



A Biblical Perspective
to Balance the Extremes

I Gave
DATING
a
CHANCE

Jeremy Clark

I G a v e
D a t i n g
a A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE
TO BALANCE
THE EXTREMES
C h a n c e

J E R A M Y C L A R K



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*To my parents,
Spencer and Rona Clark.
Your faith taught me to believe
and your love told me I could do anything.
I love you.*

*And to my wife's parents,
J.A.C. and LeAnn Redford,
who model a passionate and transparent love.*

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INTRODUCTION

To Date or Not to Date

I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE THINKING...

I'll bet I can guess one of the biggest issues in your life right now—maybe THE biggest. In fact, if all your thoughts from last week were recorded and labeled by topic (that's a scary thought!), your relationships with the opposite sex probably outweigh family, friends, school, job, and pretty much everything else.

I'd also guess that your thoughts on this subject are downright confusing. As a young Christian, you're faced with such conflicting opinions: Date. Don't date. Wait to date. Your head is probably spinning from all the advice.

WHY THIS BOOK?

I've been working with young adults for almost ten years now, including four years with nearly five hundred high-school students at the First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton, California. At each place I've ministered, dating dilemmas have arisen constantly. Everywhere I've been—California, Washington, Arizona, Colorado, even

overseas—young Christians have the same questions and concerns, the same ones I had and that you probably have.

These years of ministry to dating-age Christians have taught me that young people clearly want to date. But does merely having a desire to date make it okay to date?

No way!

On the other hand, I believe that learning to date according to God's standards *does* make it okay to desire and pursue relationships. I'm convinced that for young adults who love the Lord and who long to please Him, dating truly is an option. Young Christians *can* enjoy godly relationships if they approach dating with God's perspective and guidelines. Believers *can* get to know one another by responding to romantic feelings appropriately. God enables us to maintain healthy emotional, physical, and spiritual boundaries when we walk in step with the Holy Spirit.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO?

Whether you've dated quite a bit or not at all, if you want to please God and to make sure you're headed in the right direction on the issue of dating, you've come to the right place. If your mind and heart have ever cried, "Lord, what do I do with this desire to date?" then this book is for you.

Maybe you're eager to date, but you've heard Christians shouldn't. After all, *dating* has become a dirty word in many Christian circles. Some recommend throwing out the whole idea. Maybe you've even tried not dating because you felt it was the godly thing to do. Perhaps you're now frustrated because not dating didn't solve your problems or address your concerns.

Even if you've never dated before, you may still feel torn between

your heart's desire to date and the movement to ditch dating altogether.

While I wholeheartedly believe Christians need to clean up their dating act, I don't believe you have to reject dating to be godly in your relationships.

Of course discovering God's plan for your dating life may indeed mean that now is not the right time to date. There are seasons of life when dating isn't the best option. Because of higher priorities God has for you, you may not have time for a dating relationship. Or perhaps you've been hurt in a relationship and need some time to heal. Or it could be that you're too young and simply need to wait a little longer.

Don't worry if you're not sure about the timing issue. Later in the book, we'll look closer at recognizing the right time to date. Meanwhile, remember this: You don't have to keep struggling with unanswered questions about dating. As we'll see, the Bible can guide you through dating, step by step.

Whether or not you choose to date right now, I want you to have a biblical strategy for dating. I want your parents to trust you, your peers to respect you, and most of all for you to trust God's leading as you date.

MY STORY

Another reason I've written this book is simply my own story. It's easy for me to identify with whatever confusion you may be experiencing about dating. I remember when so many well-meaning friends filled my ears with dos and don'ts about dating. They made promises of happiness, success, and purity if I followed their suggestions. But often I wound up bewildered and frustrated.

Over time I experienced all kinds of dating ups and downs. Early

on, while still in my teens, I tried the “world’s way,” playing games and playing the field. Not only did that leave me unsatisfied and often hurt, but it definitely didn’t please God.

As I grew closer to the Lord, I truly wanted to please Him with every aspect of my life. I even went through a time of not dating in order to focus on the Lord more intently. He worked in me deeply during that time, building my character and showing me how to have good relationships. Though I wasn’t dating, I was doing a lot of watching and wondering. I wondered if I’d ever find The One, and how I’d know she was it. I wondered if I could date to God’s glory.

