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# Relationships with “More than Friends”

BY MARY S. HULST

Mary Hulst's college students, like all of us, are regularly exposed to many lies about dating, singleness, sex, and marriage. Walking with them through the basics of *why* to date, *how* to date, and *who* to date, she counters some of these lies with the truths of the gospel.

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One of my great privileges as chaplain at Calvin College is to preach each Sunday night during the academic year at a campus worship service called “LOFT,” which stands for “Living Our Faith Together.” As the name implies, the focus is on living out discipleship in community. Each service is designed and led by college students for college students. Not surprisingly, I weave dating, chastity, sex, and relationships into many of my messages there.

In a series of four LOFT messages exploring our relationships with God, parents, friends, and (what I call) “more than friends,” I approached the topic of chastity in the last one. I added the quotation marks on purpose — as when someone asks about a couple, “Are they friends?” and the reply comes, “No, I think they are ‘more than friends.’” That’s what I was talking about: our relationship with the person we want to date, are dating, or want to break up with.

Every dating relationship requires a lot of ongoing discernment, even when everything goes properly — that is, when two people are civil and decent toward one another and do not maliciously abuse each other in any way. There are plenty of initial hurdles, personal disappointments, small hurts (intentional or not), and rejections to deal with. My comments to the students assumed this “normal” flow in their dating relationships. I would have more and different practical counsel if spiritual, emotional, or physical

abuse were involved.

I think of this fourth message as a “Christian speech” rather than a true sermon. By that I mean that I selected a topic and drew insights from the Bible to guide my thinking about it. Christian principles are presented throughout a Christian speech, but the scripture text is not the launching pad for the message. In a true sermon, a preacher starts with a scripture passage and opens it to deeper understanding by the congregation so that they live differently as a result of hearing it.<sup>1</sup>

My college students, like all of us, are regularly exposed to many lies about dating, singleness, sex, and marriage. Walking with them in this message through the basics of *why* to date, *how* to date, and *who* to date allowed me to counter some of these lies with the truths of the gospel. What follows is a condensed version of my message to the students.<sup>2</sup>



Do you know about the app Tinder? Its enticing motto is “It’s like real life, but better.” Oh, really? Tinder allows you to upload a picture of yourself and then flip through the pictures uploaded by other people in your immediate geographical area. You can swipe one way if you do not like a person’s picture, and swipe another if you do. Now if you like someone’s picture and that person also sees your picture and likes it, then you get the option to communicate with each other.

In many places, but especially in big cities, people are using Tinder to arrange easy sex: “Let’s see, who is nearby that I find moderately attractive and is willing to meet? I can move into the relationship just as a body. I can get whatever sex I can get out of it, if that’s all I want.” Tinder allows people to have bodies without souls.

Way down at the other extreme on the Internet, there are people beginning online relationships with people who live far away, whom they have not seen, or do not know what they smell like, or know anything about them. Yet, they are pouring their hearts out to one another through emails, sent back and forth, that are filled with reflective, witty prose, and perhaps a poem. It’s as though they have souls but no bodies.

These extreme options – dating as bodies without souls and as souls without bodies – are available and increasingly popular today through the “miracle” of modern technology.

But our God comes into this and says, “Guys, I’ve got something so much better for you: fully incarnate relationships, where bodies and souls are together and you get to know each other well.”

When you were a child, did you snicker when a teacher read aloud in Sunday school or Bible class one of the Old Testament passages that talk about a husband and wife conceiving a child in these words: “The man *knew* his wife” (for example, Genesis 4:1)? He-he-he...they’re talking about sex.

You were eight years old, and that was funny. But the Hebrew word here, *yada* (“to know”), is much more holistic than “had sex with.” It conveys the idea of the husband delighting in knowing and loving and serving his wife, and one way this is exemplified is in the act of sexual intercourse.

God has this idea that he wants *yada*. And we, when we are honest with each other, most of all want *yada*. We really want to know and be known. We want this in our relationship with God, in our relationship with our parents, in our relationship with our friends, and we want this with anyone we date.

To know and be known—that’s what we are going for in a relationship. As we apply this to Christian dating, let’s look at *why* we should date, *how* we should date, and *whom* we should date.

### WHY WE SHOULD DATE

What should be our purpose or goal in dating? First, it is important to dispel a cultural myth by saying clearly that *we do not date in order to get*. “Getting” a person is a common theme in romantic songs and movies: “I want *you*. I’ve got to have *you*. I need *you*.” We all know centripetal-force people who just suck others into their orbit and the relationship is all about *them*. That’s the central idea here: “I have a need, and I am going to take *you*.” But, as followers of Jesus Christ, this should not be our purpose in dating. We do not date to “get” someone.

