

A vintage-style advertisement for a book. The background is a solid teal color. In the center, a man and a woman are shown from the waist up. The man on the left is wearing a bright red V-neck sweater over a white collared shirt and grey trousers. The woman on the right is wearing a short-sleeved, olive-green dress with a full, pleated skirt and a wide, gold-colored belt. She is also wearing a gold beaded necklace and black pointed-toe shoes. The word "outdated" is written in large, white, lowercase letters across the middle of the image, partially overlapping the couple. Below it, the subtitle "Find Love That Lasts When Dating Has Changed" is written in smaller white text. At the bottom, the author's name "JONATHAN 'JP' POKLUDA" and "with Kevin McConaghy" are listed in white text.

outdated

Find Love That Lasts
When Dating Has Changed

JONATHAN "JP" POKLUDA
with Kevin McConaghy

“Every Christian I know who isn’t married yet is looking for dating advice. How to do this well in our day, with our technology and our culture, is a leading conversation, and honestly, JP is the leading expert. In this book, with kindness, compassion, and thoughtfulness, JP gives godly wisdom that walk us toward the relationships with God, others, and ourselves that we really want.”

Annie F. Downs, bestselling author of *100 Days to Brave* and host of *That Sounds Fun* podcast

“Modern dating is already outdated. It causes pain and problems and leads to confusion and frustration. In *Outdated*, JP reveals that the Bible is full of wisdom principles you can use to find incredible joy in dating—and a lasting love for life. Some people think that following what is fashionable in dating is the way to go. The truth is *Outdated* has the timeless secrets of relationship favor for you.”

Kyle Idleman, author *Not a Fan* and *Don’t Give Up*

“Everything about dating has changed, and there is no one I trust more to help you navigate it than JP! He is a leader for the next generation.”

Jennie Allen, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Get Out of Your Head* and founder and visionary of IF:Gathering

“If you are dating, you need this book in your life! Throughout this book, JP is constantly pointing you to the truth that’s worth standing on while helping you dismantle the lies culture has sold us about dating. You can date and glorify God while doing it! Let this book be a guide to you on that journey!”

Jamie Ivey, bestselling author and podcaster

“*Confusion* and *disappointment* are the two main words I hear from young adults when chatting about dating and relationships in today’s landscape. Yet there also isn’t much wisdom or good voices out there. That’s why I love *Outdated* and JP. This book is powerful, tactical, wise, and inspiring all at the same time. We are due for a fresh vision on all things dating and relationship related, and JP delivers that to us in this amazing book.”

Jefferson Bethke, author of *Take Back Your Family*

“One thing is for certain: dating in today’s culture is confusing, twisted, and often filled with frustration and disappointment. Something needs to change. *Outdated* offers a clear and practical roadmap for dating in a new way. Unafraid of being incredibly forward, JP is powerfully direct in his words as he dismantles some of the top dating myths in culture today and replaces them with powerful, life-altering truth. If you are single or dating, without question you need this book in your hands.”

Kait Warman, author of *Thank You for Rejecting Me*,
relationship coach, and founder of Heart of Dating

“If only I could go back and give this book to my college self! JP’s practical wisdom and insight would have saved me from so much unnecessary pain. Here is a textbook on dating that is saturated with Scripture, pregnant with hope, and authenticated by real life experience. I commend *Outdated* to any and every young adult. I beg you to view it as required reading for the sake of your joy. There is no need to risk several wrong turns when JP is handing you a map. Keep this resource close by throughout young adulthood.”

Timothy Ateek, executive director of
Breakaway Ministries

“Next to the decision to follow Jesus, there is no decision more significant than who you will marry. This book is a must-read for anyone trying to successfully navigate love, sex, dating, and marriage.”

David Marvin, leader of The Porch

“*Outdated* is a valuable resource to those who are navigating the tumultuous waters of dating and relationships in today’s world! My friend JP gives voice to the struggles that many people face in dating and offers helpful, specific direction on what it looks like to change the landscape of dating and relationships for the better.”

