

Sermon—March 1-2, 1997  
Rich Nathan  
Loving Your Spouse for a Lifetime

## Picking A Mate For A Lifetime

This evening [morning] I am going to start a new series before Easter on marriage. I am going to be calling my series, “Loving Your Spouse for a Life-Time.” Where I want to begin concerns picking a spouse for a lifetime. I find it just amazing that one of the issues that receives almost no attention at all in churches, and certainly in society in general, is the issue of mate selection. We have thousands and thousands and thousands of books written about the erotic side of romance. We have so much information on increasing the erotic dimension of relationships, and sex manuals and all of that, but something so fundamental about the kinds of qualities that you ought to look for, the kind of process that you ought to engage in when selecting a spouse is almost not talked about at all. And when it is talked about, people are given the silliest advice that is guaranteed to mess up your marriage and to insure that under no circumstance will you have a lifelong marriage.

I don’t know how many of you have seen or picked up a copy of the best-selling books by a couple of women authors called *The Rules*. *The Rules* has just rocketed to the top of national bestseller lists. What it is is a manual for women to catch the kind of man they want and that they deserve. Just flipping through *The Rules*, you can understand why so many marriages fail these days and why people make such bad choices.

The authors tell women to be quiet and mysterious when you are dating. Make sure you always act lady-like. Don’t say much. Let him do all the thinking and talking. Can you

imagine anything more demeaning and dehumanizing? Let the man to all the thinking and talking.

I know this advice sounds like it is out of the 1890's. I want to say to these women, "Hey, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is almost over here. You are giving us 19<sup>th</sup> Century advice."

Here is another one: Make sure that in every situation he runs the show. If you don't get jewelry within three months, you might as well call it quits. A lot of us would not be married based on that rule.

Or how about this one: To get his attention, start wearing tight jeans, a mini-skirt, or a deep-V neck shirt. If you have a bad nose, make sure you get a nose job.

Rules for happiness? Not only do the rules perpetuate the worse stereotypes of a superficial, manipulative, conniving woman, but the very things that would make for a loving, lasting relationship – things like honesty, integrity and self-esteem – are thrown out the window. And another whole generation of women is taught to sacrifice their self-respect by playing games, showing their legs, and keeping their mouths shut.

That is what created the mess to begin with. Fortunately, there are a few books out on the market written from a Christian perspective that I would like to recommend to you as I consider with you this subject of mate selection. There is a very good book by Neal Warren called Finding the Love of Your Life: Ten Principles for Choosing the Right Marriage Partner. Parents, I would run out and buy it for your kids if they are of marrying age, so long as it is not seen as putting pressure on your child to get married. But if your child is seriously dating someone or is going off to college, you may want to pick that book up for them.

The fact is that 95% of Americans, and I assume the same statistic holds true for committed Christians, will get married. And most of them will get married without a clue

regarding one of the most important decisions for their lives. I mean, think about it. People spend so much more time reading about and shopping for a car than they do researching how to shop for a life-long mate. We have consumer-testing agencies, about 20 magazines comparing the performances of various cars. What is the worse that can happen if you buy a bad car? You are out \$15,000 or \$20,000 or you have it in the repair shop often.

Compare that to the cost emotionally and spiritually and physically of getting married to the wrong person. Where's the consumer-testing agency? Where are the warning stickers if you mess up in this area? Making a bad decision in the realm of your life-long mate. What is the worse thing that can happen in that case? You can throw your life away. You could ruin your relationship with God. You could end up injuring yourself and your children.

Let me set the biblical background on today's talk. Essentially, both in the ancient near East and Old Testament world, as well as the New Testament world of Jesus, most people did not pick their own spouses. The heads of the family arranged the vast majority of marriages. And you see that in the Old Testament where Hagar as the head of her family, finds a spouse for Ishmael. Abraham in Genesis 24 sends his servant on a mission to find a wife for his son, Isaac. Most people did not choose their own spouse, but rather had their marriages arranged in the ancient world. And that is true still today in much of the Third World. In fact, it was true here in the United States up until the last century.

