

Boyfriend-Girlfriend Relationships

Gordon Lyons

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Boyfriend-Girlfriend Relationships

“...conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”
(Philippians 1:27a NIV)

“Treat...younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.” (1 Timothy 5:2b
NIV)

Preface

Maintaining Biblical standards in certain areas of everyday Christian life can prove very difficult, but—with God’s grace and a determination to honour the Lord wholeheartedly—it is not impossible. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that many of the Lord’s people do not always desire to follow the precepts or principles of God’s Word. Many others do, but even they find that—at times—they fail to maintain the very principles that are dearest to their heart.

This article has not been written with a view to being critical of people’s faults or failings—for we all have faults, and we all fail to honour the Lord in many ways. It has been written simply as a guideline to those Christians—especially, young believers—who are seeking to know what is right and wrong behaviour during dating and courtship; and to provide a few basic examples.

In an article of this size, it would be impossible to enter into every aspect of this vast and important subject. All that can be attempted here is to outline briefly a few important Scriptural principles, and apply them to some practical situations of courtship. Inevitably, many matters will be omitted. However, some of these matters will be covered in separate articles.

The writer would appeal to his readers to use this article only as a general guide. Ultimately, the reader must act in accordance with his or her own conscience, and in accordance with the express teaching of God’s Word, the Bible. With these provisos, let us consider briefly some of those principles that are laid down for us in, or that we can deduce from, the Word of God.

Finding a Boyfriend or Girlfriend

- What's the right way for a Christian young person to go about finding a boyfriend or girlfriend?
- How do we develop our relationship?
- What can and can't we do during courtship?

We are the Lord's holy people. God has chosen us in Christ Jesus for himself, and it is his intention that we should live to his glory. However, the Lord does not usually intend us to live our lives alone, but in the company of another person: Someone to whom we can be bound closely, lovingly and faithfully, and with whom we can share every aspect of our lives.

For this reason, the Scripture tells us that it is not good for the man to be alone. God intends that we should live for him, and serve him, together with the 'helpmeet' or companion whom he provides for us. (Gen. 2:18,24)

Marriage has been ordained of God to be a holy and binding union between a man and his wife. It is to be a life-long commitment to one person only. (Matt. 19:3-9; 1 Cor. 7:39)

At this point, we should note that the Lord does not necessarily intend everyone to seek marriage. Marriage is the rule. However, although the Scriptures do not normally encourage a single or celibate state, there are some exceptions to this rule: For example, those who sacrifice the duties, responsibilities and privileges of married life in order to devote their lives more completely, and without distractions, to God's service. (Matt. 19:11-12; 1 Cor. 7:32-35)

However, this exception—which applies only to some of God's servants in special circumstances—must never be made the rule for many or all of God's servants. Furthermore, those who seek to serve God while remaining single must have received from the Lord the gift of complete self-control in relation to their natural sexual desires.

For the vast majority of God's people, however, marriage is part of God's plan for our lives. We must be ready and willing, therefore, to assume this responsibility at some time. In the meantime, and assuming that we are gainfully employed, we should be endeavouring to make adequate preparation for the future support of our marriage partner and our children.

We have said that, in seeking marriage, the Lord will provide a partner for us. But in what way does the Lord provide a partner for us? Surely, we must take the initiative, and look for someone for ourselves?

There is nothing wrong in seeking friendship with members of the opposite sex—as long as we never seek to develop a close personal relationship with an unbeliever. This would be contrary to the principle of the unequal yoke. (2 Cor. 6:14)

However, although we should have a number of Christian friends, it is neither necessary nor desirable for us to seek specifically for a future marriage partner. True friendship must come first. Sooner or later, a close relationship will develop naturally; possibly, from among our existing Christian friends. It is just as possible, however, that we could find and develop a relationship with a Christian friend outside our immediate area and circle of friends. Either way, the Lord is able to provide the right person for us.

Is Our Choice God's Choice?

God has already chosen a partner for us. It is only necessary that we be found in the right place, at the right time, in order to meet the person of God's choice. In other words, we

are only required to be where the Lord wants us to be; whether in relation to our church fellowship, employment, home or leisure activities. God will bring us into contact with our future partner—if we are prepared to trust and obey him, totally.

“But,” someone may object, “That’s ridiculous! God expects us to look around for our own partner. The Lord doesn’t bring our partner to us!”

To which I reply, If we cannot trust God in this matter, then we have no reason to trust God at all. If we do not believe that God has arranged a partner for us, in line with his own will and purposes, then we have no right to believe God in anything. God is concerned not only with our salvation. He is concerned with every single aspect of our lives. One of the most important aspects of our lives concerns our personal relationships.