Ben Stuart, pastor of Passion City Church DC and author of
Single, Dating, Engaged, Married

outdated

Find Love That Lasts
When Dating Has Changed

JONATHAN "JP" POKLUDA

with Kevin McConaghy



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To someone who has been ghosted and feels forgotten.
To anyone looking for a road map to dating in the church.
For the helpless romantic who hasn't lost hope.
This was written for you.

Jonathan Pokluda

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Introduction

Everyone wants to be loved.

I can't think of a truer statement of human nature than that. It is perhaps our greatest desire. Although I already knew this to be true, it came into full view for me as I watched thousands of twenty- and thirtysomethings crowd into a room every Tuesday for worship and teaching from the Bible at a gathering called The Porch. The reason so many people would attend The Porch in addition to their regular Sunday services was that these Tuesday evenings were focused on the topics and issues most relevant to people in their twenties and thirties. The sermons would cover things like career decisions, managing finances, finding your purpose, making an impact with your life, overcoming addictions—no subject was off-limits, and over the years we covered just about every topic you could think of, in addition to teaching through books of the Bible.

However, there was one topic that always stood out.

About once a year, we'd have a series about dating. And without fail, those were always the most-anticipated,

most-attended, most-talked-about sermons of the year. The auditorium would be full to the rafters. We streamed all of our services online and posted them as podcasts, and the dating talks would always get the highest viewership and the most downloads. So many people would come forward after the service looking for advice, or email or call us with questions during the following days, that we had to extend each dating series by a week so that we could have one Tuesday devoted just to answering people's questions in a rapid-fire format. And after seeing this happen over and over again for a decade at The Porch, a year ago I moved to a college town to lead another church that also has a weekly young adult ministry—and the same thing is happening here. I even started doing a weekly Q&A on Instagram, and though people can ask literally anything, I end up getting hundreds of questions each week about relationships and dating.

In other words, no other issue facing single people today—nothing else in all of the human experience—causes as much interest, angst, confusion, curiosity, questioning, and pain as dating. It's the area single people want the most help in.

One reason people are so interested in dating is because they know it's important. Finding love is a top priority in life. And although most of us have parents and other family members who already love us, somehow that isn't enough. We want a different kind of love. We want someone to *choose* to love us, not love us because they are related to us. In fact, we want someone to choose to be related to us, through marriage. We want the lifetime, unconditional level of love we would get from family but also want it to be based entirely on who we are rather than to whom we were born.

Many of us want that kind of love—love that lasts—more than anything. But it seems like it’s become the most difficult thing in the world to find. That’s the other reason why people are so interested in dating advice: we, as a society, are getting increasingly bad at it. The change is kind of dramatic. In 1960, 65 percent of all people ages eighteen to thirty-two were married; in 2013, only 26 percent were.¹ And although some people try to explain this away by claiming that today’s young adults simply don’t want to get married, the same study says that, of the 74 percent who aren’t married, roughly seven in ten would like to be. People do want to get married; they’re trying to reach that goal but are just not succeeding at it very often. Another study from Stanford found that different generations all have the same ideal age at which they’d like to get married; young adults today would prefer to marry at the same age as their grandparents’ generation did.² Yet the average age at which people first get married has increased from 21.5 years old in 1960 to 28.9 years old in 2019,³ meaning that it now takes seven extra years of dating to find a marriage match. And once we are married, that doesn’t necessarily mean we’re married well: somewhere between a third and a half of all marriages end in divorce,⁴ and obviously not all undivorced marriages are successful.

What’s crazy about that is it seems like today’s young adults should be really, really good at dating. Compared to previous generations, we have so many more choices and so much more information available to us. We have dating apps and websites designed to sort through the millions of available singles and supposedly help us find the algorithmically perfect match. We have an endless string of movies and

TV series showing us examples of how to date, including some where people literally compete to be the one to marry an eligible bachelor or bachelorette. And yet, by just about every measurable standard, we're continually getting worse at dating.

The problem is we're following the wrong examples. Almost from birth, we're told that dating and marriage are supposed to look a certain way. Our views on love and relationships are based just as much on fantasy—literally fairy tales—as they are on anything resembling real life. We watch actors playing fictional people fall in fictional love in fictional stories, and we think that somehow real life should be as dramatic as the movies.