I found that I could. Through all the ups and downs, I believe God laid on my heart certain principles about dating that helped me to glorify Him in my relationships. After some years of experience, I knew God’s standards better and how to put His truths into practice—although I’ve by no means mastered this process.

Meanwhile, in my youth ministry at Fullerton, I met a volunteer leader named Jerusha Redford. We began dating, and God helped me date Jerusha to His glory. It was awesome! Eventually Jerusha and I were married, just over a year ago.

I can see now how God used each of my dating experiences to make me ready for my wife. The principles of love I learned from God while dating are now a solid foundation for our marriage. I found out how to communicate, how to control my desires, how to be committed, and above all, how to concentrate on being right with God.

I want to share with you the guidelines I’ve learned from both successes and failures in my own dating life, as well as from the experiences of others I’ve associated with in ministry. I trust that these guidelines will help you develop healthy, enjoyable relationships as you apply God’s timeless truth to your life.

G O T O T H E S O U R C E

Dating doesn't have to be confusing and frustrating—or worse, impossible.

Why not?

Because we have direct access to the Source—the Source of all answers and the Source of all fulfillment.

God is that ultimate Source. He has a lot to say about your relationships with the opposite sex. He's written a letter to you that's full of the best advice on love and relationships. You know it; it's the Bible.

The word *dating* might not appear in your Bible's concordance, but God's Word speaks loud and clear about all relationships. We'll look together at tons of examples and principles from the Bible that can guide us in our relationships and help us unravel the mystery of dating.

God's Word is relevant to every aspect of your life. By studying His Word you'll gain not only great dating advice, but so much more. Listen to this:

The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.

The precepts of the LORD are right,
giving joy to the heart.

The commands of the LORD are radiant,
giving light to the eyes. (Psalm 19:7-8)

This passage promises three amazing results of searching God's Word. Look at the passage again. Do you see all three?

When we apply His timeless truths to our dating life, we find...

- WISDOM. Do you want to be a “smart date”? Do you want to know how to act and speak? God’s Word will make you wise.
- JOY! Dating can be fun, and I firmly believe it can be a wonderful time of growth as well. As you follow God’s lead and His righteous ways, you will have joy in dating.
- LIGHT. That means you’ll have direction. You can see where you’re going. You won’t feel blind or abandoned but will be guided by the Good Shepherd Himself.

Incredible promises, aren’t they? And they’re yours for the taking! If you’re willing and ready to pursue God’s truth, this book can help you experience dating in an ultimately satisfying way that brings glory to God.

So...enough with intros. Let’s get down to business!

The Drive to Date

NATURE, LOVE, AND ESPECIALLY GOD

“The tragedy of our age,” my wife once heard a pastor say, “is that we’re at a crossroads, but all the signposts have fallen down.”

You’re at a crossroads when it comes to dating. That’s why you’re reading this book. You’re a Christian who wants to serve the Lord and understand His will. You want to keep your dating life under His control. But you’ve probably been confused by all the fallen signposts around you.

The world’s way of dating definitely doesn’t suit you. It’s full of mind games and usually ends in heartache and burned bridges. You can’t follow those directions.

No wonder a whole movement against Christian dating has gained popularity. Some Christians say that since romantic feelings can lead to sin, the only godly course for young people is not to date. “Courtship” is acceptable, they say, but only when a person is ready for marriage. In their eyes, casual one-on-one dating will only distract young people from their walks with the Lord.

These Christians who discourage dating have good motives, and their goal—to keep young adults pure—is a great one. But their approach, I believe, is imbalanced. I believe we *can* apply the Lord’s truth to our romantic relationships as we date. We *can* find a workable strategy for dating and getting to know others, all to God’s glory.

Can you please the Lord and still date? I’ll answer that question with an emphatic yes! There *is* a godly alternative to “kissing dating good-bye.”

IT’S A NATURAL THING

562-694-26...Click.

C’mon! I can do this.

562-694-266...Click.

Darn it. I’m twenty-six years old. Why am I still sweaty-palmed and freaked-out that her dad will answer?