Certainly, we could seek for someone without regard to God’s will and purposes for our lives. But our choice would not be God’s choice. And if we chose someone without regard to God’s will, we would be sinning against the Lord. If, however, we leave the choice to God, then God will surely bless us far beyond our expectations. The Lord who ordained marriage, and who said that it was not good for a man to be alone, will never disappoint those who, with patience, await his choice.

Patiently awaiting God’s choice, however, does not imply disinterest or inactivity. We must not sit back and expect the Lord to deliver our partner to the door! We should be involved in serving the Lord in various ways. Quite possibly, it will be in and through our service—or another similar situation—that the Lord will bring us into contact with the marriage partner of his choice.

As a practical example, consider those missionaries who set out to serve the Lord—without a marriage partner. They had as much need of marriage as almost everyone else. But, by going to some remote land at the command of the Lord, they had cut themselves off from finding a companion—or so it seemed. However, there is no land so distant, remote or unlikely, that the Lord cannot provide a marriage partner. Those who obeyed the Lord’s command—and put their marriage prospects in jeopardy (humanly speaking)—found the partner of God’s choice. Where? Sometimes, in that most unlikely place to which the Lord had called them.

Similarly, if we want to find the boyfriend or girlfriend of God’s choice, we must be in the place where God wants us to be. If we are not, then we cannot expect to find the person of God’s choice.

- Are we in the place of God’s appointing?

Relationships are Built on Mutual Trust and Respect

God has created each one of us with intense emotional and physical needs. The most intimate of these needs can be met fully only within the marriage bond. Seeking to fulfil our natural desires for physical intimacy outside of the marriage bond is, of course, sinful.

A relationship between two people should be founded on the rock-solid foundation of their common faith in—and commitment to—the Lord Jesus Christ, and it should be built upon mutual trust and respect. Love cannot develop in a healthy and honourable way if any of these qualities are missing from the relationship. To put commitment to Christ, or mutual trust and respect, before love or our natural feelings may seem strange. However, personal commitment to Christ and to one another in Christ, and mutual trust and respect, is the basis on which a loving relationship must be founded—not our feelings or emotions alone.

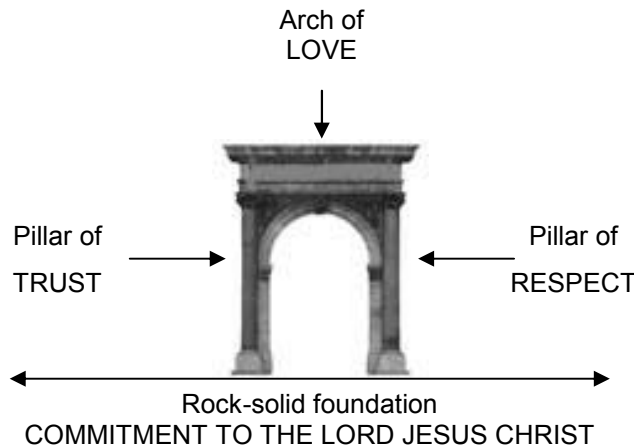


Diagram illustrating the relationship between Love, Trust & Respect

Looking at the diagram above: if we remove either the pillar of Trust or the pillar of Respect, then the arch of Love will collapse.

Again, if the pillars of Trust and Respect are not resting securely on the solid foundation of Christ, then the structure will fail.

So it is with our relationships: Without trust and respect, honourable and true love cannot endure or flourish. Without Christ as our sure foundation, our relationship is built on sinking sand.

Without the solid foundation of wholehearted commitment to the Lord Jesus, and mutual trust and respect, our natural love and affection will soon degenerate into an excessive desire for purely emotional and physical satisfaction. This is why commitment, trust and respect are so important in our relationships. Without these qualities, our relationship will soon become self-centred and feeling-orientated: That is, we will tend to respond only or primarily to our natural impulses, feelings or desires, with little regard to the moral and spiritual principle of restraint. If, however, we respond primarily to our feelings or natural impulses, we will end up acting dishonourably toward our boyfriend or girlfriend, and allowing them to act dishonourably with us.

Impulses, feelings or desires must never be permitted to govern or drive our actions. Rather, our actions must always be restrained and governed by our moral and spiritual principles. And here, of course, we are speaking of the moral and spiritual principles of God's Word.

To do anything that fails to recognise the sanctity and honour of our own and our partner's body, is to sin against the Lord and against our partner.

- Are we treating our boyfriend or girlfriend as one whose body is holy to the Lord?
- If not, what are we doing to God's holy temple (our bodies)?

