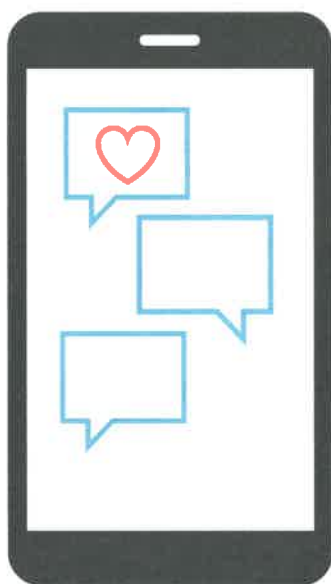




DATING AND SINGLENESS

For this is God's will, your sanctification: that you keep away from sexual immorality, that each of you knows how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passions, like the Gentiles, who don't know God.

1 THESSALONIANS 4:3-5

In the church, we often speak about God's pattern for marriage and sexuality, but it is less common to hear discussions about dating and singleness. This is a real problem because our kids are receiving very clear instructions about both dating and singleness every day. The culture's approach to dating is antithetical to the Bible's view of marriage. Instead of promoting selfless

love and lifelong commitment, the culture says dating is about self-fulfillment and exploration. And instead of esteeming marriage as a source of true satisfaction, the culture encourages singles to delay marriage as long as possible in order to maximize independence and freedom. How can we possibly expect our kids to embrace a biblical view of marriage unless we are committed to helping them?

Let's begin with some parameters. We understand that individual families will approach dating in different ways. Our goal is to offer you a biblical, concrete foundation to build upon as you and your family approach these issues.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

The Bible includes a clear biblical sexual ethic for non-married people. We know that sexual intimacy is reserved for a man and woman who are united together through the marriage covenant (Gen. 2:24). But one of the reasons that Christians have a difficult time with the subject of dating is because the Bible has no such category. Dating is a convention of the modern age. Before dating was around, a man would simply "pursue a woman toward marriage."¹⁴

In many ways, dating imitates marriage. Like marriage, dating is based on two people cultivating romantic and emotional bonds in the context of commitment. But unlike marriage, dating relationships are temporal by nature. Dating fosters dependence and sexual intimacy, but it lacks the protective measures of the marriage covenant. Even so, dating has become a fixed practice in our culture and we must learn how to approach it as Christians.

For the Christian, if the only thing that changes when you get married is that you start having sex, something is wrong with the picture. When we read the common thread of Scripture, from Genesis to Jesus to Paul, we read that, “a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh . . . so they are no longer two, but one flesh” (Matt. 19:5-6).¹⁵

DEAN INSERRA

This should lead Christians to take a different approach to dating. While, it is fine to evaluate whether two people are compatible before setting a wedding date, a Christian approach to dating stops far short of “giving ourselves away emotionally, romantically, and sexually to someone who is not our husband or wife.”¹⁶ Dating relationships are not permanent—none of them are. Too often we justify unhealthy dating practices because two people might or are planning to get married. Nothing is marriage but marriage (Heb. 13:4). The Bible tells us not to “stir up or awaken love until the appropriate time” because marital love is dangerous apart from the marriage covenant (Song of Sol. 2:7). We should be careful not to embrace a view of dating that actually describes marriage.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO GUARD YOUR HEART?

“Guard your heart” is a common piece of advice in Christian circles. It comes from the Book of Proverbs:

Guard your heart above all else,
for it is the source of life.

PROVERBS 4:23



But what does it mean to guard your heart?
And how do you do it? Paul says,

Don't worry about anything, but in everything,
through prayer and petition with thanksgiving,
present your requests to God. And the peace of
God, which surpasses all understanding, will
guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

PHILIPPIANS 4:6-7

This has particular application for marriage and singleness. Paul tells us that prayer is the pathway to guarding our hearts and minds with the peace of God.

Guarding your heart begins with prayer to God and overflows into communication with the other person. In other words, the key to guarding your heart is to talk to God about the relationship before you talk to the other person about the relationship. This will help keep things in proper perspective.

There is real danger in failing to do this. First, if you fail to guard your heart, you may move too fast in the relationship, becoming too vulnerable too quickly. Second, you may

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fail to seek God's desires for the relationship by depending on your own understanding and priorities (Prov. 3:5-6).

Why do you guard your heart? We learn from the Old Testament that our hearts are vulnerable (Jer. 17:9) and easily drawn into sin (Gen. 6:5). While we often view the heart as the seat of our emotions and our will, yet Israel understood the heart to be the center of the whole person—not just our emotions and will but also of wisdom and perspective.