When we move from fiction to reality, we don't fare much better, because the reality is that modern dating is a failure. It's not producing the results we want. If you obey all of the popular "rules" for dating and follow the supposedly good advice from the countless articles and videos and influencers on the subject—in other words, if you do the same things everyone else is doing—then you'll get the same outcomes as everyone else. And those outcomes, statistically, aren't that great.

Basically, we're believing in myths. We talk about things like "love at first sight," and finding "the one," and "happily ever after." We try to conform to modern society's standards and expectations for dating, even though modern society is terrible at forming relationships that last. By and large, we're doing dating wrong, and the results speak for themselves.

I've had a front-row seat to it all, first through my own dating mistakes (and trust me, I made *a lot* of them), and then through the tens of thousands of singles I've gotten to

observe and minister to. I've seen what works and what (unfortunately) doesn't. Most importantly, I've learned about God's wisdom for life and relationships through studying the Bible, and have strived to share that with others so they can find success and avoid heartache in dating.

I remember giving one dating talk at The Porch years ago, when I was still relatively new on the job. Afterward, one young woman wanted to meet with me to discuss the message. I grabbed a friend and we sat down to hear what she had to say. She proceeded to go through my sermon point-by-point and explain how I was wrong about everything. You see, she figured she was pretty much an expert on dating, since she did it a lot and in her eyes had been successful at getting whichever guy she wanted. She'd even been married once, although that relationship had ended in divorce. There were also some other bumps in her dating road, such as a string of bad breakups, and the time she got pregnant and decided to get an abortion. So, after we finished listening to her tell me how I had it all wrong about dating, and how her way was better, I simply asked, "And how is that working out for you?"

(Spoiler alert: when she finally decided that her worldly way of dating wasn't working, and chose to try the godly way instead, she ended up marrying another good friend of mine in a ceremony that I had the honor to officiate. Not only that, but God has written an amazing story of redemption on her life.)

If you think you're happy with the results you're getting, there's no need to change. But most people *aren't* happy with the results they're getting in dating, and statistically it's not working for us on a society-wide level. You can't do the same

things you've been doing, and the same things millions of other people have been doing, and expect to get different results. Don't think that *this* time will be different, or that somehow it will work for you when it hasn't worked for anyone else. If you want a different outcome, you need to provide a different input. You have to be willing to change.

A Different Way

The world may have a lot of rules for dating. But the Bible, which many people (wrongly) think of as a big book full of rules, has very few dating rules.

Partly, that's because dating as we know it didn't exist in Bible times. In fact, dating hasn't existed throughout most of history; the concept was only invented a little over a century ago. In the early 1900s, when it first came into fashion, the term *dating* was originally seen as a euphemism for prostitution, largely due to confusion because the two practices seemed so similar.⁵ It is a new idea; most people throughout most of history managed to live, love, and marry successfully without ever "dating" anyone.

But just because modern dating wasn't really around when the Bible was written doesn't mean the Bible doesn't have anything relevant to say about the subject. It may not have many rules about dating, but the few it does have are very clearly applicable to our lives today. Plus, it is worth noting that those few rules highlight the most glaring ways in which modern dating tends to get things wrong, and that ignoring those rules is what causes the biggest problems and the most pain in dating. That's because any commands God gives us are for our own benefit. They are not at all meant to stifle

our fun. Instead, they exist to point us toward life and help us avoid doing things that cause us emotional, physical, or relational harm.

Beside listing those relatively few clear sins to avoid, the Bible is full of wisdom principles we can use to find incredible life in dating. They are not so much rules to be followed as they are really good ideas that will never steer us wrong. Really, most of these would be considered common sense, but unfortunately sense is not all that common anymore, especially when it comes to something as emotionally charged as dating.

Essentially, we are given a lot of freedom in how we pursue relationships, but things go better for us when we follow God's advice.^a As 1 Corinthians 10:23 says:

“I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but not everything is constructive.

You can ignore or try to rationalize away what the Bible says and do things your own way instead. But it will not go well for you.

