

The Road to Marriage

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[0 : 00] We're going to read now from the Scriptures in two places, first of all in Romans chapter 1, and then in Colossians chapter 2, page 939 and 984 in our church Bibles.

We're in a series a little different from normal. Normally our practice is to teach through particular books of the Bible, but from time to time it is helpful to look at some of the themes that Scripture teaches us about.

And we're looking at this whole theme of relationships and marriage. And we're seeking to gather together the Bible's teaching on a number of different aspects of this whole area.

And so this morning I want to read from Romans 1, verses 17 to 25, which really expresses how the world has gone all wrong in its thinking about human relationships and in particular sexual relationships.

And then from Colossians 2, which gives us a foundation for a Christian way of thinking. Paul says in Romans chapter 1, verse 18, The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

[1 : 22] For what can be known about God is plain to them, for God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made.

So they are without excuse. For although they knew God in this way, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.

But they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature, or the created thing, rather than the creator who is blessed forever.

Amen. Turn over to Colossians chapter 2, and we read just a few verses from verse 6. It makes the contrast of those who have been made alive in Christ.

[2 : 49] Therefore, as you received Christ, Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

For in him, that is in him alone, the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him who is the head of all rule and authority.

Amen. May God bless to us this his word. You might like to have Romans chapter 1 open.

We will be looking just a little bit there, although as I said, we're ranging through the whole scripture really in this series about aspects of love.

[3 : 59] Last time we looked at the Bible's reason for the sexual relationship, that is marriage. I use that term advisedly, the sexual relationship, because the Bible knows only one, and that is marriage between one man and one woman.

And so the term sexual relationship and marriage are in fact interchangeable. Marriage is defined by sex. A marriage bond is consummated by sexual intimacy, and it is ruptured by adultery.

It's very simple. Which is why what the government has just called same-sex marriage is not marriage at all. The law gives no definition of consummation and no possibility of breaking by adultery.

It just goes to show what a shameful sham it actually is. But we needed to start with the reason and the purpose of marriage, because unless we know what something is for, we're very likely to misuse it, make a mess, and in fact probably get badly hurt.

Just because something can be used for a particular purpose, it doesn't mean it's meant for that purpose. Think about petrol. Petrol is for running a car.

[5 : 13] Petrol is for the internal combustion engine. Petrol is not for starting your barbecue. I learned that some years ago, not from a book, but in my garden.

My barbecue wouldn't start, and having a petrol can in my garage, I thought I would improvise. I was very careful. I didn't just pour it on. I very carefully soaked some newspaper and put it very carefully in my barbecue, and very carefully lit a match at arm's length.

But there was a very big bang, and I lost my eyebrows. And the respect of my wife. By the way, there are two lessons which flow from that.

Don't try this at home. And the second, I suppose, is be very careful if you get invited to my house for a barbecue. But sex is equally explosive, equally dangerous.

Just because sex, and indeed marriage, can be used for certain purposes, does not mean that is what it's really for. And it doesn't mean it isn't dangerous if we use it in the wrong way.

[6 : 20] What sex is for, as we've discovered, is the service of God. Marriage serves God's kingdom. Marriage is for mission.

It serves God's purpose in creation and in recreation through redemption. And Jesus clearly reiterates Genesis 1 and 2 in Matthew 19.

And he says that marriage is sex in the service of God. As Christopher Ash's excellent book is subtitled. And the three particular blessings that we speak of in marriage all serve that primary goal.

The three Ps of marriage, partnership, the mutual sexual union of marriage, procreation, childbearing and nurturing and training as a fruit of that union.

And protection of that union through the public recognition of marriage to prevent the wrongful relationships taking place outside marriage.

[7 : 19] And that last one, of course, is necessitated by the fall of man. And when sin now so easily corrupts that primary purpose of marriage. So the reason for marriage is to serve the kingdom of God by these means.

But today I want to think a little about the road to marriage. How to find your way there. If that is, in fact, to be God's gift for you. Now, obviously, this is especially important for young people.

