

Relationships: Real & Restored Pt 4 - Dating

*Dating | Song of Solomon 1-3
Spence Shelton – October 2, 2016*

This weekend we continue our series on Relationships. In this series We are looking at different relationships like marriage, dating, parenting, etc and we are trying to give an honest assessment of where we are in them, and at the same time give a hopeful picture of how the gospel can empower and restore those relationships. So my ASK of you this series was to be real with yourself and maybe with one of two others about where you are in these relationships. And then, have the courage to take a step in the direction of God's design for these relationships.

Today, we are going to take a look at Dating. And I cannot tell you how excited I am for this message. Because I personally love, nay celebrate, awkwardness. And there is no more awkward relationship space in the universe than the dating scene.

How many of you have ever been on a first date? Maybe that was yesterday for some of you. Maybe that is right now. Maybe you weren't aware that's what this is. Wait he

invited me to church...is this a date? Annnnd awkward. I know, Dating is not easy & it is often confusing and frustrating. Every time I think about dating my mind goes to the movie Dumb & Dumber where Lloyd Christmas gets up the courage and confesses his love for Mary...he puts it all on the line...then gets rejected.

Ever been there? Palms sweaty, hoping you are on the same page, or knowing that you are miles apart? Man Dating just isn't easy.

But, I have good news for you. The bible not only speaks to dating, it gives a clear and compelling vision for dating. One that I hope you will see clearly today. One that I hope will shape the way you approach dating. For married couples before you think this is not for you...I hope you don't think your dating life stopped at your wedding. When it comes to dating, the wedding is not the finish line; the wedding is the first mile marker in a marathon. So I hope you will lock in here & put some of this into practice. I hope it challenges your marriage and I hope it shows you a way to be better friends to the single people here in the Mercy Fam.

Today we are going to primarily be in an Old Testament Book called The Song of Solomon. So if you have your bibles get them out and make your way to the Song of Solomon or maybe your bible calls it the Song of Songs.

This is THE book about romance in the bible. For some of you who have never really read the bible, some of this is

going to surprise you. I'll never forget the first time I read it freshman year of college. Did a bible in a year program. And so I suffered through Leviticus but got here and read "7:7-8, *"You are tall and slim like a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters of dates. I will climb that palm tree, and take hold of its fruit."* WHAAAT!? Ran to my buddy's dorm room who was in a bible study with me...HEY, YOU KNOW THIS IS IN HERE? Our desire to read and apply the bible transformed overnight!

This book is called a song. In fact look at verse 1 of chapter 1

[1] The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

That phrasing, Song of Songs...it's a construction that, especially in Hebrew, implies that this is the Best Song. This romantic love song is the best song. The bible's #1 hit of all time. Which is saying a lot considering the other poetry in the bible. The reason it is so powerful as to call it the best song is that the physical love described here points us also to the greater love that God has for his people and that he has created them to enjoy. So as you see this romantic relationship develop, there is also a second thing happening and that is God pointing you beyond the relationship of these two to his love for you. And I could do a several part series on this book of the bible. One day I will. But for now you gotta roll with me.

But first what you have to know is that this book reads a lot like a PLAY would read. It is the script of two characters. A

King named Solomon and a blue-collar girl who works out in Solomon's fields the story calls the "Shullamite woman." And this book of the bible follows the development of their romance from that fateful first look all the way into their marriage.

And I believe this relationship is the picture, the paradigm, we need to construct a relationship that will carry us to our wedding day with joy. By "relationship" I mean love, romance, and sexuality *before* marriage. Maybe you call that dating, or maybe you kissed dating goodbye and call it something else, or maybe you are from a culture where your parents decide who you will marry. Wherever you come from, here in this story are the markings of what your relationship should look like on the way to marriage.¹ If you aren't experiencing all of these, as God designs, then you are missing something and settling for less than what God has for you. Listen, I could have given you 37 things not to do in dating. Cause I've seen at least that many. And some dos & don'ts will come out today. But I want you to see the big picture of how this relationship progresses. The big mile markers. And I want you to evaluate your dating relationships by it.

¹ Comer, John Mark. *Loveology* (Zondervan Grand Rapids, MI 2013) 129. These 4 markers were originally offered by Comer in his book as a way to teach God honoring dating through Song of Solomon. The thoughts within are mine but I am grateful to him for the structure.

I'm going to point out four markers of a healthy dating relationship that rise to the forefront in this story. Here's the first

1. The Dance

The first part of this book is what you could call the dance. It's how these two strangers meet. It is the long gazing into one another's eyes. The romantic moonlit walks. It is falling in love and it is a dance. It requires care, it requires intentionality, it requires leading & following and all kinds of verbal & non-verbal communication. Watch their two roles in the dance unfold...

right out of the gate you can tell this is a romantic relationship. I mean listen to how it opens...

