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Relationships by the Book

A Bible study on the Biblical principles for navigating relationships in today's world



*by Bret & Jorie Holman
(5th Edition)*

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*Unless noted otherwise, this Bible study is referencing the
New Living Translation (2nd Edition) of the Bible.*

Introduction

Trusting God with our relationships, especially our romantic relationships, is challenging and even downright scary. We live in a world that is full of dating options and apps. Casual dating is common, as well as the conventional means of meeting others through work, school, and other venues. So why doesn't God give more detailed instructions about His strategies for meeting that special someone? Well, the good news is He does!

As Christians, we can look to the Word of God for EVERY area of our lives, including our relationships. This Bible study is designed to help you navigate through the natural process of friendship, dating (or "courting"), engagement, and eventually marriage, as well as the unlimited variety of ways this process plays out for different people and couples.

You can do this Bible study by yourself, with a person you are dating, a trusted mentor, or even a small group. Its format is designed to point you towards Biblical principles for relationships, as well as stimulate open, honest, and prayerful conversation with others who are seeking God's wisdom with you.

It is our sincere hope that this Bible study helps you, or someone you know, to discover God's plan and strategy for how to live a meaningful, fulfilling single life, and to eventually find that special life partner He has been preparing you for all along. We believe in these principles and promises because they led us through our own single years as Christians, and they eventually led us to each other.

May God show you His wonderful plan for your life!

Bret & Jorie Holman

Lesson 1: Finding Your Security in God

As we search the Scriptures we find that God has a plan and a purpose for every aspect of our lives, including our relationships. We also see that success in these relationships begins with nurturing our relationship with Him.

1. What did the apostle Paul say was his greatest desire in life?
Philippians 3:7-8

The healthiest relationships, especially marriages, are when both individuals consider their relationship with Christ as primary. This breeds security and confidence in their hearts and relationships.

2. How would you describe love in one sentence or less?

The English language is severely limited when it comes to defining love. It only has one word - love. The Greek language however, has eight different words to describe the types of love we may feel: eros (physical), philia (friendship), agape (selfless), storge (family), ludus (casual), pragma (loyal), philautia (self), and mania (obsessed). It is important to ask ourselves which of these we are feeling for someone before pursuing a relationship with them.

3. How does the Bible describe love? 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

The current practice of dating among singles today, or having a "boyfriend/girlfriend," often leaves men and women with a distorted view of love. A temporary, romantic relationship, which

often involves sex or some level of physical intimacy and is outside the boundaries of a life-long committed relationship, does not reflect the qualities of true love as described in 1 Corinthians 13.

By getting emotionally, and even physically, involved and then breaking up, especially throughout multiple relationships, people often develop the mindset that love is simply a feeling that can change with time. As a result, such relationships do not breed the sense of security that true love does. Rather, they establish a pattern that leads to the kind of chronic, relational instability we see today.

4. Do you believe most people today are satisfied with our culture's strategy for "dating?" Why or why not?

5. Do you think most Christians, as well as non-Christians, believe that life-long, loving marriage is possible? Why or why not?

6. What is God? 1 John 4:16

The only One who can love us perfectly and fulfill every need of our hearts is God. If we look to a person to do so we will end up in frustration and put an unrealistic expectation upon that person and upon the relationship.

Personal Application

Q. Are you able to trust God to lead and guide you in your goal to eventually find the life partner He has for you? Why or why not?

Feel free to journal any other insights or prayers you have so far.

Lesson 2: Learning to trust God

Many single people are tempted to worry, or to try and help God, when it comes to how and when they will find their life mate. The story of Isaac and Ishmael is a good example of what can happen when we stop trusting God and try to take matters into our own hands. (See Genesis chapters 16 and 21)

Many people today, including Christians, rely upon dating around, or moving from one committed relationship to another, in order to find that special someone. A runaway divorce rate, unplanned pregnancies, STD's, broken and jaded hearts, a loss of hope, and other problems provide plenty of evidence that what we are doing is not working.

