

Dating, Dodos, and Dinosaurs

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Meet Joe Average. This average Joe is no millionaire. This average Joe has not been on reality TV. Joe is a single. Joe doesn't find a mate by sitting in hot tubs on nationally syndicated TV. Joe doesn't find a date by competing on televised sitcoms. In fact, Joe Average doesn't date at all. He thinks dating is too overrated – don't so many feelings get hurt? He thinks dating is dangerous – aren't so many hearts broken? Joe has witnessed a few broken hearts himself, especially his own. So Joe has sworn off dating, and women altogether. Do *you* know an Average Joe?

The number Average Joes are growing. Since 1980 single mothers have increased 42 percent, single fathers have increased 99 percent, and people living alone have increased 36 percent compared to married-couple households, which only increased 9 percent during the same period.

Perhaps we should be excited – more recruits for Rhode Island Christian Singles! But this is also somewhat disturbing. Why are so many of us not getting married? Well, the divorce rate is certainly no confidence booster. We've all felt the ravages of divorce in one way or another. Who wants that? Better to not get married at all, and avoid all that pain.

This conclusion has resonated with many Christians. They see Paul's comment that it is good to remain unmarried. They read the book, "I kissed dating goodbye." They hear sermons on contentment. And they decide to stop looking for a mate altogether. And so dating, especially among Christian circles, is becoming extinct, going the way of the dodo bird and the dinosaur.

How do we approach the topic of dating and marriage? Let's start by asking a few key questions:

1. *Is it wrong to be single?*

This may or may not be obvious to you, but it is worth retelling. Paul certainly does seem to see goodness in being single. Paul himself was single, and was able to devote more time toward God's work because of it. Sometimes singles get lost in the shuffle, especially amongst Christian Sunday schools and youth groups and family programs and marriage seminars. But we need to remember that Christians do great service as singles.

I have a great aunt who has been single her whole life. She is one of the most cheerful people I know. She is a teacher of elementary schoolchildren, and the enthusiasm she brings has influenced many students along the way. Some have even

been inspired to become teachers themselves. She has taken her singleness and been able to help many people. Which brings up my second question:

2. Is it wrong to want to be married?

Some Christians think there are much more important desires to be dwelling on. Well-meaning souls try to encourage Christian singles by telling them as singles they can more fully devote their lives to prayer, service, singing, sackcloth, and ashes. But the Bible holds a high regard for marriage, and it is not wrong to want that. The psalmist recognizes that “God perceives my thoughts” (Ps 139), and it is thus useless to try to hide our desires from God anyway.

The Bible values marriage. The very first chapter discusses a couple, Adam and Eve. The very first commandment is to be fruitful and multiply. Proverbs praises an excellent wife, and one whole book of the Bible, Song of Songs, is devoted to a description of passionate love.

To desire a spouse is a noble desire, and there need not be any shame in it. But if it is OK to WANT a mate, the logical next question is:

3. Is it wrong to look for a mate?

Many think that it is, or at least act that way. After all, aren't we supposed to trust God? “Let go and let God”? Pray and then forget about it? Devote ourselves to God's work and let God bring a spouse our way? Certainly we can trust God in his providence, but this neglects the active role that we can play in the life that He weaves for us.

If I wanted to become an accountant, I could pray that God would give me an accounting job. But it would also be prudent if I took accounting courses, had accounting training, got some accounting experience. It also would increase my chances if I made a resume, sent letters, and contacted accounting firms. In short, I need to not just set a goal, but work to accomplish that goal. None of this means that I stop praying, or that I have stopped trusting God.

This isn't just true of business and career. I can pray for help for the poor in the world, but also God wants me to be part of the answer to that prayer. We are often the hands and feet that God uses to answer prayer.

Listen to James chapter 4:

JAS 4:13 Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." ¹⁴ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

God is the one in control. But this verse is not saying that we just don't do anything. We make plans, but then we also recognize that it is God who is ultimately in control. We can and should do the same in other areas of life.

Can you think of an example regarding marriage in the Bible? What about Isaac? Abraham wanted to find a good wife for his son Isaac, and I'm sure he prayed about it. But he also sent a servant to his homeland to find one. This servant went, praying along the way that God would guide him.