[2] Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine; [3] your anointing oils are fragrant; your name is oil poured out; therefore virgins love you. [4] Draw me after you; let us run. The king has brought me into his chambers.

- First thing is...this girl is physically attracted to this guy. I mean...I want his mouth on my mouth. Your cologne makes me a little crazy....Verse 4 Top Gun soundtrack starts playing...Solomon, you big stud, take me to bed or lose me forever. What an opening to a book of the bible! I've asked Courtney to memorize this.

- But look at verse 3 and you'll see there's more. Your name is oil poured out...All the girls love him because of his reputation as a man of good character. Ladies this is what you are looking for: A guy who you are attracted to, who bathes, and has great character.

She is attracted to him. And what about his attraction to her?

[6] Don't stare at me because I am dark—the sun has darkened my skin. My mother's sons were very angry with me; they forced me to care for their vineyards, so I couldn't care for myself—my own vineyard.

- Some of you guys are like, *That's what I'm talking about, a tan mama*. But she's embarrassed about it:
- Now, it's totally different today: In our culture tan is good... in those days it was bad. Cultural beauty standards have changed. This whole concept would be hard to understand in our fake-bake, botox culture.
- The point is, this woman is totally insecure about her looks. This is a great snapshot of women then and women now. We live in a culture that is saturated with images of the perfect body. They're designed to make you feel inferior so that you will purchase their product.
- Not only does she not feel attractive, she's not really from the upper crust of society. Having dark skin was shameful because it meant that she worked

outside. She was poor. The fact that she said her "mother's sons" meant that her father was probably dead. This field would have been owned by Solomon and he would have leased it to her brothers. They were angry... Hebrew word means, "they burned in anger toward her"... It's a word play: just like the sun has burned her skin, her siblings had burned her. She's a working girl from a dysfunctional family who didn't have time to pamper herself or take care of herself.

What does Solomon see in her? He's got all the palace hotties. But he sees deep beauty in her. Listen...

[9] I compare you, my love, to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots.

Don't be insecure baby. To me, girl you look like a horse....which I wouldn't necessarily lead with fellas. Pharaoh's chariot was pulled by a long line of black horses and he would always have one white one. It represented the flawless strength of pharaoh and could be spotted a mile away. What he's saying is that she's one in a million. She's the stand out. She's not ordinary...

And Solomon...watch this... Solomon continues to recreate her with his words

[10] Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with strings of jewels....then she says...[1] I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. (she thinks she is ordinary) and he

replies [2] As a lily among brambles (or thorns), so is my love among the young women. You are extraordinary!

Fellas, those are powerful words. And I want you to see what he's thinking underneath that.

First, what he's thinking: What is attractive about her? He sees her selfless devotion to her job, to a family that doesn't even love her. He reads her physical appearance through her inward beauty. Her inward beauty made her outward beauty MUCH more beautiful.

Guys when you are looking for a dance partner: **Physical attraction is important, but you'll find it is not as important as spiritual attraction.**

I didn't say physical beauty is not important. It is. But there are things that make a woman more beautiful than her physical appearance. And our culture is screaming that physical beauty is #1. TINDER – built entirely around this. And it's a lie. There is a deeper beauty that actually intensifies beauty.

- Proverbs 31:30 Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
- 1 Peter 3:3 Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes.⁴ Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a

gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.

Quick truth for you who are too young & dumb to know any better: Over time physical beauty fades. Things sag, wrinkle, droop, & go gray. Age takes them away. But deeper, spiritual beauty actually intensifies with age...and makes a person more attractive over time.

Guys even people who are not Christians have figured this out. Comedian Aziz Ansari (Tom Hatherford) just released a book Modern Romance, a NYT bestseller. It's about how the next generation is dating. He's not a Christian. And after surveying thousands, he came to this conclusion:

There are two types of love: passionate and companionate. Passionate comes first, when feelings are wonderful and intense. But those feelings simply cannot last. Most of us think when those feelings begin to fade, time to go find a new passionate love. But for those who push through passionate love, over time companionate love develops and actually proves to be the deeper, stronger, lasting type of love.

I promise you something right now: first time I saw Courtney I was 15 and we were on a school trip in the Mediterranean. THE angels descended from above and said this one is the best one. I was in the presence of a goddess from Whitsett, NC. I was 15! Was she beautiful? YES!