Now, in New Testament Palestine, children had no say regarding who their parents betrothed them to before the age of 12½. Children didn't get married at 12½, but they were often betrothed to be married sometime during their teenage years. Up to age 12½ they had no say regarding the betrothal. After age 12½ the children had to give their consent to their parents regarding the parents' choice of a potential mate. So there was some liberty given to the children to veto or reject the parents' choice. You even see this biblically in Genesis 24

when Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac. Abraham instructs the servant saying, “Find a wife from our family. And you must follow these instructions closely. However, if she will not come back with you, then you are free from the instruction.” When his servant finds Rebekah, Rebekah is asked by her family, “Is this what you want? Will you go back with this man? Will you consent to this marriage?” So contrary to popular belief, there was some input given to the mates themselves when they reached what was then considered to be maturity, age 12½ or 13. They offered their consent.

We also see some instances in the Bible, not many, but some instances of people actually selecting their own spouses. Jacob selects Rachel as his mate, although he has to go to her father to get her hand in marriage. Samson picks his future spouse much to the dismay of his parents. And Esau also chooses his future mate without his parents’ consent.

Nevertheless, to be fair to the biblical text, we need to understand that we live in a much different cultural scene than people lived in during biblical times. So in trying to formulate the biblical message on picking a mate, we are forced to look at general principles for making good decisions and general principles about having a good marriage.

I know that what single people would like is a set of rules that would guarantee a successful marriage. That is why books like *The Rules* are so popular. People love rules. Never hold hands before the 7<sup>th</sup> date. Don’t kiss before the 3-month point. Make sure you are never in the apartment alone after 11:00 p.m.

The Bible doesn’t offer those kinds of rules for us. It offers principles, guidelines that we have to flow with as we walk intimately with God. Rules don’t require us to have a relationship with God or to listen to the Holy Spirit, to seek God’s mind, to feel any sense of

peace about a relationship. Principles point us in the direction that God would want us to walk in, but we still need to be intimately connected to God as we follow principles.

One more thought before we look at some of the biblical principles for mate selection. I think there are four groups of people who will be listening to today's talk with very different attitudes. Certainly, if you are a single person and do not feel called to life-long singleness, you ought to be very interested in today's message. In a moment, we will discover that some folks are called to life-long singleness. But if you are a single person and you think that at some point in your future you are planning to wed, listen up.

If you are married, some of you will be very encouraged to find that you did employ many of the biblical principles of mate selection and things turned exactly as God promised they would. Your obedience to Him and His Word has worked out wonderfully for you.

A few of you will say, "I didn't employ any of these principles. I went into our marital relationship totally blind and with all the wrong thoughts and motives, and yet things have worked out wonderfully for me." Well, you get down on your knees later today and you thank God for the grace He has shown in your life. I know there are a few folks who can violate the rules, jump off the building and never hit the ground. That is grace. Pure grace.

Unfortunately, there are many more folks who violate the rules and end up paying the price. You have paid the price through an unhappy, unstable marital relationship or you have paid the price by going through a hurtful, bruising divorce. If you are still in your relationship, and as you listen to this talk you say, "We violated the rules and that is why things are so difficult," I want to encourage you to hear the whole course of this series that I am going to do. I think that far too many marriages break up that don't have to. Sometimes men and women are simply not willing to work as hard as they need to. Sometimes people

are not willing to tough it out and do the incredibly difficult work of repairing their relationship or putting in place what should have been in place from the beginning.

I have often found in failing marriages that people's failed marriages are simply symptoms of personal work that folks have not done regarding themselves. People have failed to get themselves healthy and then they blame their marriage for a lack of happiness. So they leave their spouse for someone else and find the same unhappiness all over again.

But if you find yourself at the end of this talk saying, "You know, we made all the wrong moves and it is no wonder that our relationship is as unstable and as unhappy as it is," I would encourage you to seek professional help; to do the work necessary to keep your commitment in marriage. In a few weeks I am going to talk about divorce – a subject that our culture has completely minimized in terms of its disastrous consequences to both kids and the divorcing couple. The fact is, friends, with God anything is possible, even the healing of a deeply troubled marriage.