1. What do you believe is not working with our current system of dating or premarital relationships?

Read Philippians 4:6-7 and Matthew 6:33

2. What does the Bible say we should do about the things we want or desire? See Philippians 4:6, Matthew 6:33a

Philippians 4:6 _____

Matthew 6:33a _____

3. What will be the result of following this advice?

Philippians 4:7 _____

Matthew 6:33b _____

4. What is the biggest challenge for you when it comes to trusting God to meet the right person, at the right time, in the right way?

Read Psalm 37:4-5

5. What does this passage encourage us to do?

Verse 4a _____

Verse 5a _____

6. What does this passage say will happen when we do?

Verse 4b _____

Verse 5b _____

7. Can you think of a time when God has given you the desires of your heart as you trusted in Him and His will?

By following the advice of these passages and remembering the times when God has shown Himself to be faithful in our lives, we can have peace and patience throughout our time as a single person. We can be confident that He has a plan and a timing for when and how we will find our life mate. If the Creator of the universe can number every hair on our head, then He can certainly lead us to the person He desires for us. And when it comes to being patient, it can help to remember that we and our future mate are constantly in a state of preparation. God's timing is sovereign and perfect.

Personal Application

Q. In what other ways did this lesson help you to know that you can trust God with how, when, and who you find as your life partner?

Feel free to journal any other insights you received from this lesson, as well as any prayers you may have.

Lesson 3: Understanding God's nature and character

The key to being able to trust God when it comes to finding a life mate is to know and understand His nature and character.

1. What did Paul say was his desire for every Christian?
Ephesians 1:16-19

2. How can knowing God better, including His loving and generous nature, help you when it comes to wanting to find someone?

3. What does the Bible call the finding of a spouse?
Proverbs 18:22

4. What does the Bible say about those who seek the Lord?
Psalm 34:10

5. What did God say about man being alone? Genesis 2:18a

6. What did God do about man's situation? Genesis 2:18b, 21-24

We can see that it is God who instituted the concept of relationship, including the covenant of marriage, and that He has not put a desire for relationships and marriage in our hearts to frustrate us.

7. Have you ever struggled with trusting God to give you the best, including the best life partner He has for you? If so, why?

Four common steps that most people follow to getting married are: friendship, dating/courtship, engagement, and finally marriage. Sometimes this process happens sooner than we expected, and sometimes it happens later than we expected. Sometimes it happens very quickly, and sometimes it takes a long time to unfold.

The point is that no two relationships unfold exactly the same way, so we must trust the wisdom of God to help us navigate our unique journey when it comes to falling in love and finding a life partner. He is more than capable of leading us in this area of our lives. God is the greatest matchmaker, or “dating app” 😊, you can trust in.

Personal Application

Q. What else did you learn from this lesson and how can you apply it to your life?

Feel free to use journal any other insights you received from this lesson, as well as any prayers you may have.

Lesson 4: Securing undistracted devotion to Christ

1. What are we to always seek first? Matthew 6:33

2. Who are we to focus on as Christians? Hebrews 12:1-2

3. What was the goal of Paul’s instructions to the Corinthian believers about relationships? 1 Corinthians 7:35

As Christians our relationship with Jesus is, and always will be, our primary relationship. This relationship is the foundation for all other relationships, even marriage.

4. How does the strength of our personal relationship with Jesus help us in our relationships with others?

5. What are we to do with things that distract us in our relationship with God? Hebrews 12:1

6. What did Paul consider everything else in comparison to the value of knowing Christ? Philippians 3:8

As followers of Christ, we too should be willing to let go of anything, even an ungodly friendship or romantic relationship, if it hinders us from following God in a full and focused way. He is the Creator and Lover of our soul, and He is a “jealous” God who desires our attention above all others (Exodus 20:5). By focusing on anyone or anything else before Him, including a person or a relationship, we turn our hearts away from Him.

