

Dating: Going Against The Grain Of Our Culture

1 Peter 2:11

By Pastor Eddie Ildefonso

IMAGINE YOURSELF in a new restaurant reading a fancy menu on an empty stomach. You spend a few minutes deciphering the delicacies listed and then give your order. "I believe I'll try this roast duckling with chestnut sauce, please."

When the plate arrives, you express your approval of a beautiful arrangement of food, complete with complementary colors and garnishes. "It's worth blowing a diet for food like this," you remark to your host.

Soon you begin to have second thoughts. The chestnuts are lodging in your throat, and the duck and your stomach seem to be fighting over mineral rights. "Maybe my eyes are bigger than my stomach," you explain with a note of regret as you push back your plate. You resolve to ask a few questions and make a wise decision the next time you look at an unfamiliar menu.

Many people go through similar pangs of regret concerning their decisions about dating, courtship, and marriage. Relationships that are appealing at the outset can turn distasteful with time. The gentle wound of Cupid's arrow can become a painful thorn in the flesh, and many who swear by their commitment to each other soon find that they are swearing at it.

Anyone familiar with current divorce statistics would agree that our culture is doing a poor job of preparing people for lasting and fulfilling marriages. Could it be that many of the problems lie in the nature of the dating and courting relationships that precede the marriage vows? We think so.

Dating relationships as we know them are relatively new on the scene. They have no direct precedent in the Scriptures. (The only Hebrew matchmakers were the parents of the prospective bride and groom!)

What does emerge from Scripture, however, are relationship principles that are clear, transcultural, and timeless. For instance, the Bible teaches, "**Abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul**" (1 Peter 2:11). When that verse was written, a common application of it might have been "Stay away from the temple prostitutes." In our culture today it might mean, "Check the rating on a movie before you decide to see it."

Although most single Christians really want to experience the uniqueness of a Christian marriage and home, they're unaware of the non-Christian pressures of our culture that greatly weaken that desire. All too often, before they've developed spiritual discernment their ships are blown off course by prevailing cultural winds.

While the Bible speaks quietly in timeless principles, our culture shouts its message in dictums difficult to ignore-even though we aren't always aware we're hearing them.

How can this be? In simple terms, our culture is our background. It all seems so right, so normal, because these influences have become a part of us. **Our cultural background is a "switch" that is difficult to turn off as we acquire our outlook on life.**

As we mature in the Christian life, we begin to objectively reevaluate the kaleidoscope of influences in our background. Our approach to the dating process is especially crucial. Our culture exerts such a strong Pull on our lives that we can easily become brainwashed into following the patterns around us, only to arrive on the other side of the altar with a "ho-hum" marriage.

God warns us, "**Do not learn the ways of the nations . . . For the customs of the people are delusions**" (**Jeremiah 10:2–3**). What are some of these ways?

LIVING FOR THE MOMENT

I was once speaking to couple by the name of Stacy and Paula Rinehart and they told me the following: "Our three-year-old daughter is having trouble learning her last name, Rinehart. If you asked Allison her name, you might well hear her say "Allison Right Now!" Actually it's no wonder she thinks that's her last name because her daily chatter contains a barrage of requests for things "right now."

As adults our demands for the immediate are often no different. "**Instant gratification**" accurately describes the expectations of our generation. We approach life with a vending machine mentality. Just look over the possibilities, decide what we want, and get it immediately.

The philosophy of living for the moment is everywhere. "**You only go around once in life, so grab for all the gusto you can.**" "**If it feels good, do it**" "**If you're angry, explode and you'll feel better.**"

But the apostle James said, "**You lust and do not have; so you commit murder,**" (**James 4:2, New American Standard Bible**), pointing out the evil of our desire to fulfill passions immediately even if we have to sacrifice another's welfare in the process.

I once knew two young Christians who had known each other only a short time before they came to us for premarital counseling. It quickly became evident that they were immature emotionally and spiritually, and their relationship was based on a physical attraction. They desperately needed to wait and give themselves the benefit of time. They had taken a bite of the "**right now**" apple, however, and we could not dissuade them from the wedding scheduled within the week.

They found after marriage that when their initial attraction to each other wore off, they had married someone they didn't really know. Five difficult years of financial woes, small children, and marital counseling have demonstrated to them the repercussions of living for the pleasure of the moment. As we have watched and counseled them in some of the difficulties of these years, how often we've wished we had more adamantly opposed that wedding.