Today, we are going to go right back to the beginning in considering building a loving marriage that lasts a lifetime. I am going to tackle the subject of "Picking a Marriage Partner for a Life-Time." Let's pray.

I want to consider the subject of mate selection by looking at some of the most common myths, ideas that people have in their minds regarding marriage. One of the most common myths that people have in their minds is that marriage will make them whole. People feel this empty place inside of them, this hole inside of them. They say, "If only I could find the right person, the right man or woman, they would fill this hole of mine, this place that needs love and acceptance. I just know if I got married I would no longer be lonely. I will live happily ever after, just like the storybook says. I will have all of my sexual needs met and that area of my life will be healed and fixed. Marriage will make me whole."

That is a profound lie experientially, as many people have discovered. The fact is they didn't suddenly get well because they exchanged marital vows. It is also a lie biblically. Colossians 2:10 says, "You have been given fullness in Christ." Or more literally, "In him you have been made complete." The emptiness and loneliness and brokenness that we experience can only be filled out and completed through a relationship with Christ. Do you know why so many marriages fail? Because people are trying to get out of marriage something that marriage was never designed to produce. They are trying to fix or fill a hole inside of themselves and marriage simply can't carry the load. Only God can heal a person.

The great philosopher Blaise Pascal spoke in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century about a God-shaped hole that is inside of every human being. He said that people try to fill this hole with created things. We try to fill the God-shaped hole inside of us with career success, promotions, cars, a new house, extravagant vacations, people or marriage. We find the hole is too big and too deep and that no one other than God can give us the kind of unconditional love and acceptance and approval that we need to make us complete.

I think people try to overload marriage and make it into something that it was never designed to do – be the source of healing and completion. At some level, marriage will heal. At some level, marriage will communicate to us that we are loved. But at a foundational level, at the deepest level of our souls only God can communicate to a human being that they are loveable, that they are valuable, that they are significant, that they are secure. No other person can put that in your life. In Christ we are complete.

The flip side to the first myth that marriage will make me whole is that marriage will make the other person whole. Sometimes people who have grown up in a family system which gave them the rescuing role – they rescued their parent's marriage, they rescued dad from alcoholism, they rescued the family financially – will carry on that dysfunctional role in

mate selection. Such people will look for broken folks that they can rescue through their love. They are so well-trained to try to heal the broken that they even will select a mate who has obvious deficiencies and glaring problems because this is one more person that they can pick up and heal. That is what love means for me – I rescue people. So folks are drawn sometimes, of course this is not universally true, but sometimes folks are drawn to the helping professions – nursing, social work – because they have been trained to be rescuers. And then they do the same thing in their marriages. Not only can't marriage fix you, but in marriage you can't fix someone else, only God can.

Pastor Bill Hybels, in a wonderful book on marriage that I would highly recommend to you called *Fit to be Tied*, employs the illustration of a life raft to illustrate the frustration of trying to rescue someone else. He says sometimes people find themselves in life emotionally drowning. They are going under for the third time. And then floating by is a blond-haired, blue-eyed, 5'5" life raft. They grab onto it with all their might because they say to themselves, "This will keep me from drowning." Initially the rescuer feels loved. This man needs me. This woman clings to me. They must love me. No, they are desperate and they don't want to drown.

Do you know that being hung onto as a life raft gets old? It gets suffocating. It gets imprisoning and confining. You feel like you can't breathe. You feel like this person is going to take me under.

Marriage won't make you whole. Marriage won't make the other person whole. If they are addicts before they were married, they will continue to be addicts through the marriage ceremony and into the marriage unless there is a radical intervention and a radical recovery plan. If a person is lonely before a marriage, they will be lonely after they get married unless God meets their need for love. If a person has bad work habits before marriage, marriage



will not give them good work habits or healthy attitudes toward money or healthy perspectives on authority or change perspectives regarding God.