Do not Lust After her Beauty

We must remember, of course, that we can sin against the Lord in other ways: For example, if a man looks at a woman lustfully, then he has committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matt. 5:28)

The Scripture tells us,

Do not lust in your heart after her beauty... (Prov. 6:25a NIV)

But what exactly does it mean to look at someone lustfully?

It means to admire someone to the point of coveting or wishing to possess that person for oneself: generally, for selfish or impure ends. Looking at someone lustfully invariably involves the powerful inward desire or instinct to share physical intimacy with that person. It also may be defined as the harbouring of impure thoughts toward that person.

These impure thoughts, or the inward desire of the mind for intimacy, need not be considered only in terms of excessive and inappropriate desire for sexual intercourse—although this is included. Lust, however, assumes many other forms. One of these other forms is the inward craving for intimate physical contact. This could involve the lustful desire for mutual sexual gratification, without necessarily extending to full sexual intercourse.

Of course, there is no moral difference between sexual intercourse and sexual gratification short of intercourse. If intercourse before marriage is sinful—and it is—then sexual gratification before marriage is also sinful.

No one is exempt from the temptation to lust. Therefore, we must take every care to avoid harbouring impure thoughts by rejecting them whenever they first enter our minds. This involves the exercise of strict self-control. Also, we must take every care to avoid putting ourselves deliberately into any situation where we know that we will be exposed to this or a similar temptation.

The forms of lust mentioned above—and all forms of sexual impurity—are classed either as adultery, or as adultery of the heart. In God's sight, there is no moral difference between the two. The thought of the mind, and the deed of the body, are both alike a violation of the seventh commandment. (Exodus 20:14; Matt. 5:28)

In the Scriptures, adultery is not confined exclusively to unfaithfulness within the marriage relationship. When used generically, or without the presence of other more specific terms, the expression 'adultery' can refer to all forms of sexual immorality. Thus, in the Ten Commandments, adultery relates to all forms of sexual sin.

In a similar manner, the expression 'fornication' (or sexual immorality) is not confined to the sin of pre-marital (or extra-marital) intercourse—although, of course, these are included. When used generically, the term 'fornication' can apply to all forms of sexual impurity or uncleanness.

Our Body is Not for Sexual Immorality

Concerning sexual immorality, God's Word says:

...The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. (1 Cor. 6:13b NIV)

- Are we keeping our body pure—for the Lord?

The Scripture continues:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? (1 Cor. 6:15a NIV)

- How should we treat the parts of Christ's body?

Again, God's Word says:

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. (1 Cor. 6:18 NIV)

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. (Eph. 5:3 NIV)

Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking... (Eph. 5:4a NIV)

(19) Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own;
(20) you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.
(1 Cor. 6:19-20 NIV)

Our body is the Lord's. It is a vessel cleansed from every defiling impurity, and hallowed unto God. We must keep that vessel pure—sanctified and holy—for the presence of the Lord. In practice, this means that we must not give our body, or any of its parts, to anyone—except in marriage.

Developing Our Relationship

Laying the Right Foundation

Primarily, the period of courtship is a period of getting to know one another intimately—as *people*. Intimate physical knowledge should have no place at any stage of courtship. This privilege is reserved for marriage alone.

Our boyfriend or girlfriend should become to us someone very special, as the relationship between us develops. But this special relationship can only develop properly and honourably when it is built upon a wholehearted commitment to the Lord Jesus, and upon mutual trust and respect. Mutual trust and respect, however, cannot be engendered and developed apart from complete purity and honour—in body and in mind. Our conduct must always be above reproach.

The fundamental basis of our special relationship involves an unreserved commitment to God, and an unwavering determination to remain faithful to the moral and spiritual standards set by God's Word.

God has created us with the gift of sexuality—and we should thank God for this priceless and unifying gift. Without this gift, we could never really become completely united to the person we love: an intimacy of body, mind and soul (the whole personality), which is reserved for the marriage bond alone.

During courtship, the expression of our natural sexual desires must be restrained totally by our moral and spiritual principles. We must always restrain our natural desires—no matter how we feel, or how compelling our natural urges for sexual intimacy. Principles—not feelings or compelling urges—must govern our actions.

This is the basis upon which mutual trust and respect first germinates, and then begins to grow. When we have found the right partner (i.e., the person that God has brought into our lives), then this growth will flourish eventually into love: the pure, deep, satisfying and honourable love associated with trust, respect and the wholehearted desire to honour God in every aspect of our relationship.

‘Love’ that is based on physical attraction alone, is neither real love nor true love. It may be infatuation (intense admiration or extravagant passion), but it is not love. Real or true love concerns itself with the *whole* person—not just with certain features or aspects of his or her person or personality.

