? Who is worthy to be trusted? Men? Women? Family? Friends? Everyone is less than absolutely trustworthy.

There are two things that help us trust. The first is to choose wisely – don’t trust an alcoholic to hold a beer and not take a drink! Trustworthy people are humble, selfless, and faithful. The degree to which these qualities are in someone is the degree to which we should trust them.

But there is a second problem: no one is perfectly trustworthy. Everyone will let us down at some point. This is why we need a relationship with God, for He is absolutely trustworthy. He is perfectly humble, selfless, and faithful:

Matthew 11:29 – I [Jesus] am gentle and do not have pride.

1 John 4:10 – This is love! It is not that we loved God but that He loved us. For God sent His Son [Jesus] to pay for our sins with His own blood.

Deuteronomy 31:8 – Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord will personally go ahead of you. He will be with you; he will neither fail you nor abandon you.

The security we find in Jesus is the foundation we need to venture into less trustworthy relationships and not be unduly wounded. Trusting in Him first, enables us to enjoy truly satisfying relationships with others.

Discuss

- > Describe the difference between loving others for *their* benefit and loving others for *our* benefit. How can we tell the difference between the two?
- > What does performance anxiety look like in your life? How do those coping mechanisms prevent you from receiving love?
- > Why is trust the foundation of a love relationship?
- > Why is trusting Jesus a helpful foundation for trusting others?

Prayer

What can we pray for in your life?

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6: Summary

Warm Up

- > What are you looking for in a future spouse?
- > What are the qualities of a healthy dating relationship? What are the qualities of an unhealthy dating relationship?

Study

INTRODUCTION

In this series, we explored healthy and unhealthy qualities of romance and dating. We saw how dating needs to be more about looking for a relationally mature partner, than about pursuing temporary pleasure. We explored why extra-marital sex undermines our ability to experience marital intimacy. We examined how social and personal loneliness is best addressed through building a meaningful relationship with God. Lastly, we examined how performance-based relationships lead us away from being truly known and unconditionally loved. Three headings summarize our study:

1/ SAFE SEX

First, save sex for marriage. For sex to express emotional intimacy, it must be set inside the safety of a marital commitment. Some people say “a piece of paper” isn’t necessary to show commitment. But perhaps their resistance to the traditional form of commitment is based on underlying fears. And perhaps it is exactly those fears that make it difficult for relationships to flourish. However, as we work through our fears of commitment, sex becomes what God intends: an intimate, self-giving, enjoyable, and bonding experience.

1 Corinthians 6:18-20 – So run away from sexual sin. It involves the body in a way that no other sin does. So if you commit sexual sin, you are sinning against your own body. ¹⁹You should know that your body is a temple for the Holy Spirit that you received from God and that lives in you. You don’t own yourselves. ²⁰God paid a very high price to make you his. So honor God with your body.

2/ SELFLESS LOVE

Many people think that the opposite of love is hate, but (for example) when we love our children, we hate what hurts them. It is better to think that the opposite of love is selfishness. This makes selfishness the greatest enemy of love. But considering how passionately people pursue self-expression, self-love, self-fulfillment, and so on, we would think selfishness is a noble pur-

suit. Regardless of its popularity, to experience true love, we must learn the art of selflessness, and look to marry someone who has that same ambition.

Romans 12:10 – Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 – Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud ⁵or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. ⁶It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. ⁷Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

3/ SET PRIORITIES

Finally, we must order our relationships. When God is first in our hearts, we experience relationships with others as God planned. However, if we look to find in others what only God can give, we get demanding, kinky, abusive, hardened and unfulfilled. Human relationships crumble under the weight of unrealistic expectations when they replace God in our lives.

Romans 1:25 – They traded the truth of God for a lie. They bowed down and worshiped the things God made instead of worshiping the God who made those things. He is the one who should be praised forever.

We can’t use a hammer to cut wood, a car to sail the seas, or a spouse to meet our deepest needs. Good things go bad when they are used for something other than their intended purpose. Spouses are a tremendous treasure only when we treat them as a channel instead of a replacement for God’s love.

CONCLUSION

What does it look like to trust God in the area of romance? It looks like following his ways instead of our ways. This is such good news. Because he created love, sex, and relationship, he knows what’s best. God’s wisdom, love and power transform our relationships into something far better than what we could produce. Ironically, as we let his will instead of our desires guide us, we find the relational satisfaction we’ve always longed for.

Psalms 37:4 – Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Discuss

- > Which of these three conclusions is most difficult for you? Why?
- > What would enhance your experience of love, sex, and relationships?
- > What would trust in God look like in this area of your life? Is there anything that is preventing you from trusting him?

Prayer

What can we pray for in your life?