I know it may be a little disillusioning for some of you that simply walking down the aisle will not instantly transform you or transform your mate into people that are entirely different than you were five minutes before. But I have to burst your bubble and tell you that that is the truth.

Myth #3 – That any marriage is better than not being married. That anyone would believe that after talking with unhappily married people is extraordinary. Yet, there is so much pressure in our culture to get married. Families can load up the pressure on a child by talking about it all the time.

“When are you going to get married, Joe? I mean your brother has two kids and he is three years younger than you.”

“Sally, you know that you are our only child and we want to have grandchildren something fierce. You aren’t getting any younger. Maybe you are being too picky or too choosy.” Maybe the pressure is coming from the desire to escape an unhappy home. “I hate it around here. And there’s a convenient out. I’ll go get married.”

All the while you hear the biological clock ticking louder and louder. Surely, any marriage must be better than being single. The pressure mounts as people face graduation. It used to be said that some women went to college to get their MRS Degree. You don’t hear that much these days. But I know the power of peer relationships that could happen here with our Joshua House ministry. Your circle of friends all begin to pair off. And maybe you are just dating someone and trying to be totally rational about it. But one by one they are all getting engaged and you just start feeling that subtle pressure, “Man, are we next?”

Is something wrong with us? Maybe we are stuck in our relationship. Maybe I should pop the question.”

Don’t do it for those reasons. Don’t give in to that kind of pressure. It is simply a lie that any marriage is better than no marriage at all. In fact, biblically, while marriage is held in very high regard, and those who teach against marriage are said to be personally deceived and deceivers of others (1 Tim. 4). They are literally teaching doctrines of demons. The apostle Paul also commends our attention to singleness. In fact, Paul in 1 Cor. 7 gives us two practical advantages of being single. Now those of you who have been divorced might be able to multiply the advantages of remaining single rather than getting into a bad marriage. But Paul gives two practical advantages for being single without in any way diminishing the value of marriage.

In 1 Cor. 7:28 Paul says, “If you do marry you haven’t sinned. And if a virgin marries, she hasn’t sinned.”

There were, apparently, many Corinthians who, in their superspirituality, were teaching that marriage and romantic love was somehow less spiritual than the life of celibacy. Paul completely shreds that idea in 1 Cor. 7. But he says that there is a practical advantage to remaining single. “Those who are married will face many troubles in this life and I want to spare you this.”

The fact is that not only do you have to deal with your own problems and your own emotions and your own family and your own finances and your own issues, but also you have to deal with all of those hassles from your mate. You get to double-dip regarding hassles when you get married. We get our fallenness and someone else’s fallenness to boot. You don’t want that? Don’t get married.

And then in addition, Paul gives a second practical advantage to being single in verses 32-35, the advantage of undivided attention to God. Paul writes, “I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs, how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world, how he can please his wife and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman, or virgin, is concerned about the Lord’s affairs. Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world, how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your good. Not to restrict you, but that you might live in a right way, in undivided devotion to the Lord.”

I can’t tell you how many times, friends, over the years that I have found myself torn between ministry and my family. Now, I love my family and know that in my life, this was God’s will for me and for my joy. Nevertheless, there has been a division of loyalty in my life. And there is a tug-of-war. At times I have wanted to spend more time praying for someone or working at something. If I didn’t have a family, I would spend many more hours sharing my faith, or preparing teachings, or writing, or praying for people. There are some practical advantages to singleness.

Let me mention the fourth myth, one that I hope you are not subject to, but I found this myth alive and well even recently. It is the myth that God may want me to marry someone that I don’t love. Some people approach the will of God as being so utterly mysterious and so often at odds with your deepest desires that I am forced to wonder whether they really believe that God is fundamentally good. And whether His intention for our lives is of good intention. Unfortunately, over the years I have talked with a number of committed Christians who would stay in a relationship or even make a decision to marry all the while feeling that they are not attracted to their spouse. Or they see some glaring deficiencies in

their spouse's character, but are submitting to the process because this is the will of God in their imagination.