Passionate Love But over the years I've watched her run after Jesus fiercely, I've watched her be the best friend to others I could imagine. She's given me 4 wonderful kids.

And you know what? She can't spend all day every day pampering her body cause she is sacrificing herself to take care of our family. She wakes up & reads scripture. Ya'll that is deep beauty and she is far more attractive to me than the day I met her. **That's Companionate Love.** And that's what you really want.

So men, if you want companionate love, think like Solomon. Do not ignore physical beauty. But find a woman whose inner beauty makes you even see her outward beauty through that lens. Summarize it this way: **Godly attraction prioritizes spiritual beauty over physical beauty.²**

Lastly fellas I want you to see what he's doing. Let me read you chapter 2. 8-13

[8] The voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills. [9] My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, looking through the lattice. (I promise I know he sounds like a creeper but that's not what's happening here ok. Guys do not go staring into girls windows hoping they will respond like this. They will call police.) [10] My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away, [11] for behold, the winter is past; the rain is over and gone. [12] The flowers appear on the earth, the time of

² This idea of spiritual beauty of physical beauty comes from JD Greear's sermon "Laws of Attraction" from the *Exposed* series on Song of Solomon preached in 2008 at The Summit Church. A fantastic series I recommend to you for a fuller treatment of Song of Solomon.

singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land. [13] The fig tree ripens its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance. Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come away.

His first and last words to her are “arise. Come away.” See what he’s doing guys? He’s wooing this woman. He’s calling her out to come away. He’s asking her on a date. That’s his job. To chase, pursue, and draw the woman into a relationship.

That’s how God intended male-female relationships to thrive. It’s a 2 way street for sure, but it’s the man’s job to instigate and activate. To lead the way. Why? Because from Gen 2 on, men are called to lead. It’s Adam who is first on the ground in Eden. Adam sings over his wife and calls her Eve. It is the man who leaves father and mother to go get his wife not the other way around. 132

By “lead” I do not mean to dominate, boss around, intimidate or any other stupid thing that men have done in the name of the bible. I mean step out, take responsibility, care for, listen to, love, serve, and risk.

Guys... that is scary. Because every time you step out, there’s a chance you will fall through the ice. You risk failure and rejection. You know that feeling when you finally get up the nerve to ask a girl out – and she says no? It’s horrible. The pain of rejection is deafening. But rejection is a part of life! Maybe you’ve never felt it because

you’ve grown up in a culture where everybody gets a participation trophy. But sometimes you lose! That’s ok!

Listen, One of the most disheartening traits in a man is cowardice. It comes out in things like sneak-a-dates. Where guys TEXT “hey want to get coffee?” And she’s like “is this a date? Or is this coffee? What is this? What am I preparing for? Will others be there?” Who knows! Because he was too much of a coward to really ask you out. He hid behind a screen & 3 emojis. Guys...you cannot create a no-lose scenario when it comes to romance. Leaders take risks. And if you are too scared to risk your pride then you are still a boy and you do NOT need to be dating anybody.

Ladies listen to me...If he texts you and asks you to do anything do not respond. Guys...STOP HIDING BEHIND TEXT MESSAGES LIKE A COWARD.

I may sound old school, but go to her FACE or at least call her. Put yourself out there and say, “ARISE, COME AWAY WITH ME.” No don’t say that. But say, “You seem to be awesome from everything I can tell. I’d like to get to know you, would you go out to dinner with me Saturday night?” I’m training my girls to expect courage from any guy interested in them.

And Ladies listen to me. If men are going to start having backbones we gotta celebrate that. Which means you must have the grace in this to say yes or to say no with kindness & affirmation. That’s your role in the dance. When he asks

you to dance, you can step in and be led, or graciously decline. "Thank you for being clear and asking me. That takes courage and I appreciate that. I am not interested though." And guys if that happens, THAT'S OK!

The Gospel gives us freedom to fail! Because even if we fail we are still loved by God! Means Christian men should have more courage to try and date UP than anyone else. "She's out of my league..." So what? You love Jesus? If the answer is yes...get some courage and ask her out.

In fact, let me pause here really quickly. See this whole dating idea is a picture of the gospel. That God came after you. God the king came after the one discarded & helpless in the field. Expect you were worse. You weren't of good character you were one who rebelled against him. You were the spouse who cheated on him with others gods. You rejected him. Yet he says come, arise. Come home. And the betrayal you committed against him? He didn't punish you for it. He took it on himself. And he forgave you. The dance...it's a picture of the relationship God is calling you to. To come home to him. In the bible he calls the church his bride and he is the groom. Because he has a passionate love for us and he leads, he sacrifices, and he gives everything up for us.