Rather, *we date in order to grow closer to Jesus*. I know you are thinking, “O, Pastor Mary, we do *not* date to grow closer to Jesus,” but yes, yes we do—because hopefully what attracts us to someone initially is how well that person imitates Christ. Is that person kind and generous? Does that person live with integrity? Do we like the way this person is living and, if we hang out with them more, could this person help us become more like Jesus? That is *who* we want to date, and that is *why* we date. We want to grow closer to Jesus.

Furthermore, *we date in order to be better for the kingdom*. I often say, “When all-you-all date, it affects all-you-all.” No one dates in isolation. There is another cultural myth that dating is private and one just goes off and figures it out on one’s own. No! Just ask the persons whose roommate or friend or sibling is dating how it affects their lives. So, when I say we date in order to be better for the king-

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dom, I am talking about the kingdom of God that is happening right around us, in our dorm room, our house, our family. Are we becoming better for the community because of the people we choose to hang out with? If we are not becoming better for our roommate, friends, and family by dating someone, then we should not be dating that person.

If we have some hutzpah, we will ask our friends and family how our dating that person has impacted our friendships and family relationships... because it has. And in the best situation, they will say, "You are so much better since you started dating that person. It is *awesome*. We want you with that person *forever*." That is where we want to get. We want to say, "The kingdom of God is going to be better if the two of us keep moving toward each other and toward Jesus." Eventually, if things are going really well, we will make the status permanent. We will say, "The kingdom is going to be best if we get married. That is just going to be great."

### **HOW WE SHOULD DATE**

When we are dating to draw closer to Jesus and become better for the kingdom of God, then we will discover that *singleness is truly a beautiful and important state of being*. Some of us will be single our entire lives, because it is a calling or just how it happens. Most of us will be single for at least some part of our adult lives. We should treasure our singleness as an opportunity.

The Apostle Paul notes (in 1 Corinthians 7:32-35) that it is harder to be attentive to the kingdom of God when we are married. A married person wants to serve the kingdom and wants to pay attention to his or her spouse, and finds it hard to do both. If we are single, we can be devoted; if we are married, our loyalties are divided. I can testify, having been married for a couple years after being single for twelve years, that Paul is so right! I have limited mental real estate, and my husband and his children and his in-laws have all moved in on the real estate. My thoughts go to him and to them, and it is harder to be wholly attentive to the kingdom of God. I love being married, but it has helped me appreciate singleness as an important and beautiful state of being.

When we are single, then, we should value the opportunity to learn how to attend to God, how to talk to and listen to our Lord. In the process, we can find God really interesting and find ourselves really interesting. We will be rooted and contented in our singleness as we learn to root ourselves in Christ.

An episode of one of my favorite television shows, *Parks and Recreation*, illustrates what happens when we neglect to attend to God and to ourselves during singleness.<sup>3</sup> The character Ann Perkins arrives at a community garage sale with three large boxes, each one labeled with the name of a previous boyfriend and containing the remains of their relationship. When Ann dated a man, she took on his personality. Rummaging through the first box, she explains to the camera, "I dated Chris and he was really into exercise," and

the box is full of now-unused exercise equipment. "Before him, I dated Andy and he was in a grunge band," and she pulls out the old flannel shirts. "Before that I dated Tom and this box" – filled with glitzy odds and ends – "is my needless shopping phase and also my credit card debt phase." We laugh in sad recognition of Ann's problem: she needed to figure out who she was. We need to figure out who we are in the Lord.

Parents ask me, "What are you most concerned about in your students?" I worry that in trying so hard to be liked by others, they will not learn what they really love. What do they love about God, what is God inviting them to do with their lives, what dreams do they have? Maybe one loves teaching music to children, and cannot imagine life without this. Maybe another loves the idea of healing people and watching them get better, and cannot imagine life without that. Maybe they love being outdoors in nature, and cannot imagine not doing that on a regular basis. Maybe they love children so much, that if God does not call them into marriage, they are sure God is calling them into parenthood and would think about adopting. As we learn to attend to God and figure out exactly who we are and what we love, we bring all of that into our relationships, including a romantic relationship if God calls us to it.