The heart refers to who you are as a person and the Bible is teaching you to guard yourself. Take care to live and walk before God in ways that are pleasing to Him.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.
PSALM 19:14

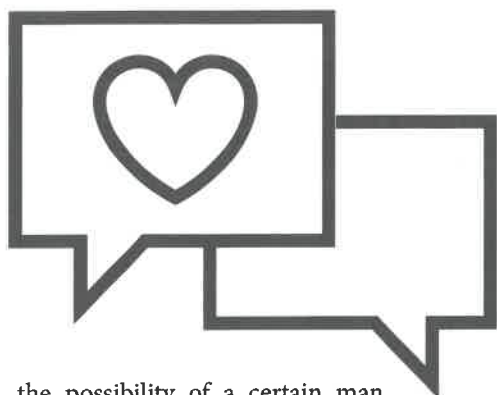
Look back at Proverbs 4:23. It instructs to you to “guard the heart” (who you are) because “it is the source of life” (what you do flows from it). When it comes to dating, it is essential for you to guard your heart because what you do in a dating relationship flows from who you are in a dating relationship. We often treat the idea of guarding your heart as if it merely involves protecting yourself from too much intimacy with someone of the opposite sex. Certainly this is necessary, but guarding your

heart is so much more than this! It's a call to protect your character in all that you do.

A WORD ABOUT SINGLENES

The Bible exhorts us to honor marriage in our churches, and rightfully so, as it is a portrait of God's love for us. But let's be clear: A person is not less than whole if he or she is not married or in a dating relationship. In fact, the Bible tells us that those who remain unmarried are able to “be devoted to the Lord without distraction” (1 Cor. 7:35). Consider Jesus, whose personhood is not diminished in the least because He is single. Additionally, singleness does not mean being alone. The body of Christ is the family of God, and every Christian—single or otherwise—is a member of this spiritual family (Rom. 8:14).

For those seeking marriage, remember that we trust in a sovereign God who is more than able to bring two people together. Instead of casually “dating around,” earnestly pray and ask the Lord for a husband or wife. As you develop healthy, meaningful friendships with Christians of the opposite sex, seek to identify the qualities you desire in a future spouse. Christians should approach marriage carefully. There are dangers on both sides—in moving too quickly or in delaying marriage for too long. In seeking out a spouse, our strong encouragement is to prioritize his or her commitment to Jesus and the church. As you evaluate



the possibility of a certain man or woman, trust the advice of godly counsel and allow multiple people to affirm any decision to move forward (Prov. 11:14).

INTENTIONAL DATING

Christians should not follow the culture's lead on the issue of dating. We encourage each family to tailor their approach in ways that work for them. In light of that, we offer some general guidance from a gospel-shaped framework to dating.

First, the purpose of dating is to find a spouse. A lot of times, kids begin pursuing dating relationships prematurely simply because everyone else seems to be doing the same thing. Make sure you are the one shaping your child's thoughts about dating and guide them to seek out a dating relationship at the appropriate time.

As you approach this conversation, consider these questions: At what age will you allow your child to date? Will he or she only go on group dates, date alone, or date with a chaperone? How much time will he or she spend with a boyfriend or girlfriend?

Set clear expectations. Let your child know that you will talk to a potential boyfriend or girlfriend and have a conversation with his or her parents before your son or daughter goes on a date.

Be on the lookout for unhealthy behaviors. Look for signs of growing emotional dependence and physical intimacy. Don't be afraid to step in if the relationship has become harmful.

Help your children pursue the right goals. As they begin to date, teach them to live with integrity and pursue Christlike holiness. Teach them to glorify God with their bodies and emotions. And teach them to honor their future spouse in the way that they conduct themselves.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Every child will eventually face questions about dating and singleness. For Christian parents, we want our kids to approach these issues with biblical wisdom, with the goal of honoring God with their emotions, bodies, and lives. The best way for our children to remain faithful to Jesus is for us to commit to guide them each step of the way.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What's the current conversation about dating in your home?
2. How are you helping your child move toward a biblical view of dating and marriage?
3. What does it mean to guard your heart? How are you helping your child understand this important concept?
4. What one thing stood out to you from this article?

BIG IDEA

Provide your child a healthy concept of friendships, marriage, and other relationships in a society that constantly diminishes the value of these connections.



KEY SCRIPTURES

- *We are to love God and love others* (Luke 10:27).
- *We need relationships to help us* (Ecc. 4:9-12).
- *We are to keep peace with each other* (Eph. 4:1-3).
- *We are to serve others* (Phil. 2:3).
- *God gives us marriage* (Gen. 2:24).



KEY QUESTIONS YOUR PRESCHOOLER IS ASKING

- Why do people get married?
- Who can get married?
- How do we treat people?



AT THIS AGE MOST PRESCHOOLERS WILL ...

- Begin to recognize different types of relationships.
- Begin to understand the right ways and wrong ways to treat people.
- Group themselves based on gender.



DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONES

- Preschoolers don't fully understand the concept of marriage, so they often have erroneous ideas, like "When I get older, I'm going to marry my mommy." Never respond in shock or disapproval to these types of statements—simply explain the truth.
- Children at this age often have "boyfriends" or "girlfriends" at school or church. Remember that preschoolers do not understand these relationships as adults do. It is best to respond neutrally to this information, not encouraging the behavior but not conveying distress about it either.
- At this stage, the most important relationships outside of the family are your child's peers. Stress often the importance of showing respect to others and including everyone. Encourage your child to reach out to new playmates. Teach them relational skills and how to connect with others.