

Living a Wise Life

Six sessions applying Old Testament Wisdom Literature to 21st Century Living

Week 5: Wisdom about Romantic Relationships (*Song of Songs*)

ICEBREAKER: Give out bits of paper to everyone. Ask them to write, anonymously, any questions they have in relation to romantic relationships that they want to be answered. Put all the written questions in a pot.

1. Why date?

The point: Dating/going out with someone didn't really exist as a concept in Biblical times. In the Song of Songs, the man and the woman get married in the centre of the Song, and are probably "betrothed" (the equivalent of engaged) in the rest of the Song. They are moving from being two single people to being a married couple.

The application: We date to get to know someone better to see if they would be a good person to marry. We can't be in a relationship with someone as boyfriend/girlfriend without it having any implications for marriage. That is not to say we must get married after the second date, but we must be honourable and honest. The whole point of dating someone is to get to know them better to see whether we might marry them. If we know there is no conceivable way that we could ever possibly marry the person - either because of who you are or who they are - then we should not date them.

2. Who to date?

The point: We can't get all the information from the Song of Songs. But **read 5:16b**. "He is altogether lovely. This is my lover, this my friend". We should date someone we find physically attractive and think could be a potential best friend. This involves an honest appraisal of their character, and not just their body.

But also, if dating is connected to thinking about marriage, then the criteria for who to date must be the same as for who to marry. In other words, someone who is not married already, not a close relative, of the opposite sex (Mark 10:6-7) and also a Christian (1 Corinthians 7:39, 2 Corinthians 6:14)

The illustration: If you know a personal testimony of someone going out with a non-Christian, and the difficulties of this, then you could include this here. **E.g. When I was 18, I had been a Christian for a year, I started going out with someone who wasn't a Christian. It was a disaster. And thankfully I realised it was a disaster and I stopped the relationship after a couple of months. I was thinking that old chestnut in dating unbelievers – "maybe they'll become a Christian". And maybe they will - I do know some situations like that. But, it's such a gamble. Are we prepared to risk the effectiveness of our lives for Christ and all the joys of being married to a Christian on the fact that someone may become a Christian? They may do – but the chances are pretty slim.**

3. How to date?

The point: The key advice is in the refrain in 2:7,3:5,8:4. **“Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires”**. In other words take it slow physically.

In the last session, we saw that the context for sexual intercourse is within marriage. “How far should I go?” is the wrong question to be asking. The better question is, “how can we as a couple going out live a life pleasing to Jesus and helping us to be holy?”.

The illustration: You could give personal testimony. **E.g. I’ll tell you how it was for us – but I’ll also tell you I don’t think we got it totally right. We kissed, but we wouldn’t kiss lying down. But after a bit we realised that there were times when we aroused each other too much – and the line between sitting kissing and lying down kissing got a bit blurred as you slide down the sofa. So, there came a point, when we got engaged, when we said no kissing on the lips at all until we got married, because that was the only way we could stop ourselves getting far too intimate before we were married.**

The application: When we start going out with someone, we need to have a chat about boundaries, so that we can together please Jesus in the physical side of our relationship. We should help each other. Know your weaknesses – e.g. late at night, alcohol, alone in a room with a bed. Be accountable to someone of the same sex outside of your relationship. We are temples of the Holy Spirit. When we are with our boyfriend/girlfriend, we can think whether we are acting in a way that is pleasing the Holy Spirit who lives in us, and who is watching what we’re up to.

15 mins

QUESTION TIME: Have a time answering any questions people have on what you have said, and then answering the questions that people have written down at the start of the session. You may want to have a panel of three or four in the pastorate to answer the questions.

4. How to choose to marry?

BUZZ GROUP: Picture the scene. You’ve got to know someone for 6 months, started going out with them and now you’ve been going out for a year. All seems to be going well. You are both Christians. How do you know whether this person is right to get married to or not?

30 mins

The Song of Songs gives us four tests or indicators about whether we should get married to someone. These four tests are also very helpful reminders of the key things for married couples to hold on to during their life together.

a) The Exclusive test (2:16, 6:3, 7:10)

The point: The man and woman in the Song of Songs are at a place where they are ready to choose to be exclusive in their love for life. The refrain comes three times – **“My lover is mine and I am his”**

Marriage doesn’t mean you can’t love anyone else – but you can’t love anyone else in a romantic sense. When you get married - your primary commitment to any other human is to each other. You are forming a new family unit.