7. Are you able to let go of any relationship in your life that is hindering you from following Christ? Why or why not?

Another common way to distract ourselves from focusing on God, is by sharing our feelings for someone and/or initiating a romantic relationship prematurely. For example, when a person shares that they have feelings for another person, but does so before they are ready to responsibly take the next step in the relationship, that person has changed the dynamics of that friendship going forward. At the same time, if a person jumps into a romantic relationship before thinking, praying, and talking it through with God and with trusted voices in their lives, they run the risk of starting something they cannot finish appropriately.

8. What did the apostle James say about the tongue and its power? James 1:26, 3:5

9. What did wise King Solomon warn against not just once, but three times, in his famous book about love? Song of Solomon 2:7, 3:5, 8:4

Personal Application

Q. What else did you learn from this lesson and how will you apply it to your life? Also, feel free to journal any other thoughts.

Lesson 5: Building healthy relationships

As is the case with many contemporary cultural issues, the Bible does not speak directly to the issue of “dating” as we think of it and practice it in our modern, western culture today. It does, however, give us timeless, universal principles to guide us in our relationships.

Read 1 Timothy 5:1-2

1. How are we to relate to younger men?

Verse 1 _____

2. How are we to relate to younger women?

Verse 2 _____

3. How do these two verses affect the way you will see, and interact, with the opposite sex?

The simplest way to develop pure, authentic, and meaningful relationships with those of the opposite sex is to build friendships first. A healthy friendship provides support, encouragement and companionship, the very things any person is looking for in a romantic relationship. Such friendships can also be life-changing for those who have never had healthy relationships with the opposite sex before.

Even secular sociologists and psychologists agree that friendship is the healthiest and safest way to begin a romantic relationship. A friendship allows two people to get to know each other for who they really are.

4. Are you comfortable with building genuine friendships with the opposite sex, or do you struggle with doing so? If so, why?

Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

5. What is God's will for our relationships with those around us?

Verses 3-6 _____

6. What kind of lives are we called to live?

Verse 7 _____

7. Whose advice are we rejecting if we don't?

Verse 8 _____

When we misrepresent our feelings for others by flirting or relating to them in any kind of an impure way, we mislead and tempt them by stirring up desires that cannot be righteously fulfilled.

8. Who did Paul say our physical desires should be saved for?

See 1 Corinthians 7:2, 9

And by inappropriately sharing our emotional affections with those who are not our future husbands or wives, we can involve ourselves in a form of "emotional promiscuity." Relational boundaries are not just physical. God has also called us to emotional purity in our relationships. A broken heart is harder to heal than a broken bone, and the emotional bonds we form can linger long past a breakup.

9. How can "emotional promiscuity" cause problems for us or others?

Personal Application

Q. What else did you learn from this lesson and how will you apply it to your life? Also, feel free to journal any other thoughts.

Lesson 6: Walking It Out

Practical experience only confirms that the principles of Scripture provide the answers for how to walk out our relationships. The question then is - what are those principles?

Most people don't realize that "dating" as we know it today is a relatively new concept that arose out of the 18th century philosophical movement known as "Romanticism," which emphasized passion rather than logic.

A helpful definition of a more biblically based practice of dating (or courtship) is as follows:

Godly Dating / Biblical Courtship (def.):

A defined, formal, accountable dating relationship with the intention of leading to marriage, creating a morally safe avenue for two people to seek the will of God together.

Let's look at this definition in more detail:

"...DEFINED..."

Too often relationships are undefined, leaving the parties confused and possibly hurt by unfulfilled expectations.

1. Have you ever been in an "undefined" relationship? If so, how did it make you feel?

2. What does the Bible say about two people who are not clear and in agreement about the purpose of their relationship?

See Amos 3:3

The purpose of a biblically based dating relationship (courtship) is for two people to discern if God is calling them to be married. This should be clear to both parties from the beginning. Courtship, unlike engagement, is not for two people who have already decided they want to spend their lives together, rather it is a “dating” relationship that provides a way for two people to discern if God is leading them to commit their lives to each other by taking the next step and getting engaged.

“...FORMAL...”