But it's not only for them. Maybe that you're already married. Maybe that you're a confirmed singleton. But the New Testament commands that all should honor marriage, whoever we are.

And the truth is that we are our brother and our sister's keepers. And marriage is a public matter. And so it concerns us all. And certainly within the church, we all have a responsibility to help one another to honor God in marriage.

And that's true whether we ourselves are married or not or whether we ever will be. And that's reason enough, I think, to take this very seriously. But, of course, there are a lot of practical reasons, too.

[8 : 26] Those of us who are parents. Well, we'll have to face up one day to our children's relationships, won't we? We need wisdom in that. When you have teenage daughters, you start to get a bit edgy about these things.

I've noticed this in men. I'm beginning to notice it myself. And friends, we will all have to support our friends, won't we, in the developing relationships that they may find themselves in.

And even confirmed bachelors and spinsters can get a surprise from time to time. Weddings I've taken here in the last few years have ranged in age of brides from the second decade to the seventh decade.

So you never know. So this is an area of importance for all of us. And the problem is that navigating this path to marriage is often a great difficulty for many Christians.

Part of that reason, I think, is that many Christians, maybe even most Christians, have got really rather wrong views about guidance. And that's another whole topic in itself. And we've dealt with that from time to time.

[9 : 30] And if you haven't taken that seriously, you should listen in to some of the things on the website that we've said about that. But as far as marriage and sex is concerned, I want this morning to focus on, I think, the more foundational issue.

Which is that the truth is that we in the church have imbibed so much of our culture's corrupted thinking. It's so easy for us to misunderstand and to miss the true purpose of sexual relationship and then get it all wrong.

So that, in fact, we're utterly reversed in our whole thinking about this area. That's where all of our problems, I think, about marriage and sexual relationships stem from.

Problems in practice always stem from problems in thinking, don't they? Problems in theology. That's the truth. So we need to think about the rightful place of a sexual relationship and how that has been reversed in our society.

And then how we as the church must reclaim that. So first of all, the world has reversed the place and purpose of the sexual relationship.

[10 : 43] Now that is utterly plain in our 21st century culture. We live in a society that no longer recognizes the sexual relationship of marriage, but it is for God.

It's done the opposite. Our society worships the sexual relationship as God. And that perversion is quite basic to the rebellion of man.

Of course that's true. But, of course, it has also been something that has been greatly magnified, I think, in our Western society, in our world anyway, in the last few generations, as we have jettisoned the Christian heritage that we once had as a nation.

And as we've become entirely de-Christianized. And despite our Prime Minister's recent claims that we are a Christian nation, of course, the irony is that his government and the previous government have done more than any other to de-Christianize our society, certainly as far as marriage is concerned.

We were never a Christian country, of course. There's no such thing. But we were a Christianized country. Our morality, our laws, our institutions, they all stood on firm Christian foundations.

[11 : 49] But that is no longer true. Look at how Paul describes the human condition in this passage we read in Romans 1. Isn't that exactly what we see writ large all around us in 2014?

Verse 21. We do not honor God. Our thinking is futile. Our hearts are darkened. You see clearly in verses 24 and 25 how closely sexual immorality is linked with idolatry.

In fact, the whole passage links these things. Look at verse 25. The characteristic that sums up a sexually confused and a sexually promiscuous and obsessed society is idolatry.

They exchanged the truth of God for a lie. And they worshipped and served the created thing rather than the creator. People stop worshipping the creator and start worshipping the relationships that they have with one another.

Including and especially the sinful sexual relationships that they aspire to indulge in. Sex is no longer for God. It is God for many people.

[13 : 00] And wrong thinking about sexual relationships is one clear expression. Perhaps it is even the key expression of the basic sin of man.

The rebellious anti-worship of worshipping the created thing instead of the creator himself. That is the essence of sin, isn't it? It is displacing God from the center and putting ourselves in the center.

We are in the center of the universe. God is banished to the periphery. He has become our servant instead of the other way around. Utterly back to front. And that's the heart of all sin.