Trust and respect—not emotion—is the foundation we must lay, and upon which we must build as we seek to develop our relationship with our boyfriend or our girlfriend. This foundation must apply to all stages of courtship—from our first dates, right through to (and including) the period of engagement.

Engagement involves a solemn pledge to marry, but it affords us absolutely none of the privileges of physical intimacy associated with marriage. These must wait until after lawful marriage has been witnessed and sealed in the sight of God and man.

As Christians, there should be no place in our lives for casual boyfriend-girlfriend relationships. A casual relationship is any kind of relationship that does not involve full commitment to the above principles.

While there should be plenty of scope during courtship for both partners to enjoy some good, clean, healthy fun together, we must never consider the courting relationship itself as a game. It is not. It is a serious matter of getting to know one another, and endeavouring to determine whether our partner is the person that God has chosen for us.

- Are we enjoying to the full our relationship with our boyfriend or girlfriend, and sharing all things together in purity and honour?
- Are we treating courtship seriously—or are we, like children, still playing games?

Infatuation is Not Love

Infatuation (excessively intense feelings of fondness or affection) is frequently associated with the developing stages of true love; especially, among younger people. However, infatuation must not be confused with love itself. Love is very much more than infatuation.

In certain respects, infatuation may be similar to the experience of falling in love—or being wanted and loved dearly—for the very first time. We *feel* the intense emotional experience of being loved. Our own little world is turned upside down and inside out as—sometimes—overwhelming emotions surge relentlessly through our mind, producing ‘strange’ effects on our body. We imagine that love revolves around these powerful emotions and experiences, and that these feelings will last forever. They won’t; or, at least, not with the same intensity.

We must learn, therefore, to recognise the distinction between infatuation and love. Our early feelings of infatuation or of fervent emotion for our partner will probably wane during late courtship, or within a few years of marriage. This stabilising of our relationship is normal; but it should be anticipated and prepared for by both partners.

However, although our initial fervour may well have diminished, the duties and responsibilities of a loving, caring relationship must continue—regardless of how we feel. Love, therefore, must not be based upon our (temporary) feelings of fervent emotion, but upon every feature of our relationship with one another.

But what are the other features of our relationship?

These include all the attributes of our boyfriend or girlfriend's personality: That is, the distinctive characteristics or qualities of that person. Unlike our constantly fluctuating emotional nature, the qualities that make up our character or personality are permanent—or almost permanent.

- How much do we really know about these enduring qualities in our partner's life?
- How much of our own true character is known to our partner?

Do We Share Important Principles and Interests?

- How well do we know our boyfriend or girlfriend as a person?

We may both share the same spiritual values and principles; we may both be committed to following the Lord. But, in and of itself, this does not necessarily mean that we share other important things in common.

It is true that our boyfriend or girlfriend cannot reasonably be expected to share everything in common with us. To a certain extent, his or her views and interests will be complementary to our own. This is usually a countervailing asset. However, we should come to know our partner well enough to realise whether his or her opinions are contradictory to our own in any matter that could be of significant importance. Some matters may interest us greatly, and may be important to us. However, our partner may not consider them as important as we do, and he or she may have little or no interest in them.

How Much do we Really have in Common?

To take a practical example: our partner may have a love for animals, and may wish to keep a pet in our future home. We, however, may not share our partner's love for animals to the same extent, and may be more concerned about making a place for our children. We may feel so strongly on the matter that we are determined never to allow any kind of pet in our future home. Naturally, this should be a matter for discussion and agreement. However, if we both continued to hold uncompromising views on this—and other—matters, where will this lead our relationship with one another? Will not this situation result in unnecessary disagreement, conflict and stress within a future marriage?

This may seem a trifling matter—but it highlights a very important principle:

- How much do we really have in common?

What about work or employment? Are we prepared to allow our future wife to work for a while, before starting to bring up a family? Or do we want to start our family early in the marriage relationship?

If the husband is to be the sole breadwinner, this will obviously place greater constraints on our finances. Our children, as well as our wife, must be adequately provided for (and growing children need food and clothes regularly!) In addition, all the household bills must be met on time, together with bills external to home itself.

- How do we intend to make the necessary provision for our family and our home?
- Does our partner agree substantially with our plans?

Matters such as these should be considered very carefully, and discussed adequately with our partner, before we think about committing ourselves to engagement.

How do We Handle Our Disagreements?

Assuming our relationship is at a more advanced stage, have we reached agreement with our partner on important matters such as work and family? Or are there some areas of potentially serious disagreement in our relationship?

- How do we handle our disagreements?
- Can we disagree without falling out (agreeing to disagree on non-essential issues)?

Of course, there is no point in agreeing to disagree on certain issues, if this means that we're rigidly determined to stick to our own viewpoint—regardless of what our partner may think. A situation of this kind can only create unnecessary tension, and it probably result in future conflict.

