Biblical Principles for Courting Relationships

Scripture affirms that marriage is an honorable thing in the site of God, while both fornication and adultery are to be abhorred (Heb. 13:4). Furthermore it is revealed that if a man finds a wife he has found a good thing (Prov. 18:22). However, the Bible emphasizes the importance of finding the right person to be your spouse and indicates that a bad choice can significantly impact the rest of your life. Therefore, one must take great care to discern the Lord’s will and understand His guidelines for such a selection.

The Principle of Authority

There are several levels of authority that God has placed over our lives for protection, guidance, and blessing. The first and foremost level is the Holy Bible. Indeed, the scriptures have been inspired by God and are without error, making them the highest standard of truth in all matters (II Pet. 1:19-21; John 17:17; Psa. 33:4). Furthermore, the word of God is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness and can discern and address the deepest thoughts of the heart (Heb. 4:12-13).

The next level of authority that God has designed to be in place over our lives is the oversight of parents or guardians. It is interesting to note that entrance into marriage by nature requires people to leave the oversight of their parents in order to form a new family unit (Gen. 2:24). By implication then, and by further revelation both in the Old and New Testaments, we can understand that parents have been given a unique role in the lives of their children to give them guidance in regard to life decisions and to teach them how they ought to live. It is in the Ten Commandments that were given to Israel through Moses that the Lord highlights the importance of giving honor to parents (Ex. 20:12). Paul further explains that this was the first commandment with a promise. In the preceding verse he explains the importance of children obeying their parents, because it is right in the sight of God (Eph. 6:1-2). Thus, the second level of authority given for one’s guidance in courtship is parental authority. Parents of both people should be well involved and consulted in the courtship process from the very beginning. Only when a parent’s advice is in clear contradiction to a principle of scripture should it be respectfully avoided. One should be careful not to misapply this principle due to personal preferences as opposed to a true violation of a scripture.

God has also given faithful men whom He selects to oversee His church, and therefore church leadership is a third source of guidance and protection for Christians (Heb. 13:17). It is important to find church leadership that can be trusted to align themselves with scripture and bathe their advice in prayer and careful consideration. Other mature Christians can also be a great source of counsel and support. Again, if these people give advice that is contradictory to a biblical principle, only then should it be respectfully avoided. Scripture holds the final authority in all cases.

The Principle of Initiation and Response

The responsibility of initiation and pursuit by a man in courtship and the responsibility of intuitive response by the woman is evident by implication as a light reflection of the deeper interaction that takes place in marriage (Gen. 2; 1 Cor. 11: 7-9; Eph. 5:22-33). As it will be a man’s responsibility to be the initiator and leader in marriage, if indeed marriage is God’s
specific design for his life, then it is the man that must initiate and fulfill the journey of courtship under the counsel and permission of both his and the woman’s parents and the wisdom of church leadership with a woman’s response taking place under the same conditions. Therefore, it is a man’s responsibility to look for a woman, and not a woman’s responsibility to look for a man. When men come along, it is the responsibility of the woman and her family to evaluate whether to respond with a “yes” or a “no” to courtship. It is also important to note that the woman is still subject to her father’s authority and oversight, not the man in pursuit of her, yet they are setting subtle, gentle patterns of leadership and response along the way. This will likely be more evident once the two have reached engagement.

The Principle of Compatibility

In Genesis 2:18, scripture identifies the importance of suitability or compatibility for companionship in marriage. Scripture lays more emphasis on holy character and convictions than personality as the basis for determining compatibility, though compatibility of personality does hold some importance. You do need to like each other!

Holy Character. It is interesting to note that as one surveys the book of Proverbs, several women are introduced. There is the adulterous woman (Prov. 2:16), the evil woman (Prov. 6:24), the boisterous woman of folly (Prov. 9:13), the foolish woman (Prov. 14:1), and the contentious and vexing woman (Prov. 21:9, 19). These continue to gain mention up until the final proverb which offers an outstanding glimmer of hope. Thus Proverbs 31 appropriately questions in verse 10, “an excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels.” The proverb let’s the reader know that such women do exist and highlights their preciousness and pricelessness. Proverbs 20:6-7 informs us that the same difficulty exists in finding a faithful and righteous man, yet implies that they also can be found. Therefore, a man should pursue a woman that does not reflect the earlier women of the proverbs, but rather exemplifies the character of the woman found in Proverbs 31. In the same vein, a woman should not be in pursuit of men, but should seek to be the kind of woman that a faithful and righteous man would dream of pursuing and less noble men would disregard. So in essence Proverbs 31 gives us what type of woman Christian men should pursue and what type of woman Christian women should pursue to be. It is in this scenario that the two will find great fulfillment in each other and complement one another as they share a common value for holy character and God’s design. Other scriptures further illustrate the essence of biblical femininity, masculinity, and holy character in general (1 Pet. 3:1-12; 1 Tim. 2:1-15; Col. 3:1-21). A good set of standards for a woman to use when evaluating the character of a pursuing man is the list given in 1 Timothy 3 for overseers or bishops. Do not settle for less.