It's perverse anti-worship. It's the basic rebellious force that's at the heart of fallen humanity. It's the relentless tendency to reverse everything in the created order.

God made man upright and yet they have sought out many schemes. That's how the preacher puts it in Ecclesiastes. And we will scheme, won't we, to reverse the created order in every possible area of life because we are idolatrous beings.

[14 : 08] We're rebels deep in our hearts. And you see, the greater the gift of God, the greater the blessing is, the nearer that blessing is to God himself, the greater the danger of that idolatrous reversal.

C.S. Lewis is so helpful in that in his chapter in Eros, in the four loves that I've mentioned before. And that is what we have done with marriage and sex all through the history of humanity.

But, of course, very aggressively in the latter part of the 20th century and into our own. It's why the reality that these controversies about sexuality in the mainline churches, about homosexual relationships in particular, is not just about the seventh commandment.

It's about the first commandment. It's all about who are we bowing down to. Are we bowing down to God as Lord or to sexual expression the way we want it as Lord?

It's as simple as that. It's basic. It's fundamental. We need to be clear, I think, how pervasive this reversal really is in society. I want to just, for a moment, chart the shift a little bit in our thinking about sex and in the seepage of that into our thinking in the church.

[15 : 25] First of all, the shift in our society's thinking about marriage and the sexual relationship. At least, I think, until the early post-war years in the latter part of the 20th century, marriage was still viewed by everybody as a public thing.

It was part and parcel of a healthy society. It fitted into a web of family and social relationships. And it was clearly bound up with an understanding of child-rearing within the commitment of a permanent relationship.

That was just a given. And no doubt most people didn't think consciously about their marriage serving God's kingdom, but they certainly did see their marriage as much, much more than just a one-to-one relationship of love.

It was a public thing. It wasn't just private. It was part of a cohesion of community life, society. But that has changed drastically, hasn't it?

This was the 1960s marked the biggest shift, the decade of free love. Of course, the pill was the great agent of sexual liberation, along with the women's lib movement, what we now call feminism.

[16 : 32] We can't go into all of that now, of course, but without doubt, 50 years on, today all the focus on sexual relationship is on just the relationship and the sex, what it offers and what fulfillment it gives and so on.

Procreation is certainly not a defining feature of sexual relationships at all anymore. Nor, I think, is the public good of marriage or marriage as part of a stable interdependency of the family and the community and the wider society.

Sexual relationships in our world have become supremely private, supremely personal. It's nobody's business but mine. We see that, don't we, so often in the public-private divide that people talk about.

What a public figure does in private is entirely up to him. It's nothing to do with anybody else. We have this ridiculous nonsense that a cheating, adulterous MP can be that privately because that's his private life.

And, of course, he can be honest and trustworthy in everything publicly. It's ludicrous. But that's how we think. Do you see how the focus has become so narrowed?

[17 : 43] Not only is God left out of the business of sex and marriage, but everybody else is left out too. It's not the business of family. It's not the business of community. It's not the business of society to interfere.

It's a private matter. It's my business. Everything is about us and our relationships. But, of course, at heart, our focus is even narrower than that.

We're actually utterly self-centered. And the sexual relationship has all become about self-fulfillment. Our relationships, if we're honest, are really all about me, not even just about us.

It's all about my personal needs. It's about my fulfillment. It's about my sense of worth. It's about my sense of identity, letting me be me. It's about doing things my way.

And that is just Romans 1, verse 25, writ large. We are worshiping the created thing, the sexual relationship, in this case, rather than the creator, who gave the gift to bless us as we use it to serve him his way.

[18 : 50] And when we live like that, we have become rebellious idolaters. We're bowing down to these sexual relationships.

And we start to think that they're able to give us all the things that we need, all the things that we want in life, as though sex were somehow our savior. Christopher Ashe says, When all of this has happened to sex, there is no alternative but to deify it.

But sex as a source of fulfillment is sex as savior. That's what the commentator Malcolm Muggeridge so famously captured when he said, Sex is the substitute religion of the 20th century.

The orgasm has replaced the cross as the focus of longing and fulfillment. In another place he says, If God is dead, somebody is going to have to take his place.