- How far are we able and willing to compromise?
- When we fall out with each other, how long does it take us to make up again—fully?
- In the meantime, how much damage has been caused to our relationship by our conflicting views and interests?
- What will be the prospects for marriage with our present partner, if we cannot adequately handle and resolve our disagreements during courtship?

If there are potential areas of major disagreement, or matters that we remain unable to resolve satisfactorily between us, then we must question the wisdom of continuing our present relationship. It's no good finding out after marriage that there were some important practical matters in our relationship, on which we really weren't prepared to agree.

These are just some of the everyday things that we must find out about during courtship. But we can only discover these matters by exploring every avenue of our partner's personality and interests, and by allowing our partner to get to know us just as intimately.

This, however, is something that we must do lovingly, with great discretion, and with thoughtful consideration for our boyfriends or girlfriend's feelings.

But how do we go about finding out these things? What are the basic principles?

Getting to Know About One Another

How do we get to know about all the important issues in one another's lives?

By spending time talking together about all our moral and spiritual principles or standards; by discussing all our hopes for the future, and by making known to each other our principal aims or objectives in life. We must take time also to talk together about our interests and concerns, and about our likes and dislikes.

Regarding dislikes, we should be careful to note and to avoid anything that upsets or distresses our partner.

Careful attention to small matters, as well as to larger issues, is important to the success of our relationship.

While we are becoming intimately acquainted with one another, we must—above all—learn to listen. We must keep quiet sometimes, and let our partner open up to us. This will never happen, however, if we can't learn to keep quiet at times, and to listen carefully—without needless interruption—to what our boyfriend or girlfriend has to say. At these

times, we should interrupt only in order to seek clarification of an important issue. Once the matter has been clarified, we must allow our partner to continue.

- Those who can only talk, will never learn much of value about their partner.
- Similarly, those who can scarcely talk at all, will equally never learn.

Two-way communication is essential to the development of any relationship.

A Time and A Place

“But we need time and opportunity to become intimately acquainted with one another.”

Yes. And we must make time and take the opportunity. Assuming we have reached the stage of maintaining a steady relationship with our partner, we must arrange time together regularly when we can enjoy each other’s company. During these occasions, we should take time to discuss some of the many important issues that must be dealt with during courtship.

Naturally, we should be doing this only under the right conditions. For instance, we should not attempt to discuss important matters, if our partner is feeling seriously under the weather, or is particularly depressed or worried about something.

On these occasions, we should concentrate on trying to raise our partner’s spirits, or to understand his or her problems. Our first concern should always be for our partner; for our partner’s welfare, or for the welfare of his or her family and close friends.

Again, it is often much easier to talk openly and at length in appropriate surroundings. Where finances permit, we should invite our partner out for a meal, or to some special event that will afford opportunity both for relaxation and enjoyment, and for some serious discussion. When this is impracticable, we should nevertheless find some quiet spot—some mutually favourite retreat—where we can discuss these matters at length, and in the presence of the Lord.

Generally, we will spend only a few years (more or less) getting to know one another intimately as people, prior to marriage. Yet, this period must rank as one of the most important periods of our lives. For, in these few years, we will make a decision—one way or another—that will affect us for the rest of our lives.

After marriage, there can be no change of mind. Whether we have made the right choice or the wrong one, marriage commits us to our chosen partner for life.

This is a very serious matter, and this is why the courting relationship must be taken seriously.

A Matter of Prayer

How much time do we spend in prayer—seeking to know God’s will about our partner?

It has been taken for granted that—early in the relationship—we will have introduced our boyfriend or girlfriend to our parents, seeking their approval and blessing, and listening to their advice.

If it’s important to seek our parent’s approval, how much more important must it be to seek the approval and guidance of our Father in heaven?

- How can we expect to know our heavenly Father’s will, if we have not made our relationship a matter of prayer?

Commitment to courtship must be preceded and accompanied by commitment to prayer: specific, regular, and earnest prayer regarding every aspect of our developing relationship.

Discerning God's Choice

Assuming that we have made our relationship a matter of consistent and earnest prayer, what kind of qualities should we be looking for in our partner? What kind of guidelines should we follow in trying to discern whether our boyfriend or girlfriend is the partner of God's choice for us?

Some basic principles have been set out already in the preceding pages of this article. The fundamental principle must be an unreserved commitment to God, and an unwavering commitment to uphold faithfully the same moral and spiritual values—both in courtship and in marriage. Both partners must share this fundamental principle of commitment. All other principles and commitments are subordinate to these.

We will now mention a few more points, and then we will apply some of the main principles already described or alluded to.