Convictions. The deep convictions of the soul undergird the essence of who we are as people. Convictions drive philosophies, perceptions, actions, speech, and way of life. Convictions are what we believe and they reach into all areas of our lives. Thus, it is important to ask the right questions and to find out where people stand on theology and practice, because one of the most dangerous threats to a marriage is a lack of like-mindedness regarding the truth. An interesting paradoxical relationship exists between our doctrine and our practice in which our doctrine can affect our practice, and yet our practice can also affect our doctrine. It is for this
reason that Timothy is warned to give careful watch both to his life and his doctrine (I Tim. 4:16).

**The Principle of Preparation**

It is important to be prepared for the responsibilities that come with a marriage relationship. For the man it will be important to realize that he will need to be the provider, protector, and leader of his family. This will require his ability to care for his family spiritually, emotionally, and financially, bearing the final responsibility in decision-making and ensuring the safety of his family, often through the sacrifice of his own personal preferences and desires. For a woman, it will involve a trusting submission of her will and plans to the oversight of her husband, a commitment to support him spiritually and emotionally, and a resolve to manage a home with great care and hard work, often through the sacrifice of her own personal preferences and desires. This is not to say that one should be entirely prepared before ever considering entrance into courtship, but rather is to serve as a catalyst for sobering contemplation and evaluation regarding whether one will likely be ready for such responsibilities in the near future and to give awareness to the amount of responsibility involved. The Lord will provide, often unbeknownst to people, opportunities in their lives to sharpen them for such a future, if indeed such a future is in His plan for them. Therefore, seek to grow in character and to be refined by trials, cast your eyes upon Christ (not being distracted by fantasy and wishful thinking about that which has not yet come to be), and allow Him to work in you the character that you will one day require for marriage or for some other great manifestation of God’s design in your life.

**The Principle of Purity**

We are fortunate enough to have such a wonderful passage as I Thess. 4:3-8 from which to draw rich principles regarding purity in courtship. In marriage, and by implication in courtship, God has willed that we would be sanctified through these relationships. Indeed, there ought to be an ever-increasing level of sanctification and purity of heart that develops as a result of such companionship. Therefore, purity should be given primacy among priorities in a courting relationship. Every decision and interaction ought to be carried out with a desire to enhance the purity and holiness of the other and of oneself. In courting relationships, however, there is potential for impurity between the two who are courting that no longer remains in marriage, thus the application of this principle will look different from courtship to marriage. Purity extends beyond the physical, as Jesus indicates by His condemnation of lust in the heart as a source of spiritual and emotional adultery (Matt. 5:27-30). In his examples illustrating this concept, Jesus further explains that one must take extreme action against sin and avoid it even at great cost.

The physical and emotional desires for intimacy that can be freely enjoyed by husbands and wives for each other are not appropriate for a courting or engaged relationship. Therefore, one must be careful to refrain from the obvious physical sin of impurity, and furthermore the subtle or deep issues of lust that can easily spawn in the heart. Do not place yourself in situations where you may be tempted to compromise purity physically, spiritually, or emotionally (Rom. 13:14). Realize the lack of love and honor conveyed in these acts. Do not
behave like a married couple if you are not married. Seek counsel from mature Christians regarding the preservation of purity in courtship.

**The Purpose of Marriage**

The purpose of marriage is first and foremost for the glory, enjoyment, and pleasure of God. It just so happens that He has secondarily made something so enjoyable to Him to be something that we also may have the privilege of enjoying. The great picture which God had in mind for marriage, even in His arrangement of the very first marriage between Adam and Eve, was one that would exemplify the relationship that Jesus Christ has with His beloved bride, the church (Eph. 5:31-32). The gospel of Jesus Christ is intricately and irremovably woven into this marriage portrait. Even when marriages fail to demonstrate Christ’s relationship with the church, they demonstrate that leaving His perfect model falls short of the greatness that can be had in relationships. They prove that Christ’s way is the best way. Therefore, men, seek to love, in appropriate ways, the woman that you pursue for marriage; and women, seek to respect, in appropriate ways, the man that you respond to in the path toward marriage.

**In Conclusion**

Treat courtship not as listless, whimsical gallivanting, but give serious contemplation and evaluation to the above-mentioned principles before embarking on this wonderful opportunity in life, realizing that you are engaging another heart in your plans and pursuits. Honor authority, understand your role as initiator or responder, consider compatibility, realize responsibility, preserve purity, and seek to see marriage from God’s perspective, and you will have great potential for success should you find yourself divinely appointed the privilege of entering a courtship relationship.