It'll be megalomania or erotomania. The drive for power or the drive for pleasure. The clenched fist or the phallus. Hitler or Hugh Hefner, head of the Playboy Empire.

[19 : 57] And that is how our society today thinks about sex and sexual relationships. Think of all the books. Think of all the TV programs. Think of all the videos. All these things aim to improve your sex life everywhere.

Now don't misunderstand. Of course there is a place for that, at least for certain kinds of that. Sex does come naturally to people, but good sex doesn't. And the Bible wants good and godly sexual relationships in marriage.

So of course there is a place for teaching about these things, helping people with these things, especially newlyweds. The church shouldn't be prudish about these things. The Bible is not prudish.

The Bible is very down to earth. In fact, it's very earthy in some places. The place for that intimate instruction is not here in the pulpit, so don't worry, we're not going there today.

There is a place for that. But not in the way our society has deified it. Our society has made sex into our Savior. Bookshops are full of books that deify sex.

[21 : 03] Talk about the mystical, religious aspects of it and so on. Even the agony columns now in broadsheet newspapers are utterly dominated by sexual issues. And of course the pornography industry is the ultimate worship leader of the great God sex.

And the effect of that on marriages and on relationships is enormous, with the expectations that are so manipulated, so heightened, so twisted by the world of cyber sex, that to many people real sex has become dissatisfying and disappointing and drab.

And a huge number of marriage-related problems, probably the majority today are sex-related, and a lot of it is due to that.

Because the sexual relationship is no longer delivering what people expect it to deliver. You see, if sex and if marriage itself is your God, then you must be in for disappointment.

Because it is a dumb idol. It is a created thing. It is not your creator. It cannot save you. No human relationship can deliver what people are looking for a sexual relationship to deliver today.

[22 : 22] Not even a good marriage can deliver your salvation. And that's why it's no surprise, is it, that in a society that thinks sex is savior, our divorce rate is so high.

It's the highest in Europe in this country, in fact. Nearly half of all marriages end in divorce, not to mention a far, far higher breakup for the majority now who never get married in the first place.

And think of the vast trail of disappointment, of hurt, of bitterness that comes from that. And so, you see, the next follow-on is that people have got a sense that the sex God actually doesn't always deliver salvation.

And so there's great fear among people. There's great reluctance to commit in case, well, in case it does all go wrong. And so what rules now in our society is serial monogamy.

The sex, but no commitment. Not until much, much later, when at last, somehow you can be sure that this is the one, that this is your soulmate. And in fact, the evidence is that people who cohabit in that way repeatedly massively increase their risk of marriage breakup when marriage does finally come.

[23 : 35] But ours is a society, isn't it, of commitment later. Marriage later. Children later, if at all. After all those things you want to have and you want to do, those things you want to do for you.

Of course, the tragedy is that when many leave it so late like that, they find that the things they do want, perhaps like a family, are not nearly so easy to come by as perhaps they thought.

Now, we could go on, couldn't we? But it's surely absolutely plain where we are as a society today. The world has reversed God's purpose for marriage as being for God and has turned sex into God.

And yet, of course, it's a dumb idol. People buy down to it. They seek fulfillment from it. Just like the priests of Baal at Carmel, do you remember? And yet, just like then, there was no voice.

No one answered. No one paid attention. And that is the tragedy of a world that has reversed sexist place in life, that has taken the gift of God for God and worshipped it as God, a God that, like all idols, can deliver nothing.

[24 : 46] And yet, like all idols, are also very, very powerful to deceive and to rob and to destroy. And so the sex industry is the world's biggest industry.

It makes huge profits for cynical manipulators, but it brings huge misery for those who are being exploited.

That is our society. What about the church? Well, the truth is that the shift in society has inevitably seeped into the church, sometimes in stark ways, but more often in much more subtle ways.

Isn't it true that many Christians, too, make a sexual relationship in marriage their primary goal in life? It's easy, isn't it, to see the path to real fulfillment, to real significance, to real satisfaction, as being in that dream relationship that you're desperate to have.

