

DATING, MARRIAGE, AND SEX

book thirty-three in the series:
"THE OWNER'S MANUAL TO THE NEW YOU"

DOUG BRITTON, MFT

Five-day Bible study for individuals, small groups, and churches

- Day One: Dating Guidelines
- Day Two: God's View of Sex
- Day Three: Marriage Guidelines (Part One)
- Day Four: Marriage Guidelines (Part Two)
- Day Five: Review and Test

Dating, Marriage, and Sex: Book thirty-three in “The Owner’s Manual to the New You”

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By Doug Britton, MFT

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Twelve books on “Developing a Godly Character”

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The Owner's Manual to the New You

"The Owner's Manual to the New You," published by LifeTree Books, is a series of forty-eight cross-cultural discipleship books by Bible-based Marriage and Family Therapist Doug Britton. LifeTree Books is making these books available free of charge for individual use.

Each book is ideal for a five-day study by small groups, classes, or individuals. Although this is a forty-eight-book series, each book can be studied as a complete book by itself.

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- Book 2: Becoming a Believer
- Book 3: Your Identity in Christ
- Book 4: Quick Overview of the Bible
- Book 5: How to Study the Bible
- Book 6: How to Pray
- Book 7: Key Christian Practices
- Book 8: Successful Christian Living
- Book 9: Living a Joyful Life
- Book 10: Knowing God's Will
- Book 11: Obeying God
- Book 12: Living in God's Power

Developing a Godly Character

- Book 13: Growing in Christ
- Book 14: Changing Your Self-Image
- Book 15: Changing Your Attitudes
- Book 16: Living with Humility
- Book 17: Living with Purpose
- Book 18: Living with Self-Control
- Book 19: Living with Integrity
- Book 20: Growing through Problems
- Book 21: Trusting God
- Book 22: Breaking Free from Our Culture
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Enjoying Healthy Relationships

- Book 25: Keys to Healthy Relationships
- Book 26: Making Friends
- Book 27: Showing Grace to Others
- Book 28: Forgiving Others
- Book 29: Serving Others
- Book 30: Resolving Conflicts
- Book 31: Overcoming Peer Pressure
- Book 32: Helping Others with Wisdom
- Book 33: Dating, Marriage, and Sex
- Book 34: Embracing the Body of Christ
- Book 35: Respecting Authority
- Book 36: Sharing Your Faith

Overcoming Personal Problems

- Book 37: Overcoming Your Anger (Part 1)
- Book 38: Overcoming Your Anger (Part 2)
- Book 39: Overcoming Rejection
- Book 40: Overcoming Temptation (Part 1)
- Book 41: Overcoming Temptation (Part 2)
- Book 42: Overcoming Anxiety and Fear
- Book 43: Overcoming Jealousy and Insecurity
- Book 44: Overcoming Self-Sufficiency
- Book 45: Overcoming Guilt and Shame
- Book 46: Overcoming Discouragement
- Book 47: Overcoming Failure
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Foreword

When I was first asked to write a series of downloadable books for intensive discipleship training, I was excited. Jesus has revolutionized my life, and I am glad to share his truths with you.

The pages you are about to study come straight from God's word. They contain truth that puts our feet on the path to the fullest life possible—truth that sets us free.

As Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).

May God speak to your heart as you read, and may he bring his truth alive in your life.

Your brother in Christ,

Doug Britton

P.S. LifeTree Books is offering this downloadable book and all the other books in "The Owner's Manual to the New You" series free of charge. If you find these books helpful, please feel free to spread the news to churches, ministries, and individuals who might benefit from them.

Small Group Leader's Guidelines

Introduction. These studies are for new believers as well as mature Christians. They are for small groups, discipleship classes, mentors, and individuals. They are ideal for studies lasting from sixty to ninety minutes.

Choose the key points, verses, and discussion questions you will talk about. Don't think you need to cover every verse and question. With new believers, go over the main points, key verses, and selected questions. Go into more depth with mature Christians.

Begin and end each study with prayer. Start by asking God to help each person grow from the study. At the end, ask everyone to pray for help to put God's truth into practice.

Review homework. Before starting the current lesson, ask group members to discuss their answers to some of the previous day's homework questions.