What about women? Aren't women supposed to just sit back passively and hope that some man will take notice? What about the story of Ruth? She got out of the house and was gleaning in Boaz's field, and then she went and sat down next Boaz. If that's not taking action I don't know what is!

When I lived on the west coast there were some ladies who were a bit leery about the Christian singles group at the church. They worried that it was just a meat market where people were trying to find a mate. On the other hand, these same ladies deeply desired to find a spouse. At first I found this hilarious and ironic. But now it seems somehow appropriate. For someone to be coming only to find a mate would be not only suspect, but also missing out on other advantages of the group.

Let me make one thing clear: This group is not a dating club. We are here to support one another, regardless of whether we get married or not. We can provide some of the emotional support that we might otherwise get from a spouse. And we can point each other to God, our ultimate source of strength and support.

Let me make another thing clear: This group is not an ANTI-dating club. I heard that two people had met at one of our events, and now they are getting married. That's great news! We can rejoice if God uses this group to help godly men meet godly women.

Well, if it is OK to look for a mate, then question 4 is:

4. What should I look for in a mate?

There has been more written on this topic than I could ever come up with. There seems to be lots of books on understanding your personality, and finding your personality match. This is supposed to help make better matches and thus better marriages.

Is it working? Perhaps I should only date those who match me on the Myers-Briggs test. Or maybe I should be looking for the opposite personality type, a "Lion" to complement my "Golden Retriever" personality (to use Smalley and Trent's analogy). If compatibility is the issue, then I should be very careful not to be matched with someone who is not compatible.

But is compatibility the problem? This seems to fly in the face of history. Our grandparents did not have the many book titles on personality types that we have today. And yet divorce was a lot less commonplace back then. Were couples more knowledgeable back then about what made a compatible partner?

Today we are overwhelmed with information on compatibility, personalities, and psychological profiles. I personally have taken at least six different types of personality surveys, comparing my mental makeup to everything from an animal to a color. My "self-help" library is no less exhaustive. One would think from all this collective knowledge that our society would be making better decisions about a marriage partner. But the divorce rate (and never-been-married rate) is as high as ever.

In fact, one could argue that the strong warning about the need for compatibility has contributed to many marriage breakups. When hardships arise, one or both members in the marriage decide, "Well, we must not be compatible, because of our irreconcilable differences." So they divorce.

The desire for a smooth, hassle-free, compatible relationship crumbles in the presence of real people. The marriage crumbles along with the unrealistic expectation. The same thing happens in dating relationships, and the fear of incompatibility causes relationships to fail before they even get to marriage. We think, "I've spotted a flaw," and start running in the opposite direction.

Now we should have some criteria of what we are looking for in a mate. But if we are looking for the perfect mate, we will be waiting a long time, because the world is full of fallen sinners, not perfect saints.

Christians should not be surprised at the hardships that arise in relationships. They are not necessarily the result of our incompatibility, but rather a sinful nature that surfaces in selfish thoughts and actions. The solution is to follow the example of Jesus, and "look not only to your own interests, but also the interests of others."

As a single person who has never been married, I read the marriage research with great interest. I hope perhaps to learn some insights that will prevent me from becoming one of those divorce "statistics." I've heard about marriage researchers from Colorado who have come up with a list of what traits exist in a relationship that are "indicators" of likely failure. The lists include things like:

1. Making belittling comments about a partner in private or in public.
2. Escalating arguments by getting louder and more defensive.
3. Avoiding conflicts rather than dealing with them.
4. Interpreting a person's actions in a negative light rather than a positive light.

The interesting thing to me about these lists is what they don't mention. They don't mention anything about compatibility. They don't mention avoiding people with differences. They don't mention having the same personality, the same IQ, the same family background, the same net worth. In fact, instead of the absence of differences, each one seems more to deal with how a couple handles the inevitable differences that are bound to arise. Those couples who deal with differences in a healthy manner are likely to last. Those who deal with differences in an unhealthy manner are likely to have

troubles. But there is an acknowledgement that both sets of couples have differences and will have conflicts.

I have met many godly married couples in church over the years. Some seem so identical that they seem perfectly matched. Others seem so different in personalities that I wonder how they ever were attracted. But I see the love and admiration in ***both*** types of couples. Both types of marriages have been long-lasting and successful. The chance of success seems less based on identical personality types or interests, and more on a focus toward Christ and a sacrificial, humble, selfless attitude toward each other.