And for lots of Christians, even, that becomes an all-consuming thought. It comes to dominate your prayer life, perhaps, if you're single. You make it sound very spiritual. But what you really want is for God to serve your desire for a relationship, not the other way around.

[26 : 06] It can be true if you're married, if your marriage and your children and your family become your idol. And what you start to think is that the church is there and God is there and everybody else is there to serve you and your desires your way, not the other way around.

See, we're very, very affected by our consumerist, self-focused society. We're much more affected by it than we realize. There's so much angst about guidance, especially young Christians.

They're desperate to know who's the right person for me. What's God's will for my relationship? How many times have you heard that asked? And yet, you know, the New Testament is virtually uninterested in such things.

What it's interested in, in terms of determining God's will, is telling you to be holy and to be right and to serve God and his kingdom. This is the will of God, says Paul to the Thessalonians, your holiness.

Rejoice, pray, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do you want to know what God's will for your life is? That's what it is.

[27 : 19] But if you're all taken up with guidance about your relationships and you say to me, what's God's will in this? And I say that to you, you'll be cross with me, won't you? You don't like that.

But that's because we too, even in the church, have so often reversed the place of marriage and the sexual relationship. We too have been guilty of making it into a God, not a means of serving God.

And Jesus says, just as much about marriage and relationships as about anything else, Jesus says, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all you need will be added to you.

But in our hearts, you see, we say, I know what I need, Lord. So give that to me and then I'll seek and serve your kingdom. Isn't that right? And we're wanting God to bow down and serve our relationships, instead of our relationships to bow down and serve God.

And the world's thinking has seeped into our consciousness. We can't help it. We breathe the air of the world we live in. And so we see Christians too.

[28 : 36] Wanting to wait and wait and wait and wait before committing. And we see Christians cycling through partners, anxiously waiting for the perfect one, and increasingly marrying later and later and later, and some being so slow and so unwilling to commit that ultimately they just miss the boat.

And in some ways, Christians are perhaps even in a worse position because added to this worldly fear of commitment, we add to it this crazy, unbiblical view of guidance, as though we expect God to suddenly reveal dramatically his will and point to the person that's for us before anything, so that in advance, before we ever have to make a decision about anything, God has absolutely told us the way the future is going to pan out.

And you see, when you think like that in the world that we live in, for many Christians it leads to fear, it leads to paralysis. And especially Christian young men.

Christian young men have become a generation of ditherers. That is true. Now friends, we've got to recognize this seepage. We've got to understand this wrong thinking, and we have to resist it.

We have to reverse it. And that's my second main point this morning, and it's a passionate plea. The church must reclaim the true place and the true purpose of the sexual relationship, and therefore reclaim a true and a wise path to marriage.

[30 : 12] We read in Colossians chapter 2 what Paul says, As you receive Christ as Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

That's where we begin, he says. And he says, See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and vain deceit. No, we need clear heads and a focus on Christ and his gospel and his kingdom.

That's the starting point for a road to purposeful Christian marriage. So let me just apply some of the Bible's wisdom and instruction very practically to this area of life, because it must inform our thinking, and it must inform our behavior on the road to marriage, just as it does on every other area of life.

So three do's and three don'ts, as you think about this personally. If we're going to reclaim a right and a healthy road to marriage.

First, do be trusting. Trust God, and trust God's revealed purpose for marriage, and trust the Lord Jesus with your personal life.

[31 : 27] Now put simply, that simply means, get on with serving God's kingdom with all your might, and leave the rest to God. It was Adam, that as he lived out his creation purpose, it was then that God gave him the helper that he needed, wasn't it?

And if marriage is for serving God's garden, then let me say, put your boots on and get to work in the garden, and God will bring you the helper that you need.

That's your job, to serve him, to serve his kingdom. And if you in your life need that helper from God, God will arrange it. He will bring that helper to you. You can trust him. Seek first his kingdom, Jesus said, and all these things that he knows you need, will be added to you.