3. What did Paul say we should strive for? 2 Corinthians 8:21

By clearly stating their purpose for being together, a courting couple helps to keep each other, as well as others around them, from guessing, and possibly gossiping, about their relationship.

“...ACCOUNTABLE...”

4. What does the Bible say about the value of godly counsel?
See Proverbs 11:14

A wise believer will make use of every available resource, especially godly counsel, when it comes to making decisions as important as marriage. Godly counsel is not designed to tell a person what they should or should not do about a relationship, rather it is meant to help a person discern God’s will in a matter.

5. Do you have a godly friend/mentor/pastor who has already navigated the premarital stages of relationships whom you can look to for advice? If so, who? Are you seeking his/her counsel?

“...DATING RELATIONSHIP...”

Being in a dating relationship is not the problem. The problem with dating is when people date for the wrong reasons. If you are not sure the relationship you are involved in is a healthy one, it might be helpful to ask yourself a few important questions:

- *Is my relationship informal/undefined, with no clear purpose or standards?*
- *Am I dating for selfish purposes? For example, do I just need someone who pays attention to me?*
- *Am I dating out of insecurity because I’m unfulfilled without the relationship?*
- *Am I dating for the wrong reasons, such as peer pressure to do so, fear of missing out, fear of losing him/her if we take a step back, loneliness, boredom, etc.?*
- *Am I crossing certain emotional and/or physical boundaries, even getting involved in physical intimacy or sex?*
- *Am I "missionary dating" in hopes that he/she will get saved?*
- *Is this relationship pushing me closer to God, or is it drawing me away from God?*
- *Is Jesus the center of our relationship? Are we "equally yoked?"*
- *Do we pray together, read the Bible together, go to church together, and/or discuss our spiritual goals together?*
- *Do I respect and accept this person for who they are, or do I hope to change them through our relationship?*
- *Can I see myself marrying this person? With God’s blessing?*

6. Which, if any, of these questions apply to your relationship right now? What are you willing to do about it?

OR

If you’re not in a relationship, which one(s) do you need to watch out for and how can you guard yourself against them?

“...WITH THE INTENTION OF LEADING TO MARRIAGE...”

This is the primary difference between modern dating practices and a Biblical approach to dating/courting.

7. What does the Bible say about not doing something in faith?
Romans 14:23
-

A committed, Christian, dating couple is pursuing their relationship in faith, believing that God is drawing them towards marriage or that He will make it clear that He is not. They are not dating just for the sake of dating.

8. If you are in a relationship, have you discussed any goals, “fleeces,” or timelines for your relationship? What are you looking for to help you determine if marriage is in your future?
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“...CREATING A MORALLY SAFE AVENUE...”

9. What does the Bible say about making ourselves or others stumble?
See Romans 14:15-21
-
-

By entering a defined, public, accountable dating relationship with the intention of leading to marriage, a couple is removing many of the stumbling blocks that exist in a typical dating relationship.

One of the most common stumbling blocks is failing to discuss, and agree upon, what the physical and emotional boundaries will be for your dating relationship. This conversation should be one of the very first conversations a new couple has. “Playing it by ear” usually leads to doing more than intended and regretting it later.

“...FOR TWO PEOPLE TO SEEK GOD’S WILL TOGETHER...”

10. What does God promise us when we truly seek His will?

Proverbs 3:5-6, 16:3, 9; Psalm 37:5

Two sincere Christians, in a sincere courtship relationship, will be committed to seeking God’s will for their future together. This is the difference between worldly dating and Biblical courtship.

Sometimes a courtship does not lead to marriage, but this is not a sign that the relationship “failed.” Rather, both parties are more likely to preserve their friendship, knowing that they carried out their relationship with honesty and integrity. They can also use what they learned to help them in a future relationship.

11. What does Jesus say we are to be, and do, as believers?
See Matthew 5:14-16
-
-

By living out our relationships according to the principles of God’s Word, we serve as lights reflecting His glory in this all-important area. We will also reap the many long-term, relational blessings that come from living according to God’s Word!