This couple is a clear illustration of why some pastors refuse to marry two people who have not been seriously courting for at least six months. It simply takes time to really know someone. If this young couple had known each other longer without the complicating factor of physical involvement, they might have avoided a disappointing marriage.

Living for the moment not only affects decisions to get married, but also attitudes about what marriage should be after the wedding. As indicated by the sign in a shop that states, "We rent wedding rings." marriage has become a contract for "as long as our love lasts" rather than a commitment of lifelong permanence.

A friend who got married after we did replied this way when asked when she and her husband thought they would have children: "Oh, we're definitely going to wait a few years and see if our relationship works out. We'd hate to bring children into a broken marriage." Marriage for keeps was a maybe-or-maybe-not proposition in her mind.

For Christians, that mentality is unthinkable. Scripture teaches that marriage is the symbolic picture of Christ's union with his bride, the church (**Ephes. 5:23–33**). In spite of our unfaithfulness as the bride, he is committed to us for all eternity. Based on that relationship, divorce is not an option for two married believers, and to entertain the possibility of it while you're thinking of marriage means you shouldn't get married. In a culture that lives for the moment and marries for the moment, the Christian's concept of lifelong commitment to one person stands out in sharp contrast.

Scripture uses a vocabulary quite different from our generation and culture. In the Bible we see concepts such as ***discipline, restraint, waiting, responsibility,*** and ***commitment.*** Though these may sometimes make it appear that God would like to thwart all of our fun, nothing could be further from the truth. "**For I know the plans I have for you, God says to his people. They are plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope**" (**Jeremiah 29:11, The Living Bible**).

God does not place his emphasis on the now. You, God's unique creation, are in the process of *becoming* all that he intended you to be when he paid the price to free you from sin's power. And he is ever so capable of bringing the right person into your life—on his timetable, not yours.

When it comes to **dating, courtship, and marriage**, the stakes are simply too high to live for the moment.

LIVING FOR THE SENSUAL

Possibly nothing has had as much bearing on the cultural mores of dating as has the sexual revolution of this century. Bookstore shelves are overloaded with manuals on developing better techniques. Supposedly, any activity is permissible now for those in love. Sexual experimentation before marriage is applauded as a viable means of determining compatibility and acquiring skills. License is the order of the day.

What does this permissiveness add up to in the end? **Chuck Swindoll** quotes an article by Richard Cohen, originally appearing in the ***Washington Post***. It was entitled, "**Open Marriage . . . Broken Marriage.**"

"There were these couples I know. They were open. They were honest They were having affairs. They were not sneaking around (applause), they were not lying (applause), they were being honest (whistles). Everyone agreed that it was wonderful. The men agreed and the women agreed and I agreed and it all made you wonder.

Then they split. There was something wrong. Invariably someone couldn't take it. It had nothing to do with the head. The head understood. It was the heart; it was-you should pardon the expression-broken.

It all made you think. It made you think that maybe there are things we still don't know about men and women and maybe before we spit in the eye of tradition we ought to know what we're doing. I have some theories and one of them is that one of the ways you measure love is not with words, but with actions, with commitment, with what you are willing to give up, with what you are willing to share with no one else."

If we could take the input of our culture in the area of sex, turn it upside down and inside out and discard some of it entirely, we might begin to approach the instructions God gave in the first place. Just as a car manual gives detailed information from the maker as to the use and abuse of your car, so God has given us explicit directives as to the use and abuse of sex. As its creator, he designed the physical expression of love for the context of permanence and commitment found only in marriage.

Consider the irony of it all. The same God who spoke the world into existence also masterminded our physical relationships, and yet the world acts as if he were some prudish old maid ready to give us a slap on the wrist for holding hands. God declared that all he had made was "**very good**"(**Genesis 1:31**).

He devotes one book in the Bible, the Song of Songs, primarily to a description of the heights of physical enjoyment possible in married love.

The world has a shortsighted, painfully inadequate understanding of all that God means sex to be. Sex involves all that you are as a person brought together with another whole person to reflect the complete oneness of Christ and his bride, the church. And, just as Richard Cohen came to realize, sex is special precisely because it is to be shared with only one person.