A second discovery we make as we are dating to draw closer to Jesus and be better for the kingdom, is that *we cannot save persons by dating them.*

We cannot keep them from their bad habits. It is a cultural myth that our strong love will stop them from drinking irresponsibly, cutting themselves, having an eating disorder, or viewing pornography. It is a myth that we will draw them into going to church, praying, studying harder, or managing their money responsibly. We may say, "I know that I can change this person's life. My love will save them." But who saves? Jesus saves, we don't. The truth is we cannot change or save anyone. Only God can do that!

Here's another discovery: *physical intimacy is not a right or a need.* It often feels like both because popular culture – every movie, television show, YouTube video, and popular song – is saying, "This is a right. This is a need. You should *get it.*" But that's not correct. How do we know? Well here is a clue: "We all experience sexual desires but they...can be controlled without

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damaging us," Molly Kelly notes. "I have never seen an obituary that gave chastity as the cause of death."<sup>4</sup>

We do not talk much about physical intimacy. Why not? We talk a lot about sex, but we do not we talk about the little things that lead up to it. Why don't we say, "I would like to be really clear: at the end of this night I would like to close by giving you a hug; other than that, I am not going to touch you, because I want to be fully attentive to you and I am not going to cross any barriers"? Wouldn't that be nice? Otherwise, the entire date is awkward, because all you are thinking about is how far this is going to go physically. What if you were asked before being touched? How delightful would it be if someone said to you, "May I hold your hand?" or "May I kiss you goodnight?" That is the difference between dating to get and dating to grow, to say "I'm not going to do anything that's going to make this person uncomfortable." Then you can be fully attentive to this other human being that God has put in your presence. Physical intimacy is not a right, it is not a need. It is a *gift*, so let's treat it like that.

When we date to draw closer to Jesus and become better for the kingdom of God, *we will treat each other with honesty and kindness*. That sounds trite and simple, but in the context of asking someone out, dating, and ending a relationship, it takes some courage to do.

Many of us can remember a painful conversation like this. "What did he say to you?" "He said he wanted to meet me after practice." "Well, what does that mean? Did he say you should shower and stuff? Was there a promise of food involved in this conversation?" "I don't know what it means!" We could not tell if the person really liked us or not.

So, here is some advice: let's be clear and honest when we ask someone out. Say something like this: "You're a really kind (or smart or funny or compassionate) person and I would like to get to know you better. On Thursdays I am done with classes at 2:30. Can I meet you at the campus coffeehouse and treat you to the hot beverage of your choice?" That's all you have to do. It is not hard, it just takes courage. Start by telling the person something good about the person. Then here is what I like about the plan: it keeps the date local, public, low stakes, and gives both of you an exit strategy. (Where did we get this idea in North America that teenagers should get in the car and go off by themselves where one has the keys and the other doesn't? If the date goes really poorly, one of you is toast because you have no way to get out of the situation.)

If someone says these words or something like them to you, just say "Yes." Worst case scenario: you are sitting there for twenty minutes drinking a free java. Best case scenario: you are thinking, "This is actually fun. I really enjoy this person. This is lovely."

So, let's say the first date goes well. Here is what to say: "I really enjoyed this and would like to do it again. Would you like to meet here again next Thursday?" Either person can say this; it is honest, clear, and

specific. If the date doesn't go well, tell the truth: "Thank you for spending time with me; I feel like I have a new friend. Have a great afternoon."

A big problem in our college community is that students get a crush on someone and create a Walter Mitty-like fantasy of what it would be like to date, marry, have babies, move to the burbs, and just go the whole way. But they don't even know yet if the person likes them, or if the person is dating anyone else! It is so much safer to stay in one's Mitty-like pretend world, than it is to ask someone out for coffee and hear this: "You have been so kind to me, but I'm not interested in a second date." But does our Lord invite us to live in secret fantasy worlds? Or does he invite us to date for the kingdom of truth and reality and kindness? It takes courage and a supporting community to ask for a date, or to say "no." It takes courage and a supporting community to deal with rejection, or to do the second date. Don't we want to be those kind of people? Isn't that what a life in Christ looks like? It looks courageous and truthful.

When you have been dating someone for a while and you need to break up, tell the truth. Because the stakes are higher and each of you has more invested, you may want to start the conversation by saying something like this: "This may come as a surprise to you, but I am losing confidence in this relationship. I know that I'm not ready to keep moving forward. I need to stop seeing you." Be clear and honest. Do not string the person along. Do not flirt without purpose. Do not say, "God told me to break up with you." It may be true, but if you tell this to a person, they've got a messed up relationship with you and a messed up relationship with God. Do not say, "Let's just be friends." If you have been invested in a relationship for a while and it is over, do not belittle the person by saying, "We can go back to the way we were." You can't.