Ok that's the first part of this relationship. The first dance. Not easy but if you will look for a guy or a girl of good character and then be courageous and intentional, you'll be on a God-honoring approach to dating.

Ok, that's the biggest and most important one. Get that right, these 3 will follow. And these other 3 are far shorter than that one but important so lets look in.

Ok second marker of a healthy dating relationship:

2. The "line" – not a line but a time

Listen to what the woman says to her friends after she is married:

Sos 2: [6] His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me!

This is a fast-forward to now where she is in bed with her husband. It's a very intimate embrace...then she pauses to warn her single friends about this moment:

[7] I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.

She says this in the beginning, middle, and end of the book.³ Which, whenever the bible repeats something that many times, It's the bible's way of saying LISTEN UP! THIS IS IMPORTANT!

³ 2.7, 3.5, 8.4

Here's the deal, She is warning her single friends that sex is powerful and that there is a great context it plays out in. But do not wake it up until it is time. She is saying do not activate the sexual part of your relationship until you are in the place where it's made for: marriage.

I want to say two things very clearly and directly. First: The bible is abundantly clear that nothing does more to sabotage a relationship and nothing is more destructive to your own personal soul, than sexual activity outside of marriage. Paul even says as much in his first letter to the Corinthian church: Chapter 6

[18] Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.

What God is saying to you through Solomon, Paul, and the rest of the bible is that there is something different and more damaging in mis-using sex any way other than what God intended. And while all sin (rebelling against God's design) has the same spiritual consequences, some sins have more earthly consequences than others. And this is one of those.

In sex, two people become one and inside of marriage that is a life-giving thing. But outside of marriage that kind of unbridled, fierce power is destructive. Here's a simple way to think about it.

If you were to take a piece of duct tape and stick it on your arm...it will adhere to your arm. What it was made to do. Now, imagine you rip it off. Gonna hurt right? And it's going to take some of you with it. Now, imagine you do that 10 more times. What happens? Well the duct tape loses its sticking power. It gets to the point where it can't really adhere anymore. This is what sex outside of marriage does. It corrodes your soul and creates huge intimacy problems for your future marriage. It teaches you sex is about self-gratification, not about loving the other. Porn does the same thing by the way. I can't possibly get into all that here, but some of you are so conditioned by Porn to see sex as some kind of quick pleasure fix that you've already ruined your marriage and you aren't even dating anyone yet.

Listen here's one other thing I want you to notice here. When the woman warns about sex, she doesn't talk about it like a line you aren't supposed to cross. Do you notice that? Most Christians who want to try and obey God's command to wait until marriage to have sex will follow that with the question "well what can I do and not 'cross the line?'" That's really the wrong question.

To the Shulammite woman, the question isn't "how far can we go?" but "when can we start?"

It's not about a line to cross. Her advice is simple. Don't wake up the sexual part of your relationship until you can follow it all the way through. And then, on your wedding night, buy some Gatorade and let love awaken.

Now I gotta say one more thing. For some of you this section is difficult to hear. Because maybe for you, finally understanding What God says about sex means understanding you've broken his design & command. You've taken a relationship somewhere it wasn't supposed to go. And maybe you are asking the question: what do I do now if I've already awakened love?

This is why the gospel brings such great hope to us. You may have broken God's commands...but the gospel says God is out to restore broken people. God is out to heal people who've been damaged by their own decisions. He is the God who makes all things new. But you have to take a step. And that step is repentance. To repent is to acknowledge to God you've broken his command and to seek his forgiveness. It's to turn from your former ways and turn towards him. And when you do, he promises that he will forgive you. He will give you new life.

That is the great hope of the Christian life. That we sinners can turn to our father who will be ready to forgive us and call us home. To call us to a better love.

So listen to me...you are not too far-gone. Today is your wake up call. Turn to him. And find him better than anything you've been giving yourself to. He's the lover you've been looking for and he is calling to you. Idols give you temporary, shallow pleasure and then take and take from you leaving you empty. But the love of God gives you

deep soul satisfaction and it only fills your heart more and more. This is the love you were created for. And it is still available to you.

Jonathan Edwards said it this way

"The enjoyment of [God] is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams. But God is the ocean."

Third marker of a healthy relationship I want you to see:

3. The Friends

Remember what I said: Song of Solomon is really more like a play than a song. It has the king, the Shulammite, and this mysterious group we don't know much about called "the friends." These are the others who speak into her relationship.