In seeking to determine God's choice of partner for us, we must realise that it would be extremely difficult to find someone who meets or matches all our expectations, and fulfils all our hopes and desires. This does sometimes happen—but it cannot be guaranteed.

The Lord knows better than we do. He knows our specific needs, aims, and aspirations. He knows every distinctive feature of our complex personality. Knowing us as he does, the Lord will often give us someone, who—in respect of certain personality traits—is different from us: someone who is able to complement our contribution to the relationship; someone who is able to help stabilise our biases, and restrict our excesses. This is the principle of compatibility—the provision of a suitable companion or 'helpmeet'.

Character Mirrors the Man or Woman

With the foregoing principle of compatibility in mind—and realising that neither we nor our partner can expect to find someone who is perfect—what kind of things should we be looking for in our partner?

- To begin with, what kind of person is our boyfriend or girlfriend?
- What are the distinctive hallmarks of his or her personality?

Is our partner someone who is genuinely concerned for us, and who shows this concern by his or her actions? Or does our partner—by their actions—show that their principal concern is not for us as a person, but only for the measure of emotional support or satisfaction that we can provide? In other words, is our boyfriend or girlfriend taking an interest in us only (or chiefly) because we are able to meet some of his or her emotional or physical needs?

On the other hand, is our partner someone whose first concern is to uphold the Biblical principles of consideration and restraint? Is he or she someone who is genuinely interested in us as a person, and who endeavours to show his or her affection lovingly—but with moderation and in complete honour?

The manner in which our partner behaves toward us is an indication of the kind of person he or she really is. Our partner's conduct—and our own—is a hallmark of our true character.

Committed to Courtship with Honour

The kind of person we should be looking for, therefore, is someone who knows how to restrain his or her natural desires and emotions, however difficult this may be. This means someone who can express his or her affection toward us warmly and lovingly—but with due moderation and without selfish intent.

One of the chief aims that we should be looking for in our partner (and, of course, endeavouring to maintain in our own lives), is a commitment to a truly God-glorifying courting relationship: A relationship that is founded solidly on trust, respect, honour, kindness, consideration, absolute self-control or restraint, and purity of conduct.

For a Christian, these are the first principles of conduct during courtship.

When we have found a boyfriend or girlfriend with these aims in mind, then we are on the right track. This partner may not prove to be the ultimate choice—but we are heading in the right direction.

Whether or not this partner proves to be God's choice for us, our conduct toward him or her should be above reproach. If this particular relationship should be discontinued, we should still be able to maintain this person's complete confidence in us as a friend—a friend who will always be worthy of total trust and respect.

Showing Kindness and Consideration

- What kind of things should we do for our boyfriend or girlfriend?

We should show our partner how much we care—practically. Perhaps we cannot afford to spend too much: but even little kindnesses go a long way. We mustn't forget simple—but important—things, like personal and family birthdays and other special events. Where possible, we should take our partner out on such occasions.

During periods of illness, we should not forget to visit our boyfriend or girlfriend; or, at least, to send them a card; and to speak to them—or to their parents—on the phone. Similarly, if any member of our partner's family is ill, we should remember them and ask our partner about their welfare. Every little courtesy counts.

- What kind of things give our partner special pleasure?
- What kind of small gift would he or she appreciate from us?

We should think about all those things that are pleasing to our boyfriend or girlfriend, and we should show them some practical tokens of our affection. We don't need to wait until it's a special occasion such as their birthday. These are the kind of things that we can and should do regularly—at least in a small way.

- What kind of places are of particular interest to our partner?
- Where would he or she like to be taken?

These are just a few suggestions and examples of the practical kindnesses and considerations that we can show toward our partner. There are a host of others. Our main concern should be to do all that we can to please our boyfriend or girlfriend—not ourselves. Naturally, this concern should be mutual.

Memories to Treasure

Cherished memories are founded on the happiest moments of our lives—moments that can never truly be repeated. Are we providing our partner with memories to treasure—truly happy memories of the times that we spent together during courtship?

Expressing Affection

In a close relationship, expressions of tenderness and affection are completely natural. However, even these most natural and binding of emotions must always be moderated by the Biblical principles of consideration—the opposite of selfishness—and restraint.

We should share our affections, of course, with someone whom we truly love. But this person must only be someone to whom we are fully committed in a God-honouring relationship. Not to show affection under these circumstances would be grossly unkind and unnatural. In expressing these natural emotions, however, we must know where to draw the line: We must always be in a position to exercise total self-control.

- Is our relationship with our boyfriend or girlfriend fully honouring to God, to our partner, and to our respective parents?
- If we don't yet have a committed partner, how do we show friendship in a way that honours God fully?
- What's the difference between a friendship and a relationship?