LIVING FOR SOMEONE WHO LOVES YOU

For much of our adolescent years, and then some, we're subtly led to believe that only when we find that special someone will our lives take on real meaning. Our personalities will blossom, and our imperfections will disappear.

Many people wake up in married life to realize that what once seemed like moonlight and roses is now daylight and dishes. They are the same people they were before they fell in love with each other, with the same fears, the same old habits, and the same insecurities. And they are now married to someone who will help point out these shortcomings! Finding that special someone is not the ultimate answer to a person's needs.

There is some truth to the assertion that happiness is having someone to love you, but the world has the wrong someone in mind! No human relationship can fill that God-shaped vacuum that lies inside us all. As **Augustine** said, "*We were made for God himself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.*"

In spite of this right relationship with God, have you ever felt even mild panic at the realization that there is no one person particularly interested in you, or maybe no one who arouses your interest? That can be a rather hollow sense of aloneness. At this pivotal point you can be deluded by our culture into a quiet but frantic search for that special someone. You can

even begin to feel angry with God and somehow cheated because he doesn't understand and meet your need. But only he can satisfy the bottomless craving of your heart. David reminds us, **"In Thy presence is fullness of joy; in Thy right hand are pleasures forever" (Psalm 16:11, NASB).**

Until we acknowledge that we are made first and foremost for God, and that in Christ we have been made complete (Col. 2:10), we will quite naturally fall into the world's trap of seeking our fulfillment in a relationship with another person. And a relationship built on that basis will leave us disappointed as we see that person fail. We're all sinners, redeemed and unredeemed. **Oswald Chambers** once said, *"Our Lord is so severe regarding every human relationship because he knows that every relationship not based on loyalty to himself will end in disaster."* We must become rightly related to God (the vertical dimension) in order for our relationship with another person (the horizontal dimension) to take on real meaning.

The world prods us along in a futile search to find ultimate fulfillment in another person, but because this is impossible, most people remain quite unfulfilled. That deprivation causes them to continue trying to *get* from a relationship. They unconsciously but persistently ask the question of another person, *How can you meet my needs?* But a Christian truly fulfilled in Christ is able to *give* in a relationship because his most basic needs have already been met in a relationship with God.

In God's love and his timing, he brings into a union two people who are both looking to him for their ultimate fulfillment. And two such people who are seeking to give, not get, are able to spell out a good marriage in large letters.

Considering the sacrificial love of God for his children, it must cause him both anger and pain when we make an idol of a human relationship. Anytime we allow a person to be foremost in our thoughts and to be the goal of our existence, we're heading for disaster. Only God is worthy enough to be our highest love.

THE CHOICE IS YOURS

You cannot stumble along the path of what seems natural and appealing to you at the moment without encountering serious consequences at some point.

Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, *but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment (Eccles. 11:9)*

When you consider the powerful influence of our culture-pressuring us to live for the moment, to live for the sensual, and to live for ourselves-it's somewhat of a wonder that we can escape without harm. Clearly our only hope is to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2), and this metamorphosis takes place through consistent intake of God's word.

To make the right choices in the area of dating is indeed a battle, because the pressures are so great. Our most powerful weapon for ensured victory is God's word. The more alive the Scriptures are to you personally, the more your thinking will change and your behavior will follow.

The illusion of youth is, "I have all my life before me. My choices right now won't make any difference." Yet in the span of a few short but crucial years, decisions are made by young people that open or close 'some doors for a lifetime. Suddenly its too late to develop solid

friendships with the opposite sex, or to exercise more sexual restraint, or to study harder and party less. Life has moved on.

Going against the grain of your culture means a willingness to reject a sensual, self-centered lifestyle. Often the choices entailed are not simple, and they almost always require some backbone. Anytime you yield an area of your life previously under the world's influence to the lordship of Christ, you encounter a struggle within you. In ***Out of the Saltshaker***, **Rebecca Pippert** writes, "**Christianity isn't a narcotic that dulls you into obedience. It involves battle.**"

Moses spoke some timely words that apply to the choices singles face in dating and marriage.

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse-the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the Lord your God and turn from the way that I command you. (Deut. 11:26-28)

God in his sovereignty has left you the guidance of his word and the prompting of the Holy Spirit. But ultimately your will is free; and the choices are yours.