It may seem ironic to say that something as old as the Bible holds the cure for what ails dating in the twenty-first century.

a. Although this book is written from a Christian perspective, I know that some readers will not be followers of Christ. If that includes you, welcome! I'm so glad you are here. Believe it or not, because God did create everything, and all things function according to his design, many of the suggestions in this book will still “work” even if you don't believe in him. That is why I often cite statistics; secular evidence verifies that God's plan for relationships is best. However, I don't want you to *only* have better dating relationships and a better marriage. No matter what happens—good or bad—in eighty or ninety years of life on earth, it's going to be just a blip compared to eternity. So make sure you get the eternity question right. With that in mind, you have my permission to jump to the end of the book and read the last chapter first, before coming back and reading the rest from here.

However, it is actually modern dating ideas that should be (and hopefully, for you, soon will be) considered outdated. Most of them are not really modern ideas, anyway; they are just repackages of the same lies people have always been tempted to fall for. Regardless, we've been doing dating this way for long enough to know the results. The experiment has been run, with millions and millions of repetitions each year, and the data shows it's not working. The principles in God's Word, on the other hand, have proven to be reliable. The Bible never becomes out of date, because it is the truth, and the truth doesn't change over time.

Trade the lies for truth. Start dating a different way.

What You'll Find

My entire purpose in writing this book is to help you date well and end up in a fantastic marriage, without all the pain and problems that dating so often causes. I'm not promising a fairy-tale ending, because that's fantasy, and we're all imperfect people living in a fallen world. But I think I can help you on the adventure of finding a God-honoring relationship, and it is a beautiful thing when two godly people commit to loving each other. It is something that I believe, for most people, is worth pursuing.

Throughout the book we'll look at the various myths, misconceptions, or mistakes that society promotes when it comes to relationships. Each chapter is named after a different outdated concept—the twelve most common lies people believe about dating—and then covers what wisdom would have us do instead. The goal is not to replace one man-made set of rules with another but rather to point toward the One

who invented marriage, who created us to crave relationships, and who is the very embodiment of true love.

This book will give you practical advice you can apply today, in addition to a big-picture understanding of God's purposes for singleness, dating, and marriage. It will cover why you should date, whom you should date, and how you should date.

As you read, I would encourage you to share what you are learning. Invite those close to you to join you on the journey. I always recommend reading books like this in community with others who can spur you on and keep you accountable. Dialogue about it with them. Talk about what you agree with and what you disagree with. Share what is helpful with others. You could even post a picture on social media and let everyone know you are beginning a journey. They can watch your success, and you can invite those close to you to join you on it.

Grab some friends, grab some coffee, and let's get started.

PART 1

why we date

Dating for Fun

THE LIE: the purpose of dating is to have fun.

THE TRUTH: it's a lot more fun when you date with the right purpose.

I like to go shopping. I know that probably goes against all sorts of stereotypes, but I do. So, when a friend texted me one weekend and asked if I wanted to go to the outlet mall with him, my reply was, “Of course!”

He picked me up, and it wasn't until we were on our way that I asked him *why* we were going shopping. He said he was looking for a new rain jacket. It had been raining a lot over the previous weeks, and his old rain jacket had a hole in it, so he needed to get a new one. He figured the North Face outlet store was a good place to start looking. “Great,” I said. “Outlet mall, here we come!”

Once we got there, it was clear that my friend was on a mission. As soon as he walked through the door, his eyes were scanning the store to identify where the jackets were located.

Once he spied the right section, he headed straight toward it, ignoring everything else he passed on his way there. And when he got to the jackets, he was solely concerned with finding one that would work for him. *Is it waterproof? Is it the right size? Is it a good enough quality? Does it have a hood?* If the answer to any of these was no, then there was no need for him to waste time even considering it. He was even looking for some kind of specific hood with a cinch strap, so that really narrowed down his search. He couldn't find what he needed at the first store, so he immediately left it and started looking for another option. "OK, there's a Columbia outlet. Let's go try that store."