But if her dad does answer, I can’t risk the possibility of Star 69 or Caller ID. I’ll just have to ask if I can talk to her.

You may laugh, but this really happened to me. And it wasn’t that long ago, when I was trying to make a call to the woman who’s now my wife.

Did I finally get through all ten digits of her phone number? Yes, and you’ll never guess one of the reasons why: a TV commercial, of all things.

An old man and his grandson were sitting on a porch swing. The grandpa asked if his grandson ever intended to get married. The young boy reacted as most boys his age would, with horror and complete disgust. He thought falling in love was about as unnatural as eating broccoli.

Luckily his porch-swing partner knew better. “Falling in love,” the grandfather said, “is the most natural thing in the world.”

That bit of wisdom reassured me I wasn’t crazy for wanting to get to know someone special. It was natural to feel the way I did, to have that aching desire in my heart to spend the rest of my life with someone, to feel unsatisfied with being on my own, to really want to find the right person.

Don’t get me wrong; I wasn’t desperate, and I felt content in my relationship with God. I just had this drive in me that wouldn’t let me alone.

I wanted to fall in love—“the most natural thing in the world.” Think about it.

THE DRIVE TO DATE

I didn’t care much for science until my sophomore year of high school, when I had biology with Mr. Carlson. A six-foot-six all-star athlete, he would literally walk on top of our lab tables and randomly thwack desks with his lecture stick to keep our attention.

He sure kept mine. Under Mr. Carlson’s teaching, I became fascinated by the details of all life forms, from plants to pigs. Ever since then, I’ve loved and appreciated the natural order in God’s creation. Things make sense, and life follows patterns that we can study.

There’s even a pattern for the development of a drive to date.

For starters, the drive and desire I felt (and that you probably feel) to get to know and spend time with someone special is completely normal. It’s one of the natural things that happens as you mature, like no longer being scared by cooties. Curiosity and interest in the opposite sex electrifies you, and you long to pursue male-female friendships.

What's the source of this desire to date and what awakens our romantic feelings? I believe both are prompted by our God-given need for companionship. As Stuart Briscoe writes in *What It Means to Be Real*, "Scripture makes it very clear that our lives are lived in terms of relationships: with God and with human beings."

God created us with the capacity for companionship, including the capacity for romantic feelings. These feelings are natural and can teach us a lot about ourselves and others. Without them, we could easily get caught up in ourselves and never invest in relationships. We might become terribly selfish and neglect our need to grow in humility and service to others.

So you don't need to feel bad because you want to date someone. It isn't sinful to have romantic feelings. God knows the desires of your heart. Even better, He wants to fulfill those desires when you walk with Him. Look at Psalm 37:4: "Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart." You *did* read that right. God longs to fulfill the desires of your heart.

This verse isn't an assurance that your every wish will come true; just because you desire to date a certain person doesn't mean God will send him or her knocking on your door. But God *does* want to see you contented and fulfilled. And He knows better than you what you need and should want in a mate.

Just think: In this area of your life, as much as in any other, you have the all-knowing, all-wise Creator of everything as your Guide. That's so reassuring and refreshing.

BECAUSE GOD IS LOVE

But it really isn't enough just to say romantic feelings are natural. It's not even enough to say God knows you want to date. Romantic feel-

ings are acceptable because God Himself *is love*, and He created us to experience and reflect this aspect of His personality.

Maybe you're familiar with Genesis 1:27: "God created man in his own image." Our bodies and minds reflect the nature of God, who sees, hears, and *feels*. Because God is love, we can feel love.

More important, however, being created in His image and reborn as Christians means our spirits are modeled after God's Spirit. Because God is love, we can and *must* love.

In 1 John 4:7-8 we're commanded to "love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." Pretty clear, isn't it? The Lord wants us to love. He isn't talking in those verses about romantically loving everyone. But our Father *has* given us the desire and drive not only for brotherly love but also for romantic love. Why?

Because in the Scriptures we learn that romantic love, in a deep and mysterious way, is intended to reflect God's love for the church, Christ's bride for eternity.

In fact, your romantic love toward another person can honor God because it shows Him that you consider His precious creation to be valuable and worthy, just as God does.