From the beginning the friends affirm the relationship is a good thing and affirm that he is a good guy for her (1.4). They help guide the relationship on the road to marriage. They help her get ready before she goes to him like bridesmaids preparing the bride (1.8).

When the couple is in conflict, the friends help her see the good in her lover. Chapter 4?

[9] What is your beloved more than another beloved, O most beautiful among women? What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you thus adjure us?

The point is that this couple wasn't alone. A story about a king and a shepherd girl is also a story about her friends and parents and family and village. And they all had a voice with which to give input. Wisdom. Rebuke. Clarification.

For the first time in human history, dating is usually disconnected from family and friends. How often do you see a couple get together and then go into hibernation!? Like where did they go? Nobody sees them until you get an invite to be a groomsman.

Orthodox Jews have a practice of matchmaking called the shidduch. Friends and family suggest potential partners for single men and women, and then they meet to get to know each other. The couple usually has the final say but the shidduch gets the ball rolling.

Not that we are having a Friday night shidduch, but if you will open up your relationship to people you know and trust and give them a voice to speak into your relationship, it will do you well. That will mean that you open up your relationship to scrutiny. You can't hide. You have to be honest with people about the good and the bad. As a result

though, they will help you think straight. Help you make wise decisions, sidestep mistakes, and walk at the right pace.⁴

Yet ANOTHER reason why we encourage you to be in community groups with people in different life stages than you. So people who've been there can walk with you through it.

So here's a question that goes right back to our opening sermon: Who are your friends? Do they know your relationship and do you trust them enough to let them speak openly to you about it? Even if you don't like it?

Last marker you see in this relationship:

4. The Destination

This song, this poem, it builds toward something. The first three chapters are building towards the long-awaited wedding day. Look how chapter 3 ends.

[6] What is that coming up from the wilderness like columns of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the fragrant powders of a merchant? [7] Behold, it is the litter of Solomon! Around it are sixty mighty men, some of the mighty men of Israel, [8] all of them wearing

⁴ From Comer, *Loveology*. 141.

swords and expert in war, each with his sword at his thigh, against terror by night. [9] King Solomon made himself a carriage from the wood of Lebanon. [10] He made its posts of silver, its back of gold, its seat of purple; its interior was inlaid with love by the daughters of Jerusalem. [11] Go out, O daughters of Zion, and look upon King Solomon, with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart.

The whole thing has built to this moment where they are going to be married. And this is the model of a healthy dating relationship. It has a beginning, a build up, and a destination.... It is GOING somewhere. And that somewhere is marriage.

Listen, I want to say this and you can like it or not. Dating just to date is dumb. It's a waste of your heart and a waste of your time. Dating is for a purpose. Every cup of coffee, every night at the movies, every conversation is a movement closer to or further away from marriage. That's the purpose of dating.

The bible gives such rich teaching on marriage. Dating is the vetting process for marriage. Now, I don't think you have to stress out at this moment. That can take a little time so don't freak out if you are the one on that first date here this morning. Relax and enjoy that first date.

But, I do think it means you shouldn't date until you are ready to get married. And that is going to be different for

everyone. I haven't met many people, whose parents still drive them to school, who are ready to get married. That said, I've met MANY college graduates who have no business dating anyone because they are certainly not ready for marriage.

So yes, I know that seems extreme to some of you. Especially you who are serial daters. You always have to have a boyfriend or a girlfriend. And you are like...come on its just dating! And I want to ask...who told you that? "Well that's how it is..." says who!? The popular kids in school running around like a little herd of morons dating & sleeping with each other? God is offering a Different narrative for your life...one far better than just having a girlfriend because it's the thing to do. I know this sounds like a bumper sticker but it is completely true: you don't need a boyfriend or a girlfriend to be complete in Christ! Change the narrative!

Marriage is a great and awesome thing and dating is an on ramp we have in our culture to get there. Treat it like it has a destination. Don't just date to date.

Guys & Girls it means you need to ask a lot of questions because dating is serious. You may spend your life with this person. So ask some questions! "What is your intention?" "Where is this going?" "Do you have a job?" "Do you still live with your parents?" "What do you believe about Jesus?" "Who are you voting for & why?" "Do you want kids one day?" "Do you have debt?" "Do you have insurance?" "If you

died could you pay for your funeral?" You need to get to know this person.⁵

I don't claim to be a dating expert. I want you to see how much God loves you. And how much marriage is to be a gift God gives you as a celebration of that love. And how life-giving dating can be if you will put the other person before you. Some of you need to look beyond dating to see the pursuit of God in your life. And you need to come home to him.

GOSPEL -

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⁵ I don't normally quote Creflo Dollar, but this was too good to pass up.