He was looking for something very specific, but I wasn't really looking for anything at all—which really means I was looking at everything. While he knew exactly where to go and what to look for, I just kind of wandered around, seeing if anything caught my eye. I left him behind and went into other stores. *Oh man, check out this skateboard. Or this vest. Or over here, they have snowshoes! Do I need snowshoes? It hasn't really snowed here in, like, a decade. But maybe snowshoes would be cool to have.*

Both my friend and I were technically doing the same thing—"shopping"—but our experiences could hardly have been more different. He was on a mission; he had an objective and a purpose. I, on the other hand, was just playing around. I was shopping for fun. It was a form of entertainment for me. I had time to kill, I had endless options in front of me, and I thought maybe I could find something I could use that would bring me joy. And at the end of the day, my friend went home with exactly what he needed, a new rain jacket, and I went home with my seventeenth pair of sunglasses and a toy helicopter that broke the very next morning.

Dating for Fun

The biggest problem with dating is that far too many people approach it the same way I approached shopping that day. We just wander around, looking at anything and everything, not knowing what or who we might end up taking home with us (or who we might go home with). We're searching, but we're not searching for anything in particular. We're just out there, at the store or the bar or wherever, looking for something pretty that might catch our eye, or someone pretty we might catch the eye of. Little thought is given as to quality, or whether they are a good fit, or whether they're not just a slightly newer version of the same thing that's already failed us a dozen times before.

We're just dating for fun. We're looking for something—or, more accurately, someone—we can use to bring us pleasure. We may be looking for sex, attention, or a stroke to our ego, making us feel good that we can afford such a shiny object. But make no mistake: these people are just objects to us. When we date like this, we treat other people as things we can use for our own benefit. It goes both ways; the other person may be using us at the same time. But the fact that it's mutual doesn't make it any better for either party or any less likely to fail. If your goal is fun, fun is all you will get—until it's not fun anymore. That new, shiny object is no longer new to you, and it begins to lose its luster. As with any toy, the initial excitement wears off, and it becomes less fun to play with over time. So people throw it away, or exchange it for another new plaything—a process you can repeat over and over again, without ever getting anywhere. It may be temporarily fun, but I'm not sure we realize how costly that fun is.

The idea that the primary purpose of dating is to have fun is one of the myths our culture tells us. Dating is seen as a type of recreation, or just some kind of grown-up game we play. People may not always realize they treat dating this way, and indeed you may be thinking right now that you don't. But there's a really simple test for this: if your purpose in dating is anything other than marriage, then that is what you're doing. If you are dating in order to find someone to marry, then your goal is actually to *stop* dating around, because marriage would put an end to that. Once you are married, you will (hopefully) never go on a first date again. But if you're dating because on some level you enjoy the process, and marriage is just this incidental thing that might happen if things really work out perfectly, then your real goal in dating is to have fun. And so you continue to play the same games, chase the same experiences, and end up in the same places you've been. Until one day when you look up and think, *Wow. I've been doing this for a long time, and it hasn't gotten me anywhere.*

Evidence for the prevalence of this “dating for fun” mindset is everywhere. Why else would we expect it or accept it when people start dating in high school, junior high, or even earlier? Are you going to get married at age fourteen? No? Then where is this relationship really going to go over the next few months or years?^a

And why else would you have people who, as adults, have been dating for five years (or more) without ever putting a ring on it? What, you can't figure out within a half decade

a. I'm not saying you can't possibly meet your future spouse as a child. But I am saying it is rare—certainly rarer than it used to be, when more people lived in small towns and tended to marry at a relatively younger age—and that, even in those cases, there is no need to “date” someone as a child. You can meet someone and get to know them as friends, but then wait until you are actually ready for marriage before dating them.

whether this person is worth marrying or not? If your goal from the start was marriage, then I'm afraid you're failing at that goal.^b But if your goal was to have fun, and you're having fun not being married, then it suddenly makes sense.