If you want to break up, *break up*: that means no calling, no texting, no Facebook notes to check in. The person is looking for any sign of hope that this could keep going because your "no" was a mistake or you were having a bad day, and so on. And you need to understand what life looks like without this person in it. This is where the kingdom of God comes in, because your friends are going to be paying attention to how you do this. And if you think it is hard on the two of you involved, it is hard on the radius of people who know about this relationship.

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Be kind when you see the person, and be kind when you speak about the person in conversation with others. This is an opportunity for us to model our discipleship. When things go awry in a relationship, do we respond with integrity and grace and kindness? Do we clothe ourselves with compassion? Do we forgive?

Here's a final discovery: *we can survive a break up*. Yes, studies show that breaking a relationship with someone produces the same physical trauma as a car accident: you ache, you cannot sleep or you sleep all the time, you cannot eat or you eat all the time. But God never wastes anything. God is teaching you, growing you, saying, "Let's move together from death to life, let's move together to find people who help you grow in relationship with me and build the kingdom. I'm not going to waste that time in your life. You learned a lot about yourself and about other people and what's important to you and what you love. I'm not going to waste that. Let's move into the future together."

This knowledge allows us to take a risk again. Before I met my husband, I had a bad break up that felt like I was in a car accident. But it taught me that I can survive this. So when my friend, Meg, said to me a few months later, "I have someone I want you to meet," I said, "I can survive this. Go ahead." Chocolate and prayer get you through a lot. So I could say, "yes." Meg was the one who officiated at our wedding.

### **WHOM SHOULD WE DATE?**

Do you have a checklist? He's got to be tall, play the guitar, speak three languages, be really nice to his mother, and if he has brown eyes, that would be great. She should be cute, love to hike, be into basketball, sing in the choir, and wear her hair long. We all have a list. We have ideals. And usually the items on our lists are pretty superficial.

What would it look like if we used God's checklist? Psalm 15 begins with a question, "O LORD, who may abide in your tent?" (15:1), and goes on to describe a person of character, a person who loves righteousness. It is a pretty good checklist. "Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart" (15:2) — that is, they love holiness, are open to the Holy Spirit correcting them, and want to move from death to life. These persons "who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors" (15:3) — they speak kindly about their past relationships, even about the people who have hurt them. "In [their] eyes the wicked are despised, but [they] honor those who fear the LORD," and they "stand by their oath even to their hurt" (15:4) — in their corner of the kingdom, people like them and trust them. They have a clear idea of what is wrong, and keep working to move from wrong to right. And they keep their promises, even when it costs them. They "do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent" (15:5) — they are wise with money and 'stuff,' and generous with others.



Psalm 15 is the checklist for character and righteousness, which makes it a great checklist for the kind of people we want to date or have as friends. These people will help us grow closer to Jesus and become better for the kingdom. But here’s the final twist: when we are praying about whom to ask out, we must not only look to see if those people around us meet this checklist, but if we do. Are we Psalm 15 persons? Are we so grateful to God for the new life God has given us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ that we yearn to be Psalm 15 persons?

God’s purpose in all our relationships – with God, our parents, our friends, and whom we date – is to help us to flourish, to move us from death into life, from the tomb to resurrection. May we give thanks for everybody who celebrates resurrection with us, and with their help, may we order our loves well. We pray this through Jesus Christ, who loves us.

## NOTES

1 I write more about the difference between a Christian speech and a sermon in Mary S. Hulst, *A Little Handbook for Preachers: Ten Practical Ways to a Better Sermon by Sunday* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Praxis, 2016).

2 “Relationships with ‘More than Friends’” was originally given at LOFT on Sunday, March 2, 2014. If you want to listen to or view this message in its worship context – which is much more entertaining than reading about it, I assure you! – it is available at [www.livestream.com/calvin-college/events/2725538](http://www.livestream.com/calvin-college/events/2725538) (accessed August 29, 2016). The message begins at minute thirty-six.

3 *Parks and Recreation*, “Halloween Surprise,” 73, directed by Dean Holland, written by Michael Schur, NBC Television, October 25, 2012. This funny scene is online at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=LN8ooimoQ8I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LN8ooimoQ8I) (accessed September 3, 2016).

4 Molly Kelly, as cited in Bruce Main, *If Jesus Were a Sophomore: Discipleship for College Students* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 89.



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