Listen to me clearly, single people, do not believe that God will override your desires and your deepest held convictions regarding not wanting to marry someone else. If that is really where you are at, that you don't want to get married, do not get married. You will ultimately be held accountable for your decisions. You cannot flop off the decision onto God or your peers, or your parents. There is one person who will be held accountable for your decision to marry, that is you. And to place this onto the person of God is simply a lie.

Now, I want to switch gears a little bit and quote to you what may be the most unpopular verse in the Bible for some single people. 2 Cor. 6:14, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness. Do not be yoked together." Some versions put it, "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers."

Why do I say for some Christian singles this is an unpopular verse? Well, it sounds discriminatory. It certainly cuts down the field of potential mates. From a wide open market, we are suddenly reduced to a really much smaller market. It sounds confining, especially as it applies in the real world of "she is so attractive" and "we are so compatible" and "he has such a great sense of humor and we get along so well" and "what could possibly be wrong with me marrying someone even though they don't share my faith?"

By the way, I realize that this text is not specifically only applying to marriages, but to other closely linked relationships. But if you are looking for a loophole here, you won't find one. The Bible repeatedly teaches that people who have submitted their lives to the Lord should not marry people who haven't submitted their lives to the Lord. Starting way back in Genesis 24 Abraham told his servant, "I want you to swear, by the Lord, the God of heaven

and the God of the earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living. But go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac.”

I don’t want my son to marry a woman apart from the faith. Throughout the history of Israel marrying outside of the faith was a snare for the people of Israel. In Ezra and in Nehemiah the people were commanded to put away their wives who they had married outside the faith.

And even this term “yoked together” is an interesting one because Jesus uses the same phrase “yoking” when he talks about marriage. In Mark 10 Jesus says, “What God has yoked together...” Same word... “Let not man separate.”

Why does God put this restriction on us? Why does God narrow the field for you single person regarding your romance and ultimately your marriage? I think that most of our culture underestimates the power of commonality in terms of building a life-long stable relationship. Research findings are remarkably consistent. The most stable marriages are those involving two people who have a great deal in common. A team of researchers administered a psychological test to three groups, each consisting of 35 couples. One group included couples that were happily married. The second group consisted of couples having trouble, but planning to stay together, and the third group contained couples on the verge of separation.

The happy couples had the highest degree of commonality between the husband and the wife. The unhappy couples tended to be increasingly dissimilar. The most dissimilar couples were the ones who were on the verge of being separated.

A Canadian researcher summarized a considerable body of research this way; “Several studies have shown that not only the occurrence of relationship, but also their degree of

happiness and stability can be predicted by the degree of matching personal attributes. Dissimilarity is associated with instability and divorce.”

And while it is often said that opposites attract, the truth is that if you are truly opposite, you are headed for lots of instability and difficulty.

I must initially distinguish for you the kinds of things that you could be dissimilar in and the kinds of things that you must find in common. 2 Cor. 6 communicates to us a basic principle that on foundational, fundamental issues you must have a high degree of commonality with your potential mate or you are headed for disaster.

You say, “Like what is foundational and fundamental?”

Certainly, a common spirituality is fundamental. Friends, Jesus Christ is not whipped cream on top of the cake. Well, you can have a really good cake and then it is sure is nice if you have a dollop of whipped cream on it. Jesus Christ is the cake for the Christian. The Christian life is a Christ-centered life. All of the thoughts of a Christian, all of the goals of a Christian, all of the ambitions of a Christian, all of the resource of a Christian is found in Christ. The Christian life is a profoundly Christ-centered life. How can a Christian whose life is entirely centered on Christ think about marrying someone whose life is not entirely centered on Christ?

Some years ago I attended a dear friend’s wedding. On his wedding day I had a conversation with him that went something like this:

“So, Joe, tell me about your bride. What is she like?”