The idea also works its way into our vocabulary. People use slang like “he got game” in reference not just to sports but to dating. It means that someone has the ability to get someone of the opposite sex to say yes, not to marriage but to a short-term dating relationship and everything that goes with it. Because, face it, if someone dated one person successfully, where it actually led to a lifelong commitment in marriage, no one would ever say that person “had game.” That’s almost the opposite of having game. You “have game” only if you’re treating dating as a game. Or you’re a “player” only if you’re playing a game—playing with other people, as if they were toys. It’s childish. It’s what happens when people become adults but never really mature and grow up. I see it all the time: you have thirty-year-old boys and girls out there playing with each other’s hearts, usually in an effort to get to some other body part. Don’t play like that. Don’t be a child. Don’t toy with others, and don’t let yourself be toyed with. As Romans 12:9 says, “Love must be sincere.”

Dating Is Not Fun

The tragic aspect of this “dating for fun” mentality is that dating around isn’t all that fun.

I’m married now, but obviously I haven’t always been married. I’ve lived through all the different relationship statuses: single, dating, and married (also single-while-sleeping-around

b. I’m sorry if that applies to you, but logically, it’s true. And sometimes the truth hurts.

and dating-for-fun). I've also counseled a lot of other young adults through the issues associated with each stage. I've seen people do all of this wrong and invite incredible pain into their lives, and I've seen people do this really well and experience a life-giving marriage. So I can say from experience, and from observing the experiences of others: dating is awful. I mean, of the three options of singleness, dating, and marriage, dating is by far the least fun. By far. If you are having a blast dating around, you're probably doing it wrong.

Some of you single people may immediately object that singleness isn't much fun either, but that's just because you're so focused on wanting to *not* be single. Done right, singleness can be amazing. (More on that later.) Marriage, also, has been an awesome gift in my life. It takes work, but it's far better than the days when I was just dating.

Dating is like when you're looking for a job and are in the interview phase. It's not a fun phase. Who likes job interviews? You put on your uncomfortable interview clothes, perhaps your so-called power tie or pantsuit, and you walk into this awkward situation where it feels like the other attendees are judging you (because they are). You present yourself for their approval. You feel exposed and vulnerable. And then you go home, put on comfy pants, and stress about the results. *Are they going to call me back? I don't know. They said they would, but I don't know. Where's it going? Is it going anywhere? Maybe I should interview with some other people instead, even though that requires me to go through the same awkward process again, and again, and again.* You're just perpetually sitting in this vulnerable spot. That's dating. It's not fun.

What's fun is when you actually get the job. It's like, *OK, now I know I'm accepted. Now we're committed to each other. Now we've got something good.* But that's not dating anymore. That's marriage. I'm thankful every day that I am married and no longer have to go through the stress and mess that was my dating life.

Or, to use another shopping metaphor I once heard from my friend Jeff Bethke: if marriage is buying and dating is shopping, dating without the intention of marriage is shopping with no money. What's going to happen when you shop with no money? Either you're going home empty-handed or you're going to take something that isn't yours. Those are the only two possible outcomes.

Dating for Marriage

Instead of selfish and self-defeating “fun,” the sole goal of dating should be marriage.

God invented marriage.^c It's a gift from him,^d and (for most people) it is worth pursuing. Singleness, also, can be a gift from God.^e But dating was not created by God. Dating

c. In the creation account in Genesis 2:18, “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’” And Jesus said in Matthew 19:4–6 (while quoting from Gen. 1:27 and 2:24), “‘Haven't you read,’ he replied, ‘that at the beginning the Creator “made them male and female,” and said, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh”? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’”

d. Proverbs 18:22: “He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the LORD.”

e. 1 Corinthians 7:7–9: “I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: it is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”

was invented by people, and is a relatively recent invention at that. It's a new category. It's not even in the Bible. Dating can be redeemed; it can fulfill a godly purpose. But only if we date with a purpose.

The only reason we should date is to get married. We date because God gave us the gift of marriage, and we're trying to get there.

That simple statement has some serious implications. If you don't want to be married, don't date. If you're not ready to be married right now (or in the very near future), then don't date right now.