That doesn't necessarily mean, of course, all the things you want. But if we believe Jesus and trust him, it does mean all the things we need. Read Matthew 6, right to the end.

Don't be anxious about your life. That's the refrain. Your heavenly father knows what you need. Trust him. And since the purpose of marriage is serving his kingdom, then it makes sense, doesn't it, that the more you are engaged in serving him, the clearer it will become to you and to others, the kind of helper you do need if you need one.

[32 : 55] And you will very likely find a partner who is also engaged in seeking to serve Christ in that same way. Trust God. Set your goal on serving his kingdom.

And trust that he will add all you need to your life. That's the first thing. Second thing, do be real. A marriage partner, according to the Bible, is to be a helper first and foremost, not a hinderer for your service of God's kingdom.

And there is no middle way, is there? A spouse will either be a helper or a hindrance in your spiritual life. And you must be real about that. Don't fool yourself.

Many a Christian bloke being flattered by a girl and has regretted it. Many a bloke has been led down a silly path by a pretty face and flattering eyes and has looked to regret it.

Don't fool yourself. That's why Paul is very, very plain, isn't it, in 2 Corinthians 6, when he says, Do not, do not be unequally yoked together with an unbeliever.

[34 : 10] Now, that is true in every sphere of life, but it's equally true, isn't it, in the romantic sphere. It's utterly basic to a scriptural view of marriage, and yet it is astonishing how often people deceive themselves and say, well, it'll be different for me.

Watch my lips. It will not be different for you. God is not joking. He's not messing around with you. He's not kidding. He's not playing. He's warning you.

Be real. A partner in marriage that exists for serving the kingdom of God must be a fellow worker who will help your service, not hinder it.

Don't be hitched to a sluggard, says Proverbs, or a fool. Even if they do, profess their faith and tell you it's all right now because they're a Christian. Don't be fooled.

Be real. Don't choose someone who hinders your service or indeed may prove to hinder your salvation. That's what the Bible says.

[35 : 10] Remember, by the way, that in Genesis chapter 2, the woman is not just a helper. We're told she was a suitable helper. She was a good fit. Of course, it's primarily speaking there about the complementary nature of the sexes, that man and women are not the same.

That's the point. They complement one another. That's God's design, which is why same-sex sexual relationships is such a defiance of the created order. But it's also true, isn't it, on an individual level.

Let me state the obvious. A partner must be compatible. Of course, a little incompatibility is the spice of life, as the poet says, but it doesn't mean without limits.

Of course, opposites attract. They often do. You have somebody who's an early bird and somebody who's a late-night person. You have somebody who's always late and somebody who's always early. It's astonishing sometimes how people manage to cope with each other.

But be real. Be real. If you're determined to spend your whole life in pioneer mission on the frontier of North Africa, and the person that you're interested in would never, ever, ever consider leaving Glasgow, well, you need to be sensible, don't you?

[36 : 23] You need to get real. You need to think about it before you get entangled in a situation that's going to cause heartbreak and problem. Don't let yourself crazily fall in love with someone who will never be a helper in your service to Christ.

Is that rocket science? Don't be carried away by silly romanticism. It can so easily obscure harsh reality.

Don't think, oh, just because I'm in love. It changes everything. Love doesn't change everything. Lots of married people fall in love with other people and their spouses.

Happens all the time at their work and in other places. It's just an emotion. It's foolish. It's frivolous. Falling in love like that makes you stupid and irrational.

So you need to listen to other people who are not stupid and irrational and emotionally involved, whose heads are screwed on, whose heads are not up in the clouds like yours is.

[37 : 29] Listen to your friends, especially Christian friends. Listen to your parents. They're not as stupid as you think they are. The whole business, you know, of asking your father's permission to get married is not just a quaint tradition.

It speaks of the fact that marriage is a public thing, that it affects everybody. It affects the whole family. Your family has got a stake in it. Your friends have got a stake in it. The church has got a stake in it.

And often they can see what you cannot see through your misty eyes. That there's a glaring incompatibility and unsuitability that you need to be helped to see.