“Well, she has a great personality and we love so many of the same things. We play tennis together and she likes to go camping. We are looking forward to camping together. She is awfully pretty.”

I said, “That is great, Joe, but what about her spiritual life? You are a committed Christian and your life has always revolved around Christ. Where is your bride at?”

He gave me an answer that I thought I would just choke over. He said, “Well, I think she is born-again.”

I didn’t scream out, “Are you crazy” but that is what I was feeling inside. This was his wedding day and he didn’t know if his future bride was born-again?

It is not just enough that this other person be nominally committed or confesses Christ as their Savior. If you are a deeply committed Christian, you want this person’s roots to go really far down in Christ. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” If Christ is not your mate’s treasure, then regarding your hearts, they are going to be separated from each other at this most important level of intimacy, spiritual intimacy, and you are going to find a separation.

Let me put it this way, friends, before I move on. The reason why we read commandments in the Bible is entirely for our good. God doesn’t need our obedience as if we are supplying Him with something. God is not arbitrary in His list of rules and commands just to dominate us because He wants to be bossy or throw his weight around. The reason why God gives us commandments is to protect us and to ensure our happiness. He knows that without a common spirituality you will never have the kind of intimacy that He intends for marriage.

You need a common set of plans if marriage is going to succeed. We are building, adding on 17,000 sq. ft. of building outside. Could you imagine with the crews working outside if one crew had one set of blueprints and another crew had a totally different set of blueprints from another building and they were trying to work together to construct our

addition? That is what people who are unequally yoked are like. They are working from two different sets of blueprints. Think about it.

The committed Christian might say to themselves, “Well, you know we just had a fight, but it is important for me to initiate dialogue with my mate because as a Christian, I am the first one who always ought to reach out to make peace.”

Their mate, working from a whole different set of blueprints might say, “You know, we just had a fight and it is important for me to punish my spouse to make sure he never does this again. So I am going to give him the cold shoulder for the next two days.”

The committed Christian might say, “It is important for me to tithe my income to the church because God needs to be in first place, not only in terms of my time, but also in terms of my pocketbook.”

The spouse who has not submitted their lives to Christ might say, “Are you crazy? 10% of our income? Do you know what we could buy with that?”

The committed Christian might say, “You know, I can’t think of anything better than devoting my Wednesday nights to fellowship and Bible study.”

Their mate might say, “I could. Staying home and watching TV might be better.”

And it goes on and on regarding a host of life decisions. You are working off of different plans to build a life. What you will eventually end up with is a nightmare.

And you must be common at the level of your values. Things like how you view smoking or alcohol and your childraising philosophy, or how you handle anger, or your life goals, the amount of money that you should give away and to whom, the size and style of your house, and your political philosophy.

Friends, listen to me. We live in an age of shifting standards and shifting values. Many kids are being raised on MTV and safe sex education. And it is important to make sure you



are sexually active before you are 17, otherwise your whole body will shut down and you will be frozen forever. They are getting messages from music. If ever there was a time that husbands and wives needed to agree together on values, it is now.

Marlene and I have some very significant differences in temperament. But I will tell you what has been the glue in our marriage from the beginning is a high degree of commonness. Almost complete unanimity when it came to foundational values and fundamental spirituality and a common perspective on how to build life. We have been entirely in agreement about fundamental things – our goals, our plans, and our love for Jesus. If you want to have a successful marriage, you find a person who on the high percentage of fundamental issues is a lot like you.

I want to finish this talk by discussing three common mistakes that people make in choosing a potential mate. I want you to listen up here, single people.

The #1 mistake that single people make in choosing a mate is not taking enough time to consider their decision. Not taking enough time to consider their decision. Proverbs 19:2 says this about making hasty decisions, “It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way.”

A study was done that indicated that the longer people dated; the more likely it was that they were going to have a successful, stable marriage. That as a general rule, people had a much higher degree of likelihood of failure in marriage if they courted and got married within six months of initially dating.

You need time to make this incredibly important decision. You need time to get over the initial infatuation. Is this love that is meant to last a lifetime, or is this hormones speaking?