Right and Wrong Conduct During Courtship

Courtship is a Relationship Between Two Special Friends

- How should we conduct ourselves toward our boyfriend or girlfriend?

Throughout our courtship, we should remember that our partner is a brother or sister in the Lord.

We should conduct ourselves always as toward a brother or sister in Christ, whom we care about, and perhaps will come to love very deeply. If there are things that we would not do with a beloved brother or sister, then we must not do them with our boyfriend or girlfriend. Similarly, when alone with our partner, we must never do anything in secret that would embarrass or shame us in public.

Granted, the brother-sister relationship is not in all respects identical to the boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. Nevertheless, we must remember that—like ourselves—our partner is someone who is holy to the Lord. Also, he or she is someone's son or daughter. If we offend against our partner, we offend also against God and against our partner's parents or guardians.

Although courtship is a unique and very special relationship, it is still a relationship between two very close friends. This, however, is not the same kind of relationship that exists between a husband and his wife—although of course the bond of inseparable love and friendship forms an essential element of their relationship. By marriage, a husband and wife have become one (flesh) in the sight of God; and, by marriage, each partner is entitled to the full rights and privileges of sexual intimacy and conjugal union. A courting couple, however, are still two separate people. Until the day that they are legally married, they are not entitled to assume any of the rights and privileges of the marriage relationship.

Marriage Privileges are Not for Courtship

The privileges and responsibilities of marriage must wait until after lawful marriage has taken place. Then, in the sight of God, we are required to assume our full marital duties and responsibilities. Then, and then alone, are we free to engage in, and enjoy, the full privileges of the marriage relationship.

In many respects, the marriage relationship is very different from the courting relationship. In marriage, God requires us to meet all our partner's legitimate needs: emotionally, physically, and of course materially. In marriage, we are united to one another as one person in the Lord; and the Lord requires us to fulfil every marital duty and obligation on a regular basis.

This means that we must take the time to be a loving and caring companion to our marriage partner, and to make proper provision for his or her material needs; and, later, for the needs of our children. It also means that we must meet one another's emotional and sexual needs: ensuring that our partner—not only ourselves—achieves full emotional and physical satisfaction regularly. (1 Cor. 7:1-5)

However, these vitally important and intimate privileges, duties and responsibilities apply only to the marriage relationship—never to courtship. To apply them to courtship would be to defile and dishonour our partner. This would be a gross and wilful violation of our partner's chastity, dignity and honour, and a sin against the Lord.

Dealing with Natural Desires During Courtship

Our natural desires for emotional and physical intimacy are God-given. However, we are fully responsible to God for keeping these desires subject to God's commands, and to the moral and spiritual principles of God's Word. We must never allow our feelings or our natural sex drives to govern our actions. In the area of boyfriend-girlfriend relationships especially, we must always strictly deny free or uncontrolled expression to our feelings or impulses.

"But", someone may say, "Surely, we should be free to fulfil our natural desires to some extent—so long as we don't go too far. Surely, we can show our affection for our boyfriend or girlfriend by allowing them to become physically intimate with us. After all, this is natural. It feels right—so it must be right."

This is an area that many young people especially—including young Christians—find hardest to come to terms with. For this reason, we will look at this aspect of the boyfriend-girlfriend relationship more closely, in the light of God's Word.

Something Natural can Still be Sinful.

The desire for physical intimacy (i.e., intimate sexual contact) is indeed completely natural. But to seek to express that desire physically, outside of marriage, is absolutely wrong. God demands total purity or chastity before marriage. While we are courting, therefore, we must never give way to our natural desires for sexual intimacy: not under any circumstances.

Our relationship with our boyfriend or girlfriend must be built upon trust and respect—not upon our powerful feelings or desires. We must never allow ourselves to do something simply because it feels natural. Something that feels perfectly natural can still be sinful.

Assuming we are developing an ongoing relationship with a Christian partner—but not otherwise—we can show natural emotions such as tenderness or affection toward that person: as long as our intentions and our actions are always honouring to God.

If, however, we are beginning to lose total self-control, or if we are doing anything with the deliberate intention of causing or maintaining sexual arousal—either in ourselves or in our partner—then we are in great danger of going too far.

- How far can we safely go?
- How far can we pull the trigger on a gun, before we fire the bullet?

We must never start what may become impossible to stop.

Who Will Cast the First Stone?

These are just a few of the practical matters relating to courtship where the exercise of self-control is essential. Self-control, however, must not be construed to mean that we cannot show any measure of love or affection toward a person whom we are courting in a God-honouring relationship. Restraint taken to this extreme would be most unnatural and unkind, if not cruel.

- However, regarding those who have broken God's bounds, what shall we say?
- Is any one of us without sin?
- Who among us, therefore, shall be the first to cast a stone?

It's Too Late to Tell Me Now!

"All right," someone may say, "I can see now that we mustn't give way to our natural desires for physical intimacy before marriage. But that presents me and my partner with problems—for we *have* given way. We used to think that it was alright to do some of the things you've been talking about. In fact, we've been doing them regularly—and we're Christians. What should we do now?"

Each of you must acknowledge that you have sinned against the Lord, against each other, and against your parents. You must confess your sin to God. If you are prepared to seek his forgiveness with all your heart, God will surely forgive you and will restore you both to full fellowship with himself and with his Son (1 John 1:9)

Confess to Each Other

When each of you have acknowledged and confessed your sin to God, you must also acknowledge and confess your sin to each other. You must tell your partner that you were wrong to treat him or her in this way, and ask your partner to forgive you. And, of course, you must never again take advantage of your girlfriend or boyfriend, or anyone else, or permit them to take advantage of you.

But My Sin is More Serious

"But," someone else may say, "My sins are more serious than those you have just mentioned. Will God forgive me?"

Yes. Provided you are truly repentant and willing to forsake your sin, God will forgive you and cleanse you from all unrighteousness. Although you have disobeyed his command and have sorely grieved his Holy Spirit, the Lord still loves you. Even although you have sinned against God and against the temple of the Holy Spirit (i.e., your own and your partner's body), the Lord will still accept, forgive and cleanse you. For you are still your heavenly Father's child—and he will never disown you. (Psalm 94:14). Nevertheless, you must not only confess your sin, but also renounce it.

Cleanse Me, Lord!

What should you say to God?

Say with the Psalmist,

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness...
Blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin...

Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy
sight... Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I
shall be whiter than snow.”

(Psalm 51:1-4,7 passim)

God's Promise

Now listen to the following assurances of forgiveness and cleansing: and remember that these verses were written for backsliding believers—not for unbelievers:

(18) "Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. (Isaiah 1:18 NIV)

(7b) ...the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin... (9) If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:7b,9 NIV)

When Jesus died for our sins, he died for *all* our sins—past, present and future. Since Christ has made a full atonement, we receive full forgiveness and cleansing immediately we repent, confess, and forsake our sin.

Our Responsibility

However, although God will forgive us and restore us to fellowship with himself, we are still responsible to our partner for the consequences of our actions.

- What does the Lord require of us in this respect?

Again, the fact that God will forgive even the most serious offences, must never be taken as a license for sin or reason for sinning. Those who continue to sin wilfully and persistently are proving by their actions that they do not belong to Christ. (2 Tim. 2:19; 1 John 3:6,9)

This is God's Standard

These, then, are some of the general principles of Biblical morality, and this is the standard that the Lord requires of all his redeemed and holy people. It is an extremely high standard. It is the very opposite of the world's standards—and even of the standards of some professing Christians. But this is God's standard, as revealed to us by the precepts and principles of his Word, the Bible.

The Intimacy of True Friendship

During courtship, our personal friendship with one another is the one and only area in which we must seek to become intimately or closely acquainted. We must talk, and we must listen. In every respect, we must get to know our boyfriend or girlfriend *as a person*: a person whom we really care about very deeply, and whom we would never abuse, defile or dishonour.

This special relationship must be allowed to grow, from the earliest stage of courtship right through to the point where we both know that we are ready for the pledge of engagement. By this time, we should be making serious preparation for the life-long commitments, responsibilities and privileges of married life.

This is the line that we must seek to pursue and develop fully in our relationship: Trust and respect. Can our partner trust us completely? Do we give him or her every reason to respect us as a man or woman of God?—someone who experiences every natural and God-given emotional and sexual desire, but who will never take advantage?

No Guidance without Commitment

Finally:

- Are we submitting our relationship to God?
- Or are we pursuing our relationship with little regard to God's will for our lives?

If God is not at the very heart of our relationships, then we have left God out of our lives. And if we have left God out of this most important part of our lives, then we are not totally committed to the Lord. And until we become totally committed to God and to his Son, we can't expect to experience the fullness of God's blessings on our lives, or his help and guidance in all the important issues of our lives—including that of finding the partner of his choice.

- Do we really want to experience God's blessing and guidance in our relationships?

Then, we must commit ourselves and our ways completely to him, that he may direct our steps and lead us in the way that he would have us to go, and to the person whom he had destined as our life-partner.

Then, we can thank and praise him for all his goodness to us, and for all his grace and mercy bestowed upon our lives, and ultimately upon the lives of the family that he gives us or entrusts to our care.