And real friends will help you see it. Be real. Thirdly, be wise. Be wise about when is the time to be seriously on the road to the commitment of marriage.

Jesus echoes Genesis and talks about a man and a wife, not a boy and a girl. What he's meaning is that there is a certain maturity involved, a readiness to make a serious commitment in life and for life.

[38 : 36] It's a new cleaving that comes with a new stage in life of leaving immaturity, leaving childhood behind. Of course, many factors will influence what that age is for any particular person.

The culture, for one thing, education, a person's temperament, all kinds of things. If you leave school at 16, by 18, you can be well involved in a stable working life, a mature adult.

But if you're still a student at 28 or even 38, you maybe haven't even grown up at all yet. It's just the way things are, isn't it? And in fact, one obvious problem that we face in our society today is that adolescence now seems to extend well into the 30s, especially for some men.

It's actually not funny, is it? It's serious, I think. It's one reason that marriage is being delayed so long and far, far too long in many cases. Men, it's time to put the video games away.

It's time to man up and grow up. God didn't make us to be mummy's boys into our 20s and 30s. There's a time to grow up, be an adult, be responsible, be mature.

[39 : 46] Of course, don't rush into marriage as though suddenly that's going to make you mature and give you clarity and purpose in life if you're not. The answer is get serious about your grown-up life.

Get serious about your service to Christ so that you can enter marriage as a team, so you can be ready to serve as mutual helpers and not handicaps to one another.

Be wise, though. God wants you to grow up and to get on with life. Three do's, now three don'ts from the Bible's view of life.

One, don't be too cautious. Don't be paralyzed. Be real. Don't ignore cautions from others. Be wise. Don't rush immaturity into relationships seeking answers to your problems.

But don't ignore encouragement either. It was God who brought Adam his wife. He was the original matchmaker, and a helping hand from others is not to be despised. I don't mean frivolous matchmaking by fools.

[40 : 46] Of course not. But some people do need a nudge. Some people need a bit of encouragement. Sometimes your friends can see better than you. Sometimes they can see somebody who would be an eminent helper for you.

And again, I think I'm probably speaking to blokes here. Again, they sometimes need a nudge, even a healthy push in the right direction. I needed that myself. I confess. I'm very glad I got it.

One of the elders in the church where I was came to me and said, well, I won't tell you what he said, but it was very strong. And I'm thankful.

Don't be too cautious. Don't be cautious. And don't be paralyzed. Don't be afraid of a nudge or a hint from others. And by the way, you older folk in the fellowship, don't you be too cautious either.

Don't be afraid to give a nudge or a push when it's required. Your pastor is on your side. The Bible tells us, doesn't it, not to be cautious, not to be paralyzed, waiting, waiting, waiting.

[41 : 45] Cast your bread upon the water, says the preacher. Go ahead in faith and in trust. Don't be too cautious. But second, don't be cavalier either.

Don't be so determined to find a partner that you snatch at what God isn't giving. Don't have a cavalier trial and error sort of approach. There's no real difference, I think, between multiply cycling through partners with a sexual relationship and doing the same without one.

It's not any more holy. It can be just more damaging. And men especially, you've got to be careful. Don't be cavalier with a female heart. Don't be a philander.

It's very unimpressive to God. And it's very unimpressive to other people. And if you do make a mistake, and you will make mistakes, then be very slow to make your next foray into the female affections.

Don't be a snatcher. Don't be cavalier. And I'd say to the girls, don't you be chasers either. There's nothing really so frightening to the male of the species than a woman on the hunt.

[42 : 52] Believe me, they will run for their lives. They will. It might work if you do that, or if you're a flirt. It might work. But there's a high chance that it will attract you the wrong kind of man, the sort of shallow person who will end up letting you down very badly.

But all of us, what the Bible calls us to is to go on serving God wholeheartedly. And the rest will fall into place if it's God's way for you.

And it usually will, although not always. Not all will marry. But God does know your needs. And so, thirdly, if you do find yourself drawn to someone, someone perhaps you serve with in church and you begin to form a relationship, let me say this.