All dating relationships will end in either marriage or a breakup. So if marriage is not a possibility, then breaking up will be a certainty. The only question is how long it will take before you break up. And in this case, a longer, seemingly more successful relationship is actually worse. It means that the eventual breakup (which, again, is *guaranteed* to happen) will just be more painful, with more emotional entanglements. And if the other person in the relationship actually is ready for marriage, as is often the case, then you've wasted months or even years of their life by leading them on. So, although I want to emphasize that you simply should not be dating if you are not ready for marriage, you should *at the very least* be honest with the other person from the start. In other words, you should tell them up front, "I'm going to break up with you whenever I feel like it." Indeed, that should be your pickup line. Because that's what you are asking them to sign up for. You're not going to marry them; you're going to break up with them. You want to use them for entertainment, because of how dating them makes you feel, and then leave them at some indeterminate point in the future. So just

be honest about that. It will keep you from being a manipulator, a liar, and a user.

I've heard some people argue that dating someone when you know you're not going to marry them is somehow helpful, in that it allows people to learn what they like or don't like in a dating partner (and therefore, presumably, a spouse). I would say that's a very selfish way to use another person. Again, you'd have to be brutally honest about what you're doing and how you are using them from the very start, or else you are just intentionally toying with people and likely hurting them. I would also say there's a better way to determine what you should be looking for in a spouse, and I'll talk about that in later chapters.

Dating the Right People

Another principle related to “do not date unless marriage is a possibility for you” is that, if you are dating someone and realize the relationship will definitely not end in marriage, you should break up with that person. As in *immediately*. Otherwise you're just wasting time (both yours and theirs) and unnecessarily leading them on. It might seem harsh, but it's actually the kindest thing you could do for them. It minimizes the potential pain caused by a longer relationship. (There will be more on how to go about ending a dating relationship in chapter 10.)

This also means you should only start dating a person if they are someone you might possibly end up marrying. Now, I want to be clear here: I don't mean you have to know you're going to marry them before you begin dating them. (If you already knew that, you wouldn't need to date each

other; you could just go ahead and get married.) I just mean that there has to be a possibility you could end up marrying them. That, based on what you know about them so far, they appear to make a good potential spouse. And then, as you get to know them better through dating, either you will confirm they are someone you want to marry (and you'll marry them), or you'll determine they're not someone you want to marry (and you'll break up).

When you're dating for marriage rather than dating for fun, you'll evaluate potential dating partners differently. You'll look for traits that would make them a good spouse, and you'll likely find this will narrow down your options considerably, which is a good thing.

When I went shopping with my friend that day at the outlet mall, I looked at everything. Every item, in every store, was a possibility. I could go home with anything. But very few of those things would be any good for me. They'd be a waste of time, money, and space, and I'd end up having to eventually get rid of them. My friend, on the other hand, had very specific parameters for what he was looking for. He knew what he needed, and he knew where to look for it. And with fewer options, it was easier for him to make a decision. He ended up happy with his purchase and satisfied with his overall shopping experience, because he found what he needed and didn't waste time in the process. It was, in other words, kind of fun for him.

Check Your Baggage

After our wedding ceremony, my wife and I went on a honeymoon to an all-inclusive resort in Playa del Carmen, Mexico.

We had never been to Mexico before and were not fully clear on what “all-inclusive” meant, and we were so excited we ended up taking six suitcases for a seven-day trip! At the airport, in the international terminal, we had to take a really long escalator that seemed to go on forever. My new bride had one suitcase as I insisted on carrying the other five, because I was trying to show off as the new husband. *I’ve got this. No problem. Barely notice the weight.*

I got on the escalator, and my wife got on a couple of steps behind me. Right as we got to the top, one of the five suitcases I was carrying became caught on the side of the escalator. You know, the part of the escalator that’s *not* moving. Since I was on the part that *was* moving, the stuck suitcase pulled me backward, and with all that baggage, I immediately lost my balance. I fell down the escalator, knocking over my wife in the process and taking her with me. True story: here we were going on our honeymoon, and we literally went head over heels from the top of this huge escalator all the way to the bottom. *Bump! Bump! Bump!* Since the escalator was going up and we were going down, we kept having more stairs to hit.