God wants us to love, and as part of that love, He wants us to experience romance. He designed it, modeled it, and made it to last!

THE STRENGTH OF LOVE

But what exactly is this great thing called "love"? Dictionaries define it with phrases like "a warm liking or affection," "a tender or passionate affection," "a warm feeling," "a strong liking." To me, those descriptions sound a little weak.

When we look at God's definition, however, we see more clearly why love is something everyone desires and seeks: True love "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:7-8).

True love is tough! To really love, you've got to be willing to sacrifice. As Jesus told us in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." That's some serious commitment.

Maybe you feel you can never live up to that kind of true love in a dating relationship. Don't worry; you don't have to be able to love perfectly in order to date. But if you're willing to work at knowing and following God's guidelines, you can learn to love appropriately.

THE PROBLEM

Yes, romantic love is a wonderful part of human life. And if it weren't for sin, we would be able to love purely and to experience romantic relationships perfectly. Unfortunately, sin has corrupted God's perfect design for love and companionship on this earth. Because we're sinful creatures, our love can be sinful and often is.

But Christ died to redeem us from our sinful desires. By His power and strength within us, we can choose to live holy lives full of love and God-honoring romance. As long as we rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us, we don't have to be afraid to pursue romance in dating.

Instead of denying or repressing your romantic feelings, you need to learn to bring them under the Lord's control. All your thoughts on this subject can be in line with God's perspective as you "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5).

God created you with romantic feelings, and now He wants you

to give them back to Him so He can help you date and learn to love according to His standards. But godly dating doesn't happen automatically; it takes work. Even though your desire for romance isn't sinful, your response to these deep feelings can cross God's boundary lines. You can date foolishly. You can be drawn into compromising with the world. If you become involved in inappropriate emotional or physical intimacy, you can and will sin against God.

So we have to be careful to guard against any sin, small or great, that would steal our affection from the Lord. By paying attention to the principles you'll see in this book, you can stay within God's boundaries and date to His glory.

LOOKING AHEAD...

So here at this crossroads in your life, it's time to put the signposts back up. We need solid directions for issues such as...

- knowing what a "date" really is.
- figuring out what to do on a real-life date and how to treat the person you're with.
- meeting your responsibilities before, during, and after a date.
- determining when you're ready for dating.
- following God's standards and knowing what will result if you do—or if you don't.
- establishing good boundaries, both emotionally and physically, and learning how to protect them.

These are just a few of the places we're headed in the chapters to come. I trust you're as eager as I am to start the journey.

According to Webster

YOU CALL THAT A DATE?

When I was in high school, I struggled to draw a line between dates and just-friends activities with girls. My junior prom is a perfect example.

When prom season came around that year, I wasn't interested in anyone in particular. Becky sat next to me in English, and we always had fun, so we decided to go to the prom together as "just friends." (I know you recognize that problematic phrase.)

Becky had just broken up with Jeff, her longtime boyfriend. Jeff and I had never gotten along, and when he found out about our prom plans, he took it upon himself to warn me (it was more like a threat) that if I made any moves on Becky, he'd blah, blah, blah. I assured him I had no feelings for his ex-girlfriend. And that was the truth; my intentions were to enjoy the prom and hang with my buddies. Becky was a nice girl, and I enjoyed her friendship, but I didn't want more than that.

Prom night arrived, and I sported the tuxedo I'd rented to match

Becky's sequined gown. The night should have been fun and a great memory. Unfortunately, Becky and I seemed to have different definitions of "just friends." All night she inched closer and closer. I tried to come up with new ways to signal that I just wasn't interested, without having to actually say it. The only thing that saved me was that the night had an end (our curfew).

I thought we both understood that we were just friends. But things are never that simple when guy-girl relationships are involved. Both Becky and I ended up frustrated simply because we were operating with different definitions and intentions. We hadn't made sure that we were on the same wavelength. Of course it didn't help when some of our friends assumed that just because we were prom dates, the next step was a promise ring.

Defining the boundaries of guy-girl relationships can be complicated. What is a date, really? Can you "go out" as friends? How do you deal with buddies who are ready to marry you off to someone you take to the prom?

I believe we'll never get these things straight without a good working definition of a date.