Personalize the lesson. Although it's okay to read each lesson word-for-word, the material will "come alive" if you discuss some of the key points in your own words. Share your own experiences and struggles, and how God has helped you.

As you read, identify important points and key parts of verses. Ask group members to circle them, and then explain why you want to emphasize these points.

Get everyone involved. The more people are actively involved, the more they are impacted by what you are studying. Don't ask questions that can be answered by "yes" or "no." For example, don't ask, "Do you have any thoughts about this?" Instead, ask, "How does this insight speak to you?"

Consider breaking up into smaller groups to discuss the questions if you are leading a large group or class.

Use day five for a review and test. Use the questions in day five as a review and/or test. Remove these pages if you do not want group members to see the questions ahead of time.

Want to Learn More?

Free online resources: For more suggestions for small group leaders as well as many online Bible studies on Christianity and daily living (anger, marriage, self-image, finances, and more), visit www.dougbrittonbooks.com/resources/small-groups

Small group leader's book: For detailed information on how to lead small groups and overcome typical problems, visit www.dougbrittonbooks.com/bookstore/small-groups.

Day One: Dating Guidelines

Note

If you are married, today's lesson does not apply to you. However, you may want to study it for insights you can share with single friends.

Introduction

Whether you are a teenager, in your twenties, or much older, these guidelines can help you develop a healthy relationship with someone of the opposite sex. Over time, this relationship could lead to a wonderful marriage.

I should add that if you are single and don't want to marry, that doesn't mean something is wrong with you. The Bible is pro-marriage, but it also says it's good not to marry if you can stay sexually pure (1 Corinthians 7:27-38).



What is “going on a date”?

“Dating” and “going on a date” are modern terms that are not found in the Bible. They aren't easy to define, since there are many types of friendship and different activities that might—or might not—be considered “dating.” In today's lesson, I am writing about going on a date with the intention of getting to know someone better. Depending on your intentions, this could include going out for coffee, going to a movie, or even going to church together.

Dating guidelines

1. Lay a solid foundation

Before you build a house, you build a strong foundation so the house won't fall down. When the house is done, you feel safe and secure in it. It is immovable.

Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain ... (Psalm 127:1)

Make your relationship with Jesus your personal foundation.

You need a strong foundation when it comes to dating. Don't consider getting close to someone (or going on a date) until you are reasonably strong in your personal walk with Jesus and ready to have a godly friendship.

Be especially careful if you are desperately lonely.

When you are desperate for companionship, you are vulnerable and likely to make mistakes. You may attract someone who is drawn to a weak or needy person—someone who acts more like a nurse than a partner, or someone who is controlling or domineering.

Wait to date until you are strong in the Lord so you, as a strong person, will attract another mature Christian. Spend time with friends of the same sex in activities, small groups, and in church as you grow in your relationship with God. Trust God. He cares for you and has a plan for your life.

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. (1 Peter 5:7)

Discussion questions

1. Will you wait to date until you are fairly strong in your walk with Jesus? Why or why not?
2. Do you think it's risky to date when you are desperately lonely? Why or why not?

2. Get to know someone well before going on individual dates

Move slowly. If possible, get to know someone in his or her real life. Go to church together. Join a small group. Get involved in a ministry together. Observe how he or she talks about other people, and observe how he or she treats other people. In other words, make it your goal to really know (and respect) someone before you date.

Discussion question

3. Do you agree it's a good idea to know someone in a group setting before going on individual dates? Why or why not?

Be sure the person has been a sincere Christian over a period of time.

As a follower of Jesus, you will have a much stronger marriage if you marry someone who is a believer and has the same priorities in life. This is more important than his or her physical attractiveness, finances, or personality.

If someone doesn't go to church, but promises to do so if you start dating, don't date that person. Likewise, don't be satisfied if someone simply says he or she is a Christian. Look deeper. Hopefully, he or she knows Jesus as his or her Savior, prays and reads the Bible, attends church regularly, helps in a ministry, and acts like a follower of Jesus when with others.

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? (2 Corinthians 6:14)

Discussion question

4. What are some ways you can "look deeper" to see if someone is a sincere Christian?

Ask yourself if this person has godly personality traits.

Does he or she have habits or personality traits that bother you? Would you be willing to marry him or her if these did not change? How well do the following verses describe him or her? (No one is perfect, but look for people who are growing in these areas.)

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails ... (1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control ... (Galatians 5:22-23)

Discussion question

5. What personality traits would you want to see in someone you date? Explain your answer.

Be careful if you use online dating apps.

Try to get to know someone well before meeting in person and going on a date—talk often, Google him or her, and check to see if he or she shares mutual friends. Before going on a date, make your intentions and sexual boundaries clear. Tell a friend who you are meeting and where you will be going. Meet in a public place such as a café or restaurant. Be especially cautious if you are meeting someone who doesn't share mutual friends or acquaintances with you.

3. Only go on dates with someone you might consider marrying

You might want to date someone, not knowing him or her well enough to say, "I could see myself possibly marrying this person." That's understandable. After all, one reason to go on dates is to get to know someone better. However, if you are pretty sure you would never marry someone, don't go on dates with him or her. When you spend a lot of time with someone of the opposite sex, it's easy to develop an emotional bond and think you are falling in love. Whether you are a teenager or much older, *don't put yourself in this position by dating or spending a lot of time with someone you are sure you wouldn't marry.*

Discussion question

6. Should you only date someone you might consider marrying? Explain your answer.

Don't just be driven by feelings of romantic love.

Feeling love for someone, and feeling loved by someone, are some of the most thrilling and enjoyable emotions you can experience. Yet they don't guarantee a good marriage. Many marry foolishly, certain that their love will overcome all problems, only to experience heartache and disappointment. Don't let your feelings bind you.

Do not engage in wishful thinking.

Don't date someone because you think he or she will change because you will be a good influence on him or her. Only date someone on the basis of who he or she is right now.

Discussion question

7. Should you trust your emotions when deciding whom to date? Why or why not?

4. Make personal boundaries

Make a list of personal guidelines or boundaries you will follow when you date. If someone pressures you to violate your boundaries, stop dating him or her.

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise. (Ephesians 5:15)

Sample boundaries

- (1) Define what type of physical contact you will engage in. (Keep it limited.) (2) Avoid being alone together in a house, apartment, or parked car. (3) Don't drink alcohol (or use any other drugs). (4) Don't cuddle in a hot tub.

If you aren't sure if you should do something, ask yourself:

- Would God be pleased by this?
- Would this violate the Bible's commandments or instructions?
- Would this draw me closer to God or push me away from God?

Warning signs — Stop the relationship if the other person:

- Wants you to send sex texts or engage in other sexual activity, or if he or she says, "If you love me, you will have sex with me."
- Tries to get you to take drugs or drink alcohol.
- Gets angry or jealous, tries to control you, monopolizes your time, always wants to know where you are, or asks you to stop hanging out with your friends.
- Hits, slaps, pushes, shoves, threatens, or uses abusive or disrespectful language.
- Threatens suicide if you don't have sex or if you want to break up.

Discussion questions

8. What boundaries will you set before dating? Explain your answer.
9. What will you do if you see one of the above warning signs? Explain your answer.

5. Ask for godly advice before getting married

If you are thinking about getting married, talk with your parents, mature friends, and pastor. Take their words seriously. Also engage in Bible-based pre-marriage mentoring or counseling.

Do you know Jesus?

This book was written to help believers in Jesus grow in their faith and personal life. You will get the most out of these pages if you know Christ, since it is through his love and power that you can truly change. If you have not yet entered into a relationship with Jesus, let me invite you to accept him as your Savior and Lord. Make this your personal prayer:

Jesus, I believe you are the Son of God, and I need your help. I confess I have sinned and failed you in many ways. I invite you to be my Savior and Lord, and I ask you to help me follow you the rest of my life. Thank you for loving me, forgiving me, and accepting me as your child.

If you prayed this prayer, welcome to the family of God. God has plans for you—to transform you. You have an exciting life ahead of you!

Memory verse

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise. (Ephesians 5:15)

Homework – Day One

1. Do you agree you should be walking fairly close to Jesus before you date? Why or why not?
2. Why should you be especially careful about dating if you are desperately lonely?
3. Do you agree it's wisest to only date someone who has been a sincere follower of Jesus for some time? Why or why not?
4. If you were to date someone, what personality traits would you want him or her to have? Explain your answer:

Day Two: God's View of Sex

Note

Today's lesson is about sex, but it is not a Christian "how-to" sex manual. Instead it helps you explore your underlying attitudes about sex. It also encourages you to adopt God's view of sex.



Where did you get your ideas about sex?

If you're like most people, you learned about sex from TV, social media, the Internet, popular culture, pornography, secular teachers and professors, a friend from school, or the kid next door. Unfortunately, you also may have learned about sex from someone who molested or raped you.

Discussion question

1. What attitudes about sex do we learn from our culture? Explain your answer.

God's view of sex is different from the world's view

The wonderful sexual relationship that God intends for a husband and wife is vastly different from the sexuality we see in the world.

One way to understand how God's view of sex differs from the world's view is to think about fire. Fire is life-giving in some circumstances, yet it is life-threatening in others.

If you were in the wilderness, you might welcome a campfire. You could stand near it to keep warm, and you could roast marshmallows over it. But if you were in the middle of a forest fire, it would be a different matter. Sex, like fire, can be delightful or destructive.

The world's view

The world sees sex as being about the same as scratching an itch—"if it feels good, just do it." Plus, the world doesn't worry about whether or not you are married.

Many people find the world's view about sex exciting and appealing, but eventually they are disappointed. The world promises "freedom," but the end result is emptiness, broken relationships, and possibly sexually transmitted infections.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. (Galatians 6:7-8)

God's view

God designed marriage to be the most intimate of human relationships. In the Bible, he describes a married couple as being “one flesh.” He intends sexual intimacy between a husband and wife to be pleasurable and fun for both—a joining of body to body as well as soul to soul, a celebration of love.

The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. (Genesis 2:23-24)

“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. (Mark 10:7-8)

Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. (Hebrews 13:4)

Sexual intimacy is giving and receiving love.

When you read the Song of Solomon, Proverbs 5:18-19, and the many Bible passages instructing us to do everything in love, you discover that sexual intimacy is more than simply “having sex.” It is giving and receiving love.

Sexual intimacy is reserved for marriage.

God created sexual intimacy to be enjoyed by a married couple. It connects them in a special way. It is a manifestation of them being “one flesh.” It brings them joy and helps them celebrate being one flesh. Of course, sex can also result in the gift of children.

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. (Ephesians 5:3)

But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. (1 Corinthians 7:2)

But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. (1 Corinthians 7:9)

Discussion questions

2. What is the difference between the world's view of sex and God's view of sex?
3. How do you think someone could move from having the world's view of sex to agreeing with God's view?

Guideline for singles: Avoid sex before marriage

There are many benefits to avoiding sexual activity before marriage. For example, if you wait until marriage you:

- Gain the pleasure that comes from obeying God.
- Gain self-respect by not giving in to temptation.
- Give your future spouse confidence in your self-control.
- Enjoy true love instead of encouraging someone to sin.
- Avoid “falling in love” with the wrong person.

- Avoid emotional baggage (such as guilt) that often comes from pre-marital sexual activity.
- Avoid an unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

Discussion questions

4. Review the previous reasons to avoid sex before marriage. Which ones do you think are most helpful? Explain your answer.
5. Many unmarried Christian couples have sex. Do you think it's possible for them not to have sex? Why or why not?

Guideline for married couples: Cultivate a deep friendship

A friend of mine often says, "My wife is my best friend." He may not realize it, but by nurturing his friendship with his wife, he is giving his sex life a boost. A husband and wife who are best friends most likely will have a wonderful sex life.

What does it mean for a husband and wife to be each other's best friend? It means talking every day, taking time to understand one another, laughing together, comforting one another, and inspiring each other to new heights. If you are married:

- Do something to strengthen your marriage every day.
- Go on dates and vacations together.
- Treat your husband or wife with respect.
- Don't pressure your spouse to do something he or she doesn't want to do.
- Don't flirt or play "innocent" games with others.

Discussion question

6. Do you agree that cultivating a deep friendship can help a married couple's sex lives? Why or why not?

Guideline for everyone: Avoid sexual sin

Draw close to God as you go through the day.

Don't just fight a defensive battle, focusing on resisting temptation. Instead, also focus on drawing closer to God. As you walk in the Spirit, you become more like Christ and more self-controlled.

Living by the Spirit means falling in love with God and seeking to please him. It means reading the Bible, getting to know him better, and living in a close relationship with him. It means setting your heart on things above (in heaven).

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. (Colossians 3:1-3)

How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. (Psalm 119:9)

... Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. (Galatians 5:16)

Stay alert.

Don't daydream through life. Guard your heart and pray. Avoid potentially dangerous situations.

Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak. (Matthew 26:41)

Avoid pornography and other sexually explicit media.

Don't look at pornography or other "mainstream" media with sexual content.

You have heard that it was said, "Do not commit adultery." But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:27-28)

Say "no" to sin, then flee.

When you are tempted, say "no" and quickly leave the situation.

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age. (Titus 2:11-12)

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body. (1 Corinthians 6:18-20)

Don't rationalize sin.

Don't try to justify sin by saying, for example, "it was just oral sex" or "we're in love."

Ask forgiveness if you sin.

If you sin, ask for and accept God's forgiveness. Identify specific changes you need to make to prevent it from happening again. Ask friends to keep you accountable.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Discussion question

7. What are realistic steps you can take to avoid sexual sin? Explain your answer.

Memory verse

... Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. (Galatians 5:16)

Want to learn more?**Book by Doug Britton**

Celebrating Intimacy and Romance

www.dougbrittonbooks.com/bookstore/sex

Homework – Day Two

1. In your own words, describe the world's view of sex and God's view of sex.

The world's view of sex:

God's view of sex:

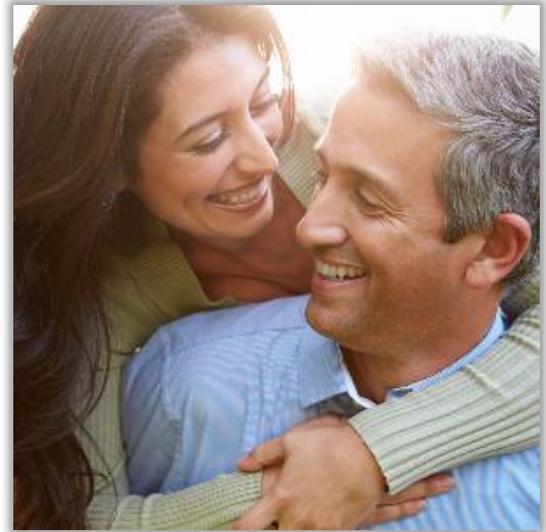
2. This lesson says it's important for a married couple to cultivate a close friendship as the foundation for their sexual relationship. Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think many unmarried Christian couples have sex even though they know it's wrong? Explain your answer:

Day Three: Marriage Guidelines (Part One)

Note

If you are single, you might think these lessons on marriage don't apply to you. However, I suggest that you study them to help you prepare for the day you might be married.

I have spent a great deal of my adult life ministering to Christian marriages, including writing an eight-book series on marriage ("Marriage by the Book"). In today's lesson you will read some of the key practices I've discovered that make for a wonderful marriage. (You will read more practices in Day 4.)



Marriage guidelines

1. Realize that you are "one flesh"

People sometimes describe marriage as a contract, covenant, or partnership. There's truth in all of these descriptions. Yet there's a deeper truth: When you are married, you become "one flesh" (Genesis 2:24).

God intends marriage to be the most intimate of human relationships. You can't get any closer to another person than by being one.

The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. (Genesis 2:23-24)

Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. (Malachi 2:15)

Although you are one flesh, each of you is also a separate and complete individual. The two are one, and the one is two.

Discussion questions

1. How is God's picture of marriage different from our culture's picture? Explain your answer.
2. What do you think being "one flesh" or "being one" means? Explain your answer.

2. Focus on changes you should make

Many people put a lot of effort into changing their spouse, thinking if their husband or wife would change, they would have a great marriage. But God says to do the opposite. Instead of trying to "fix" your spouse, try to be the best husband or wife you can be. For example, when you discuss a disagreement or problem, ask yourself: Did I contribute to the problem? How can I help?

Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your

eye,” when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye. (Matthew 7:3-5)

Sometimes you may need to bring up your spouse’s shortcomings or sins, but this should be rare. When you think you should talk about your spouse’s behavior, look again at Matthew 7:3-5 and you will see three points:

- First take the plank out of your own eye. Deal with your own sin.
- Until you take the plank out of your own eye, you cannot see clearly.
- Once you confront your own sins, you can lovingly remove the speck of sawdust from your mate’s eye.

Discussion questions

3. Why is it important to first take the plank out of your own eye? Explain your answer.
4. Can you think of a time someone thought he or she was treated unfairly but was unaware of ways he or she contributed to the problem? If so, describe the situation.

Don’t blame yourself for everything.

Although it’s usually wise to look at your part in a problem, don’t blame yourself for everything. Your husband or wife has problems too. Be willing to talk about them. Also be willing to take strong actions if necessary (for example, if your spouse physically abuses you).

3. Choose to love your spouse

A common mistake people often make is to think of love as an emotion. In the Bible we learn that love primarily is a choice or an action. Read this passage from 1 Corinthians 13. Notice that love is described as a decision or as something you do:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. (1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

When you choose to love someone, you make a strong foundation for your marriage. The wonderful thing is that when you build this foundation, feelings of love will grow upon it.

In any marriage it’s inevitable that from time-to-time you won’t feel loving toward your spouse. When that happens, don’t think of divorce. Instead, pray for God to help you choose to love. Ask him to help you put the above passage from 1 Corinthians 13 into practice.

Discussion question

5. Can you really choose to love or pray to love? Explain your answer.

4. Commit to your marriage

Complete commitment to your marriage provides a foundation of dependability and trust. It takes you through tough times and steers you toward godly solutions. A lack of commitment erodes your strength, determination, and resourcefulness. It can lead to tragedy.

Embrace God's attitude about divorce.

Study these Scriptures to see how serious the Lord is about divorce:

"I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel. (Malachi 2:16)

What God has joined together, let man not separate ... I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery. (Matthew 19:6, 9)

If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. (1 Corinthians 7:12-13)

My wife and I wouldn't be married today if God allowed divorce. Even after we became Christians, there were times we desperately wanted out of our marriage. But we knew that wasn't an option, so we worked hard to create the best marriage we could. We now enjoy a deeply satisfying marriage.

Discuss question

6. Why is commitment to your marriage so important? Explain your answer.

What about physical abuse?

There are situations in which you should take action to protect yourself. Physical abuse is one of them. A man cannot begin to understand the emotional harm, not to mention the physical damage, which he inflicts when he abuses his wife. The same is true with a physically abusive woman.

Take abuse seriously. Call your pastor and law enforcement. Separate to prevent further violence. Don't consider moving back together until you both successfully complete biblical counseling.

5. Forgive your spouse

Forgiveness is God's way of keeping our hearts clean to love each other. Forgiveness is a way of life in a great marriage. Forgiveness brings healing.

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32)

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Colossians 3:13)

Choose to forgive.

Many people think of forgiveness as something you either feel or you don't feel. But forgiveness is an act of the will—a choice. It is a decision, not an emotion. Choose to forgive in obedience to Christ. God will change your emotions over time.

Practice forgiveness.

Don't keep score. (Read 1 Corinthians 13:5). Two practical guidelines are (1) don't dwell on the offense and (2) don't keep bringing it up to your spouse or others.

Take action if necessary.

Forgiving someone does not necessarily mean you shouldn't talk about issues or take action. When there is a problem or disagreement, talk together. Sometimes gently confront your mate. And, as you read earlier, take protective action or call the police when appropriate.

Discussion question

7. Do you agree that it's important to choose to forgive? Why or why not?

6. Pray as a couple

In my counseling experience, praying together is the most effective thing a couple can do to create a great marriage.

Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. (Psalm 127:1)

If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my father who is in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them. (Matthew 18:19-20)

You can do it.

Praying is simply talking and listening to God. Be yourself. Look at your schedules, then decide on a prayer time together using one or more of the following ideas, or some ideas of your own.

Morning prayer: Pray for each other.

Our pattern is simple: Either one of us says, "Do you want to pray now?" Then each one asks the other for prayer requests and prays for the requests. The requests range from praying for help on the job to staying close to Jesus to overcoming discouragement.

Early evening prayer: Pray for a servant's heart.

If one of you is not home during the day, pray within five minutes of when he or she comes home. If both are gone, pray when the second person comes home. When you pray, ask God to help you, personally (not your mate), be the best husband or wife you can be.

Bedtime prayer: Pray for God's protection.

Pray together before you go to sleep. Ask for God's protection over your home and for each member of your family, your relatives, and others with needs.

Discussion questions

8. Do you think it's important for a couple to pray together daily? Why or why not?
9. If you were married, what pattern of prayer you would like to have? Explain your answer.

Memory verse

Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. (Psalm 127:1)

Want to learn more?**Books by Doug Britton**

Marriage by the Book (eight-book series)
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5. This study says to pray to love your spouse. Do you think this is a good idea? Why or why not?

6. Why is it important to commit to your marriage? Explain your answer:

7. Why does today's study say forgiveness is a way of life in a great marriage? Explain your answer:

8. Describe a pattern of daily prayer with your spouse you would like to have if you were married. Why would you like to have this pattern?

Day Four: Marriage Guidelines (Part Two)

Note

In today's lesson, you will read more key practices that make for a wonderful marriage.

As I wrote in Day 3, if you are single, you might think these lessons don't apply to you. However, I suggest that you study them to help you prepare for the day you might be married.



Marriage guidelines (continued)

7. Love your spouse “as-is”

Your husband or wife has faults. So do you (although your faults may be different from your mate's). The important question is, how do you respond to them?

In Day Three, you read about choosing to love your spouse. Paul helped us understand love a little better in his letter to the Ephesians when he wrote to “be patient, bearing with one another in love.”

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. (Ephesians 4:2)

To “bear with” or “forbear” in marriage means putting up with your mate's faults, differences, and quirks. It is showing compassion, love, tolerance, gentleness, and patience. It is refraining from commenting every time your spouse loses keys, doesn't make the bed, or runs out of gas.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Colossians 3:12-13)

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. (1 Peter 4:8)

Expect disappointments.

Don't expect the worst moment by moment. But in the back of your mind, remember that your mate will disappoint you from time to time. Then when that happens, you will be less likely to respond with an indignant, “I can't believe you did that!” Or, “How could you be so rude?” Or, “If that's the way you feel, I'm divorcing you.”

Talk about problems from time to time, but don't nag.

In a healthy marriage, you need to talk about problems, but not all the time. A guideline that helps me is to make no more than two negative comments a day. Another guideline is to only discuss problems when you can do so with love and respect.

A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense. (Proverbs 19:11)

It is to a man's honor to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel. (Proverbs 20:3)

Discussion question

1. Describe in your own words what it means to “bear with” your spouse. Do you think it’s important to do this? Why or why not?

8. Look for the positive

If you look for the negative, you will find it. Likewise, if you look for the positive, you will find it. Learn to focus on the good, lovely, and noble things about your mate—his winsome grin, her gentle touch, his jokes, her organizational skills.

Learn to think positively.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. (Philippians 4:8)

Learn to speak positively. Praise your spouse often.

The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life. (Proverbs 10:11)

Say “thank you” often.

Don’t take the things he or she does for granted. Instead, identify and comment on your spouse’s positive efforts.

Discussion questions

2. Is it easier for most people to complain or to praise? Explain your answer.
3. How can someone discipline himself or herself to look for and comment on the positive?

9. Serve your spouse

When I talk with a couple, it’s common for one or both of them to say, “My needs aren’t being met.” On the other hand, it’s extremely rare for either one to say, “I want to learn how to better serve my spouse” (or “meet my spouse’s needs”).

God’s word tells us to serve others.

Throughout the Bible we are told to serve others. As you read the following passages, don’t think about how well you think your spouse serves you. Instead, prayerfully ask yourself how well you serve him or her.

Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. (Matthew 20:26-28)

Pray for a servant’s heart.

Adopting the heart of a servant doesn’t come naturally to most of us. Pray every day to be sensitive to your spouse’s desires. A good time to pray this is on the way home from work, when you are probably tired and are thinking about your own desires and needs, not your mate’s.

Discussion question

4. Are you willing to pray for a servant's heart? Why or why not?

Serve wholeheartedly.

When you serve your spouse, you are honoring and serving Christ. Remembering this can help you maintain a good outlook. It's easier to cheerfully serve God than a sometimes-unappreciative mate.

*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.
(Colossians 3:23)*

Discussion questions

5. Do you find it easy to serve with all your heart? Why or why not?
6. How can you serve wholeheartedly when you don't feel enthusiastic?

Identify your spouse's desires.

Ask your spouse to tell you three things he or she would like you to do to serve him or her. Ask clarifying questions to be sure you understand his or her requests.

Try to really understand.

Take the attitude of a student trying to deeply understand a subject. Don't argue or get defensive. As you talk, make it your goal to understand specific things your spouse would enjoy.

Choose one thing you will work on.

After you identify your spouse's main desires, choose one to work on. Memorize it and remind yourself about it throughout the day. Write it in your smartphone or on a notecard.

Discussion question

7. After you identify one way you will try to meet your spouse's desires, how will you remind yourself to do this? Is this a realistic plan? Why do you think it will help you remember?

Realize your limits in responsibility and time.

It's possible to go overboard as a servant, or to serve in an unhealthy way. Ask God to help you grow in knowledge and insight so you can serve with wisdom.

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ. (Philippians 1:10)

If your mate has unreasonable expectations, discuss them. Say that you want to be the best spouse possible, but you can't do everything he or she wants. Ask for help in identifying priorities. If your mate continues to make unreasonable requests, gently say "no."

Discussion question

8. What is a friendly way you can say "no" to unrealistic expectations?

10. Discuss your own desires

Make it your main goal to serve your spouse, but also bring up your own interests and desires. Two-way communication is essential for a great marriage.

Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:4)

Notice the words “not only” and “but also” in the previous verse. They indicate that it’s okay to pay attention to your own interests. However, read the full chapter to see Paul’s full message. Your primary task is to be a servant.

Discussion questions

9. What is a bad way to bring up your desires? Explain your answer.
10. What is a good way to bring up your desires? Explain your answer.

11. Communicate daily

Make time to share about your lives every day.

It is impossible to experience the closeness God intends for you and your spouse without ongoing, intimate communication.

Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. (Proverbs 16:24).

Encourage one another daily. (Hebrews 3:13)

Listen carefully

Listening is the most important part of communicating. When you deeply understand what your spouse is saying, you build the foundation for a meaningful conversation and an intimate relationship. When you listen superficially, you lay the groundwork for a shallow discussion, one likely to frustrate both of you. You leave your husband or wife feeling misunderstood and alone.

Be quick to listen, slow to speak. (James 1:19)

When you listen, make it a goal to deeply understand your spouse. Ask clarifying questions. Do your best to enter his or her world and understand what he or she thinks and feels.

Discussion question

11. Why does this lesson say to “make time” to share daily? Doesn’t communication come naturally? Explain your answer.

Memory verse

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men. (Colossians 3:23)

Day Five: Answer Key to Test (may be removed by leader)

Note to teachers and small group leaders

Remove this page if you do not want group members to see these answers ahead of time.

True or false

- F 1. When you feel a deep love for someone, you know it's God's plan for you to be married.
- F 2. It's good to marry a non-believer since you can lead him or her to Christ.
- T 3. Taking the beam out of your eye is a helpful practice in marriage.
- F 4. If you are married and you "fall out of love," that means the marriage is over.
- F 5. If you are married, it's important to point out all your spouse's faults.
- T 6. Praying as a couple is a great way to strengthen a marriage.
- T 7. It's important for a married person to look for ways to serve his or her spouse.
- T 8. God's view of sex is very different from the world's view.
- F 9. It's okay to have sex if you plan to be married.
- T 10. If you have had sex outside of marriage, God's forgiveness is available to you.

Memory verses

- 1. Ephesians 5:15
Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise.

- 2. Galatians 5:16
... Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.



About the Author

Doug Britton, Bible-based Marriage and Family Therapist, has helped hundreds of thousands of people as a therapist, clinical director of a treatment center, seminar speaker, radio co-host, and author of over twenty books that show people how to apply God's truths in their daily lives.

He has also trained pastors, counselors, mentors, and lay leaders in biblical counseling, mentoring, and small group leadership.

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Books

Doug has written Bible-based books on many daily-living topics. Visit www.dougbrittonbooks.com/bookstore.

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Seminars and retreats

Doug is the founder and president of LifeTree Institute and LifeTree Books. If you would like him or another member of the LifeTree team to speak in your church on any of the above topics, please visit www.dougbrittonbooks.com and click on the "Seminars" link.

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Talking with Respect and Love
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