Personal Application

- Q. How has this lesson helped you be more confident in following God’s will if/when you’re in a dating/courting relationship?
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-

Feel free to journal any other insights you received from this lesson, as well as any prayers you may have.

What others are saying about living out these principles...

After being in a long-term relationship before walking with Christ, I was left totally insecure and in need of affirmation. Through my relationship with Christ though, I've been able to find my own identity in Him alone. I know that this will prepare me to have successful marriage because I won't have to look to my future spouse for my security and identity.

- *Cheri*

Having experienced the culture's standards of dating, I so appreciate these practical, Biblical truths that I've learned and shared with others who embrace them as well. I am so thankful to have meaningful relationships with strong, beautiful women of God and not have to worry about other agendas that would intervene. Our relational standards breathe a sense of security and definition, and most importantly give every believer an opportunity to secure undistracted devotion to God.

- *Serban*

We are so thankful for the teaching on biblical courtship we received as young Christians because it helped us realize that we could totally trust God to bring the right person to us in His perfect timing, freeing us from the need to seek a spouse in our own way. This enabled us to wholeheartedly pursue a deeper relationship with God, to grow in our character, and develop our ministry skills, laying the foundation for the marriage and ministry God has given us today. Though it was a faith-challenge for both of us to wait for God's provision, when the timing came, He made it abundantly clear that He was bringing us together, and was blessing us even beyond our expectations. Looking back from this side of marriage, we would not have chosen to do it any other way!

- *Nik & Kristy*

When I was a new Christian I was involved with a guy that was "the love of my life"...or so I thought. I looked to him to be my love, my friend, my comfort, and my security, not realizing that he would never be able to fulfill all these roles in my life. God soon revealed to me that I was completely selfish in my expectations of him because he was not created for that purpose. Now that I have given God my complete affection, I have experienced the greatest love, the greatest friendship, the greatest comfort, and the greatest security in Him that I never knew before.

- *Rochelle*

Like many young Christians, we began dating without the benefit of knowing God's principles for a healthy and successful relationship. We knew we wanted to honor God with our relationship, but we didn't know how. When we first heard a clear presentation of a biblical approach to dating and courtship, we were challenged and knew we needed to make some difficult but important changes. After we made the decision to submit our relationship to God's standards, we began to experience great freedom and victory and have since enjoyed God's blessing in our marriage!

- *Gabe & Jennifer*

The most common, and awkward, mistake that potentially courting singles have made is to tell the other person how you feel about them before you're ready to move the relationship forward. This is not an act of faith, since you're attempting to test the waters before getting out of the boat. The problem with this strategy is that you permanently alter the nature of a relationship when you "spill your guts" in an intimate way. A man cannot tell a woman that he has "strong feelings" for her and then ask her to act as if everything is as it has always been. Wake up and smell the emotional coffee!

- *Christian*

Growing up, I developed a conviction not to get involved with a woman physically, emotionally, etc. until I knew it was time for me to get married and this woman could potentially be the one. That position was contrary to popular opinion, but when I got involved with others who shared these same convictions, I went from "weirdo" to role model overnight as others had wished that they didn't have the baggage they had when they entered marriage. I've had the opportunity to speak to tens of thousands of students about God's way of relationships and since getting married, can now testify that God's way works! Marriage is hard enough by itself, I knew I didn't want to start it from behind the eight ball, but instead give it the highest possible chance to succeed.

- *Addison*

Meet the Authors:

Pastors Bret and Jorie Holman have been working with single young adults for over 30 years, originally as campus ministers and now as church pastors. They have also raised four adult children of their own.

Throughout their journey they have spoken to, and counseled with, single adults all over the world. They have seen that the ancient wisdom of God's Word still provides the best guidance for navigating relationships with the opposite sex, no matter what culture or generation you live in.

By learning and living by the proven, timeless, cross-cultural wisdom of the Bible, just as they did, Pastors Bret and Jorie have seen thousands of young singles, escape the traps of broken cultural patterns and find fulfilling, life-long relationships.

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