WHAT YOU TOLD ME

In researching for this book, I surveyed about a thousand young adults between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five. Question number one asked them to define what constituted a date.

"I don't really know," a twenty-two-year-old female responded. "It always seems sketchy when it's not clearly defined." She wasn't alone. Around 90 percent of those I surveyed found it hard to define the word *date*.

And those who did define it came up with a whole range of definitions, from the simple “spending time with special attention to a person of the opposite sex” (that’s from a fifteen-year-old female) to the more intense “time set apart...with emphasis on a possible future together, and having fun while doing it” (from a male, twenty-five).

One person defined it as “a way of looking for someone you are compatible with...usually romantic, but not always.” Okay, but what happens if one person thinks they’re on a romantic date and the other doesn’t?

Another identified a date as a “time where you and your potential wife/husband go off with a group of friends to get to know each other in a better way.” Whoa. That could be kind of weighty. How does marriage enter the picture?

Obviously there are many diverse definitions of dating. Each of these definitions clues us in to different aspects of what a date can be while also pointing to various stages of dating, from the simple to the serious. But there doesn’t seem to be a widely accepted standard for what a date really is.

SIMPLER THAN YOU THOUGHT

You may be as shocked as I was to see how dictionaries define *date*. It’s totally simple: “a prearranged social engagement” or “an appointment to meet socially.” That’s it. Nothing more than a social time agreed upon beforehand.

Isn’t it nice to see a definition so straightforward, uncomplicated, and broad? It encompasses everything from grabbing coffee to sharing an elaborate candlelit dinner.

It seems to me that the basic definition of *dating* is much less

complicated than we've made it. We should be able to tell pretty quickly whether something is a date or not. If it's prearranged and social, it's a date.

MORE RESPONSIBILITY

“Wow,” you may be thinking, “so much of what I do is really dating, according to that definition.” You're right. I think you'll realize that, once you look at it more realistically, dating may be a bigger part of your day-to-day life than you thought. Even a group of friends getting together after a football game could be a group date. And a prom is definitely date material.

But this broader and simpler understanding of dating brings with it greater responsibility. Since according to this definition many of your activities are dates, you need to clearly communicate your intentions to the person you want to be with. Clarity and honesty are of utmost importance.

Think about how your actions and words will come across to this person. There are obvious things you can do to clearly communicate your intentions. If you think he or she might assume that your invitation to go out for dinner is a bigger deal than you intend, then either clarify what you mean or don't extend the invitation. If you just want to hang out as friends, make it a group activity, because most people think one-on-one time means something more. If, after the first date with someone, you know you don't want a second date, then don't say, “I'll call.” But if you say you'll call, then make sure you do.

By operating according to this simpler and broader definition—and accepting the responsibility that goes with it—you'll face less pressure and stress in dating. This should free you to date without

overblown expectations and anxiety. You'll be able to sidestep many of the misunderstandings and troubles that can come with dating.

YOUR WORRY-FREE PHILOSOPHY

I'm blown away when I consider the massive amounts of time and energy spent on dating and how stressed people can get about it. For the past decade I've watched young people lose sleep, check out of school, lose touch with their families, and worry themselves sick, all because of dating.

There's no place for worry in a Christian's life. "Do not be anxious about anything," God exhorts us in Philippians 4:6, "but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."

What is it you're so concerned about when it comes to dating? Is it that you aren't good enough to date someone? That you haven't been asked out? That you don't know whether a certain person likes you or not? Take those concerns to God. The more time you spend in prayer, the more you'll sense God's peace about these issues.

On the other hand, the more stressed you are about dating, the more consumed you become with it. Dating can become a god in your life. If you find yourself thinking more about your date than the Lord, your priorities are out of balance. If you spend hours planning a date, but no time alone with God, are you keeping Him first?

To you, His child, God says, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). Don't place your dating life ahead of your Lord.

If you recognize anxiety in your dating life, I suggest you evalu-

ate whether you're acting more self-centered than God-centered. Worrying about dating is essentially focusing on yourself.

And beware. When it comes to dating, Satan would like to keep you anxious and confused. So you need to keep things in perspective. Never let dating become so huge in your life that you lose sight of what's far more important—your relationship with God.