I tried to somehow protect my wife and shield her on the way down, which meant my body took the brunt of the fall. I didn’t have any hands free to soften the blows. So I ended up lying at the bottom of the escalator, hurt and bruised and literally bleeding! That’s how the very first day of our marriage started.

What I didn’t realize then, but soon would learn, was that my fall provided a pretty good preview of what was going to happen in my marriage. You see, I carried a lot of baggage into our marriage. It was baggage I had built up and

accumulated throughout my years of dating. Because, just like the way I shopped, I had gone about dating all wrong. I dated for fun. I dated too early. I dated the wrong people, the wrong way, and for the wrong reasons. And though it took about a year after our wedding before we hit a snag, eventually that baggage caught up with me. When it did, it left our marriage, figuratively speaking, bleeding and bruised down at the bottom of the escalator. It took a long time, a lot of work, and a lot of grace to fully repair the damage and lead to the truly healthy marriage we enjoy today.

Knowing what I know now, I definitely wish I had dated differently. If I could have a do-over on my dating years, I would try to avoid creating all that unnecessary baggage.

Dating with an eye toward marriage changes not just when you date and who you date but also how you date. Since the end goal is marriage, you want to do things in dating that will set you up for success in your future marriage—whether that’s with the person you’re dating currently or with someone else in the future if it doesn’t work out with this person. That means having healthy boundaries in dating and not crossing inappropriate lines physically or emotionally. You want to treat them well even if you break up with them, and thereby avoid having any angry exes show up at your wedding.

It also means using your single time wisely. If you are not ready to date, or are not currently dating for whatever reason, that doesn’t mean you’re stuck waiting passively. You can do yourself and your future spouse a big favor by working to unpack some of your baggage so you won’t have to carry it with you into marriage. As I’ve often said, there are no married people problems—just single people problems carried into marriage.

Where I'm Coming From

If it's not clear already, I'm not telling you these things as some holier-than-thou pastor, asking you to be more like me. It would probably be more accurate to say that I'm asking you to be *less* like me, or at least less like I was during most of the time I was dating. If you feel like you've already made mistakes in dating, know that I made those mistakes too. I badly messed things up. I hurt myself and others in the process. In fact, for one or two girlfriends, I was probably their biggest mistake. That's not a joke. It's quite possible that the worst decision they've ever made in their lives was agreeing to date me. I've had to deal with that fact and seek forgiveness where I could.

I missed it. I listened to the world—culture, movies, TV shows. I loved dating as a sport—the thrill, the feeling of newness, what I could get someone to do, and how far I could get them to go. Honestly, I even in some sick kind of way loved wondering if I'd ever get married, or if anyone would ever love me enough in that way.

What I didn't realize was that, all the while, I was already loved. Despite my faults and my flaws, I was already accepted by One who was perfect. I sought affirmation and adventure and meaning in the dating game, and all the while that was just a secondary narrative to a bigger story I was called to be part of. Our earthly romantic relationships are supposed to be a reflection of, or a peek into, our eternal relationship with our Savior.^f But I treated dating as something else entirely, selfishly loving myself rather than selflessly loving the person I was with.

f. Ephesians 5:21–33, especially verse 32; also Revelation 19:6–9.

I realize you may look at me now and say, “Hey, man, it worked out for you.” In one sense, you’re right. I’m married, and married well. In fact, I married far better than I deserve, to the godliest woman I know. We’ve been married for sixteen years now, and about fourteen of those years have been great. But there were a couple of years in there that were pure misery, and it was all a direct result of the mistakes I’d made when dating. The fact that it eventually worked out for me is fully due to God being massively merciful and gracious in my life. It would be a really poor strategy to try to replicate that. Instead, things will go better if you can learn from the mistakes of others and avoid making them in your own life.

When I look at this generation of young singles in the church today, I can’t help but think that if everyone just got *this* right—if people put their selfish desires aside and began to pursue God’s desires for each other, and pursued each other the way God desires—that change would be amazing and powerful. There would be a revival. There would be a great awakening. Single people would live on mission, godly marriages would be formed, disciples would be made in the home. Christianity would spread like wildfire in a culture that has been growing cold to it. We could change a generation—and change the world—just by changing the way we date.