Our society has been asking, “Who is the best person for me?” But perhaps the question is all wrong.

5. How can I be a better person?

I have a song that is a favorite of mine. It goes like this:
*“If I am looking for love, and you are looking for love, then who is looking to love each other?
Cause if I am waiting for you, and you are waiting for me, then who lookin’ to be the lover?”*

Hmm! It seems that I am often so concerned about who will love me, that I forget to look at how I can be an agent of love to those around me.

Once awhile back I was going through a tough and lonely time. I heard a pastor quote this verse: “A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.” That’s from Proverbs 11:25. It’s so good I’ll read it again! ... I listened to that verse and a light went on in my head. Maybe I’m depressed because I’m only thinking about myself! Maybe I need to start doing something about it.

So instead of sitting at home feeling sorry that I didn’t have enough social events, I started planning my own social events! And when I did meet people, I made an effort not to just talk about all my own problems, but ask questions and get to know the people around me. I’d ask what was going on in a person’s, life, and – can I tell you a secret – sometimes I’d even write it down! The next time I’d meet with these friends, I’d be able to ask specific questions about how their lives were going. I gained a lot of new and deepening friendships during that time, and – you know what? – I wasn’t so depressed anymore!

I also started volunteering, doing things for people who could do nothing back for me. I start visiting a prison, which was a big stretch for me. I didn’t feel called to it, I never felt comfortable doing it, but I knew I needed to be there. Some of God’s tasks are messy. Most of God’s tasks are messy. I found that by going beyond my comfort zone.

Changing the focus from yourself to others can do many things.

- It puts your problems in perspective. They don’t loom so big any more.

- It gives new direction and purpose in life.
- You are in a healthier position if a potential mate does come along. You are able to look at the relationship more objectively, because you won't rest your whole sense of belonging and purpose on the success of that relationship.

So we've come back to the topic of mates, which brings me to my last question:

6. *What if I never find a mate?*

Paul asked for something from God three times. It didn't happen. And yet Paul says in Philippians that he has learned to be content in all circumstances. This applies to those of us who may have dreams of marriage.

I tried to think of any situation where dreams are not always achieved, and I thought of a race. At the Olympics, many people run in a race, and many train with one goal in mind: to win. If you aren't striving to win, you probably shouldn't be there. But for all the people striving to win the gold medal, only one person gets it. Only one person achieves that metal and feels the weight of the gold medallion around his neck.

Now I ask you, was it wrong for the others to desire to win? Was it a waste of time to race? Whether it is a race or a game or life, you don't have to win every goal to find enjoyment in the process.

I think that is what Paul means when he says he is content in all circumstances. We can have dreams, but we can also be content when not all those dreams don't come to fruition, or not when we want them to. Life is more than a race, and so the racers go home from the Olympics – both winners and losers – and resume other areas of their lives that bring meaning: family, and jobs, and friends, and relationship with God. We can have a dream of marriage, but we also have other areas of our life that are as important or more important, and are there when a soul mate is not.

A few months ago I spoke to this group. At a time when we were talking about goals and purpose, I basically said don't get so wrapped up in making goals that you can't be happy with your life where you are. In a word, I reminded you to have JOY where you are, no matter what happens.

Tonight I wanted to tell you don't get so comfortable where you are that you can't have goals and dreams, and then work toward achieving them. This includes goals and dreams for relationships and marriage. In a word, I wanted to remind you to have HOPE.

HOPE and JOY. These two must remain, and be kept in balance. This is true in relationships. HOPE says there is nothing wrong in wanting to be married. HOPE says you can be actively looking for a mate – you don't have to sit at home and wait for a prince to knock on your door. JOY says that with God you can have a full life - single or

married. JOY says you can still enjoy life even if you haven't found that soul mate you wanted.

May the Lord who loves and cares and forgives us grant us all both hope and joy.
Amen.

Questions:

1. Can a person desire to be married and still be content if he or she is not?
How does one balance hope for marriage with joy in singleness?
2. If one wants to be married, how active should a Christian single be in looking for a mate?

Can you come up with a situation that is “looking too much”?

Can you think of a situation that is “looking too little”?