Calvin and Hobbs is one of my favorite comics. They had a strip several years ago about love. I think most of you have seen Calvin and Hobbs – the little boy with the stuffed tiger. One day they are out walking in the snow. Calvin asked Hobbs, “What is it like to fall in love?” Hobbs stopped walking, looked into space, stroked his chin and said, “Well, say the object of your affection walks by.” “Yes,” said Calvin looking up at his friend. “First your heart falls into your stomach and splashes your innards,” Hobbs said swinging his arms around to demonstrate. “All the moisture makes you sweat profusely, [he wipes his forehead], condensation shorts the circuits to your brain, and you get all woozy. And when your brain burns out altogether, your mouth disengages and you babble like a Cretan until she leaves.” “That’s love,” Calvin asked? “Medically speaking,” Hobbs intoned clearly taken with his own brilliance.

Medically speaking, your brain short-circuits and you need time for the circuits to fuse again. The biggest mistake you could ever make is rushing into this huge commitment. Time gives you a chance to work through several conflicts. It gives you a chance to do more than see the car on the showroom floor. When I buy a car, I take it out for a test drive. I race the thing down a back road, slam on the brakes – hopefully, it is raining and we can go into a spin.

But you want to see over time how this person handles various situations. Part of the problem of dating is that it is so artificial. You go out to a nice restaurant every Friday night. You both look nice and are on your best behavior. You need lots and lots of time doing mundane things like chores together or painting a room together or wallpapering together before you really see what this other person is like.

Single people; let me put it in terms of running the bases on a baseball diamond. Whatever you don’t take the time to deal with before you get married, you will have to deal

with after you get married. There are issues in your life that are not healed. Those issues will have to be healed when you are married and you have the pressure of both marriage and perhaps family. If there are things between the two of you, those things will eventually have to be worked out after you are married. If you don't touch first base before your marriage, you will have to touch first base after you are married.

And so I often will talk with young couples. I will say, "What is the rush? Where's the fire?" You are going to live together for the rest of your life. Take the time to get past your initial infatuation, to really watch this person closely in a variety of situations, and ask yourself whether this is the person you want to spend the rest of your life – 50 years – with. Is the very best you could do?

Some people are afraid to take time. I would ask what are you afraid of? That this person will discover something in you that they don't like? Better that they do that now than later. That you will discover something in your mate that you don't like? Better that you do so now. The #1 mistake that couples make is not taking enough time to make the decision.

The second big mistake that people make in picking a mate is not paying enough attention to potential problems. Proverbs 14:8 says, "The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways. But the folly of fools is deception." A wise person gives thought to their ways. Some people don't pay enough attention to potential disasters. They turn their backs to the red flags that are going up. The signals on the dashboard are all reading "warning." If you have an indicator on on your dashboard that you have low oil pressure and you keep driving through that, you are going to burn up your engine. Some people have flashing lights, ringing bells, and red flags waving and they just blindly go through with it. "Oh, I don't need to pay attention to this. I know everything is going to work out when we get married." Pay attention. Give thought to what you are seeing. If your potential mate

has ongoing credit problems, if he is in debt, if he has shaky finances, if she is extravagant, if she is a terrible money manager, you had better hide your checkbook because you are in for a lifetime of financial hassle unless that area gets healed. And better that it gets healed before you get married than after.

If your potential mate frequently uses alcohol or drugs, if they can't have fun without them, then you are looking to getting married potentially to an addict, even though they deny it. If your man is a flirt, attracts women around him like flies, if he needs lots of female attention, if she dresses to kill, if she is still in contact with one of her old boyfriends, wake up. You may be marrying a potential cheater. Do you want to live insecurely your whole life?

If your mate is abusive, listen to me; here is what I would say to my daughter. Honey, if during courtship your mate ever hurts you physically, pushes you, and slaps you—you don't walk, you run from that relationship. This is a zero tolerance rule in courtship. I don't care if he gets down on his knees and begs you to return. You have lost it, friend. You get a one-strike rule on verbal abuse. One strike. If you ever talk to me that way again, abusively, in private or in public, this relationship is over.

See, men and women, the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. It is a pattern of changed behavior over the long haul. Do not in choosing a spouse listen to sweet talk, promises of future change, romance, flowers – forget it. The only thing that ought to make a difference for you is a long track record of actual changed behavior. Apart from that you are being incredibly foolish if you leap into a marriage.

Someone who has an inconsistent work history, or academic record, or problems with authority, who moves from one job to another, I would say to such a person, “Unless you

hold a job for several years, we will wait, but unless you can stay with a job through thick and thin, we are going to have to look for other potential mates, even though I love you.

The third big mistake and the last one is the failure to take enough counsel. Proverbs 15:22 says, “Plans fail for lack of counsel. But with many advisors they succeed.” One of the first questions I ask couples in premarital counseling is tell me what other people are saying about your relationship. What do significant members of your community feel about the two of you getting married? Is there anyone who is significantly objecting? Your parents? Close friends of yours? People who are pastoring you? Folks in your kinship group? Or women’s group or care circle?

If I hear back a statement like: “Well, a number of people are upset that I am marrying Joe. They think that he is not right for me. But honestly no one sees in him what I see. They don't see his sweet side the way I do.”

I would say, “Well, why not? Why doesn’t anyone else see what you see? Could it be as Proverbs 26:12 says, “Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes, there is more hope for a fool than for him.” If no one else sees in this person what you see, then you may be deluding yourself. I would take Proverbs 26:12 and put it on post it notes all over my room and on in the inside of my glasses before I would marry someone who other people in my community did not respect at all.

Now, it is true that couples need to make their own decisions and not be pressured by friends, the other person, or their parents. The ultimate responsibility for the decision rests on you. But I would seriously weigh counsel that advised me against marrying, especially if the source was other mature committed Christians. Sometimes other people who are not in love can assist us to come to a clear decision and read of a person to help us to see both their strengths and shortcomings and to help us see our own shortcomings.

Parents, you have a role to play in advising your children. We parents walk a tight rope here. We can be too intrusive. We can forget that we are not the fount of all wisdom. Our standards could be too high and we could feel that no one is good enough for our perfect son or darling daughter.

But you could fall off the tightrope in the other direction and in the name of being supportive, watch your children make a huge mistake while you keep your mouth shut. Parents, you have a responsibility in love and gentleness to speak your heart to your child. To give them good counsel before they enter relationships. If your children are still young, train them regarding what to look for in a potential spouse. Talk with them as they begin to date through the teen years. Son, daughter, here is the kind of person you want. Here is the kind of behavior you should never tolerate. Here are the warning signs of disaster.

Do you know if a culture like ours where there is so much divorce there is almost nothing more important than a supportive community rallying around a couple to help them. In the early days of my marriage when I was still in an emotional shock thinking, “What have I done,” and feeling like I made the right decision. I really loved Marlene, but insecure and “Oh my goodness, now I am really married.” In the early days of my marriage to Marlene, I took tremendous comfort in the fact that all of our significant counselors advised us that we were making the best decision of our lives by marrying each other. One older pastor, I remember his comment when Marlene and I went over to his house to tell him that we were going to get married. I was saved as an 18 year old in his little fellowship group. We told him that we were going to get married and he just about leaped up in the air and he said, “I got the witness all over about this. The Lord has spoken to me about this.”

I tell you that was a great encouragement to me, because I trusted him. And so the staff worker of our college fellowship signed off on it. All our close friends signed off. People

whose spiritual maturity we respected signed off and said, “This is a good thing. You are both making a good decision.” That is strengthening in the times that we are living in.

Friends, apart from your decision to receive Christ as your Savior, there is no more important decision that you will ever make than picking a spouse for life. Take time. Listen to counsel. Look at the warning signs. Make sure that you are together spiritually. Choose wisely. Choose well. Your future happiness depends on it.

Let’s pray.