The illustration: The foundational verse for marriage in the Bible is Gen 2:24 – which both Jesus and Paul quote when talking about marriage – “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh”. Yet sometimes people aren’t prepared to actually leave their mum and dad. Still phoning up mummy every night to get her views on things rather than looking to get the views of the spouse first.

The application: The exclusive test challenges whether you are prepared to put the other one first in your plans and desires. They need to come above parents, siblings or best mates.

b) The Erotic test (7:7-8; 4:11)

The point: Song of Songs is erotic, and it is in the Bible for good reason. A potential husband and wife are meant to feel attracted to one another.

The application: That desire to get intimate with someone is not wrong. It’s not the only indicator, but if that desire is growing over time then it is an indicator of time to get married. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:9, “it is better to marry than burn with passion”.

c) The Enduring test (8:6-7)

The point: To get married, we need to get to a point of being willing to stick with that person for life. Will we endure through thick and thin. The woman says, “place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death”. She continues, “many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away” (8:6-7). In the marriage vows, you say to each other – “till death us do part”. This requires a choice. Will I make the choice to love this person till death us do part?

The illustration: Give a personal example. E.g. One of my wife’s close biological family suffers from bipolar manic depression. I had to ask myself quite seriously before I got married whether I would be prepared to continue loving her if she were to start suffering from bipolar depression? It’s a tough question, but it’s one I at least needed to think through.

The application: Are we prepared to keep loving the person, not just when she looks like Angelina Jolie or he looks like Brad Pitt, but in 30 years time when there may be a few more wrinkles and grey hairs.

d) The Example test (8:6b)

The point: God is our example of how to love in marriage. In chapter 8:6, it says “Love burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame”. The Hebrew could equally be translated love is “like the flame of God” [see footnote in NIV]. It is a reminder of what the rest of the Bible tells us, that human love is to be based on God’s love.

When we look at God’s love, we see that the essence of love is giving. Giving oneself to the other person. For God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25).

The application: We need to think whether we are willing to try and aim for that kind of giving of myself to the other person.

The illustration: Give personal example. E.g. My wife grew up over the other side of the world, whereas I am a bit of a homeboy at heart. I had to think through whether, if we felt it was what God wanted, I would be prepared to go and live in a different country. That was a big consideration for me before getting married.

BUZZ GROUP: Discuss how your thoughts on dating have been changed as a result of this session. What has been an encouragement? What has been a challenge?

Conclusion:

Hitch up

It is worth thinking through all four of these tests before getting married to someone (for a similar list – see “Appendix 1 – Ready for marriage?” in *The Marriage Book* by Nicky and Sila Lee). If you’ve done that, and there are no significant alarm bells, then get going and get married! If you are commitment-phobic, get someone to pray for you and step up to the plate.

Break up

Starting going out with someone and not ending up married to them is not a failure in any way. The whole point of going out is to see whether it is right to get married to the person, and sometimes it won’t be right.

In the pain of splitting from someone, we need to try as much as we can to run to Jesus for comfort and fulfilment, rather than running in the direction of shopping or alcohol or work or another relationship straight away. We need to let Jesus be the one that ministers to our hurt and fills the hole in our hearts.

It is also very important to say that single people have often been made to feel sub-standard in the church. This is totally wrong. After all, Jesus was single and he is the most fully human person to have ever walked the earth. There may well be some here who are struggling with this, perhaps feeling ‘left on the shelf’, and we should recognise that and pray for people who are feeling that.

Muck up

None of us can be judgemental. We will all have blown it in some way or other in the sexual arena. Satan wants us to feel unforgiven, enslaved in our guilt and unable to move on from the past. But Jesus Christ offers us a fresh start today and every day. We can know complete forgiveness. This is never an excuse to carry on sinning, but it’s a wonderful chance to start again. We are not tainted for life.

45 mins

MINISTRY TIME: Read 1 John 1:8-2:2 – have a time of silent personal confession. Have a time of waiting for any verses/pictures/words that people feel they may have for the group. Then, in single-sex small groups, share particular relational issues that individuals want prayer for.