Please don't be too conspicuous. There's a seemly and there's a helpful way to behave as a couple, and there's an unseemly and an unhelpful way to behave, both for you and for other people.

Now, of course, we want, I want healthy relationships forming in a church like ours. Praise God they do. Praise God there are many marriages, and it's great to see it.

[44 : 06] But what is not great is if there seems to be an endless churning of relationships, and frivolous relationships, and short-lived relationships that end up with people being hurt, which end up sometimes with people even having to leave the fellowship because they're so bruised at what's happened to them, especially if they see their former boyfriend or girlfriend now very publicly flaunting a new partner in church to everybody else in everybody's faces.

That's not honoring to God, and it's not loving of one another, is it, to behave like that? Don't use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but love, but through love, serve one another.

That's what Paul says. We need to think of God, and we need to think of others in the church. We need to think what they see. We need to think what they'll assume. We need to think what example that we're setting to younger ones, to our teenagers and to outsiders.

We don't want, do we, to portray casual and cavalier attitudes to forming relationships. Far better to be discreet, far better to be not conspicuous.

So that by the time people cotton on to the fact that you are an item, as they say, then you have a stable relationship that is actually going somewhere, not just a flash in the pan that's going to end next week.

[45 : 28] So don't be too cautious. There's no need for paralysis, but don't be cavalier when things start to become together. And when they do, don't be too conspicuous.

And if you're trusting, and if you're wise, and if you're real, then things will fall into place in the right way. The road to marriage is much less about the quest to find the right person than it is about a commitment to doing the right things.

That's what the Bible teaches. In fact, that's the key at every stage. It's the answer to every problem, both before and in marriage itself. Doing the right things God's way.

But lastly, you might just think, well, is there no place for romance? Well, of course there is. Not the kind of frothy, shallow nonsense of the Valentine's Day culture that we live in.

That is all about worshipping relationships and seeking salvation in them. There isn't any place for that in a Christian view of marriage. But real romance, well, of course there is.

[46 : 38] The gospel is the romance which all other true romance reflects. It's the story of love, isn't it, that we're all caught up in. The gospel is the love story, the only one that will deliver and that does deliver forever and ever.

What our human hearts most need and seek. As a Christian, the more you are taken up with the great romance, with love to the Lord Jesus Christ, with joy in extending his family, then you will find others that share that love will become more and more attractive to you and vice versa.

Of course you will. And you'll find that's how the very best form bonds form. With others who share the same joy and the same goal in life that you do, the greatest things.

And romantic love, erotic love that blossoms that way, is always the love that is real and it will last because it's a love that outlasts life.

It's eternal. And God isn't perverse. Don't fear that. It's not a choice between godly marriage and fun marriage. It's not a choice between marriage for love and looks and submitting to God and spending your life with an ogre.

[47 : 59] You can't stand. Don't be silly. God is your heavenly father. He will not give you a snake when you ask for bread. No, no, no, no, no. When you seek his kingdom with all your heart, when you trust him, what you will find is that the helper you need, if indeed you do need a marriage partner, the helper you need will be the lover that you want.

Because your goal will be one. And a marriage that serves Christ and his kingdom is, of all marriages, the most romantic, the most full of joy and gladness and excitement.

So, friends, if we think like that, with biblical categories, with Christian minds, we will reclaim the true place and purpose of marriage with all its joy, and we will find the safe and holy road to marriage.

And we'll find it's a lot less torturous and a lot less troubled than it might otherwise be. But we need one another's help, don't we? Because the world's thinking is so damaged, so damaging.

We need one another. Which is why the apostle says, Let marriage be held in honor among all. Young and old, male and female, married and single.

[49 : 26] Let marriage be held in honor among all. For the glory of God and for the blessing of his church. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, with the deep things of our hearts, we're conscious that we are so easily vulnerable, so easily confused, so easily troubled.

Help us to trust you, to trust your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, that we should not worry and be anxious, but together, one with another, we should be a people seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and knowing that you, our good and loving Heavenly Father, who has promised us his kingdom, will add to us all that we need.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen.