

Pre-Engagement

5 Questions to Ask Yourselfes

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Do you remember the Fram oil filter commercial on TV a few years back? The mechanic stands between two cars. One car is in for an oil change and routine maintenance; the other is a smoking wreck with a blown engine. "There's the easy way and the hard way to keep your car working," says the mechanic. "You can pay me now . . . or you can pay me later." The cost to you now is only the cost of a filter. The cost later is a whole lot more: a complete engine overhaul because of your lack of preventive maintenance.

When you are thinking about getting married, you ought to approach it with the same wisdom and foresight as the man who was wise enough to replace his oil filter!

That doesn't mean there is no place for romance and a special "click" between two people. But in actually choosing to get married there are a number of basic questions that you should ask first. There is "preventive maintenance" that can keep you from coming in with a "blown engine" later. After all, only if the

engine is running smoothly can you enjoy the wind in your hair!

We will give you and your potential fiancé(e) five questions you can ask yourselves and discuss together. Answering these will help you decide on solid grounds, "Should we get married?" We are convinced that the time to ask yourselves some serious questions is *before* you ask that most serious question, "Will you marry me?" Answering these questions now, before you make the commitment, can prevent the pain of major repair work later.

1. Are You Both Christians?

Marriage is a "covenant of companionship." Two people pull together in the same harness. If two people have God first in their lives, they are able to answer with confidence, "Yes, we both know Jesus as our Savior and follow him as our Lord."

Under Christ's lordship you will be able to face with confidence whatever comes your way. Have you believed in Jesus, the unique Son of God the Father, who died in your place, who was raised from the dead to give you the Holy Spirit and the power of a new life, and who will return to give you an immortal life with him?

Being a Christian means that these truths shine in your heart so that you know God and receive his love. Being a Christian is more than a verbal profession of faith in Jesus Christ. It is a way of life. It means in practice that you love and rely on Jesus more than on your spouse. Are you *living* as a Christian? Or are you making marriage more important than Jesus? Ask—for yourself and for your prospective spouse—“Is Jesus really my Lord?” Is he your number-one priority? The master you listen to? The one you trust more than anything or anyone else?

There are at least four ways in which Jesus’ lordship can be compromised when it comes to deciding whether or not to get married.

First, are you looking to marriage to make you happy or complete, to give you identity or purpose? When this happens, Christ is no longer your Lord in a practical way.

Marriage is a wonderful gift from God, but it cannot take God’s place. Do you think getting married will provide meaning in your life? Direction? Security? Self-respect? Do you hope marriage will remove a sense of despair, inadequacy, failure, bitterness, or isolation? Do you say to yourself, “If only I could find a husband,

then I'd be happy," or "I can finally find love, acceptance, and security if I get married," or "My life is a failure unless I get married"? If so, you are asking too much of marriage.

People often come to marriage with such unrealistic expectations. Marriage will shape and affect your life in many ways, but do not expect marriage to do what only Jesus can do. Unrealistic and distorted views of marriage will lead to disappointment, frustration, anger, and despair when your partner lets you down and proves to have "feet of clay."

Do you think that marriage will be your source of joy and happiness? Is it going to make your life "come together"? There is no question that marriage is a blessing. It is the richest and closest human relationship we can enjoy. In a good marriage there is the potential to receive many good things: intimate friendship, encouragement, sexual joy, the satisfaction of working in partnership, children, and the freedom to be yourself that comes when you are fully known *and* fully accepted by someone.

But your spouse will not solve your personal problems or fulfill all your desires. Marriage must first be a place where you are committed to learn how to *give* blessing, even when the going is tough. If you build your life on the promises

and gifts of God in Jesus Christ, you will be able not only to weather storms but to grow through the storms into greater maturity and love.

Be honest with yourself. Deep down, are you looking to marriage for what you hope to get from it?

Or are you aware of what you must give, because you have already gotten from God what you really need? “In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12). Of course, you want the blessings of a good marriage, but do you want even more to build your own life on Jesus, and then give those blessings to your spouse? This way of life is the only “house built on a rock,” able to keep standing when disappointments come. The traditional vows express this well: “For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.”

Second, are you thinking of marrying a non-Christian?

The Bible clearly teaches that Christians should not be “unequally yoked” (2 Cor. 6:14–16 KJV).

We have met people who waffle at this point. They try to excuse going against Jesus’

lordship, which raises real questions about their own commitment to Christ. The black-and-white view of 2 Corinthians 6:14–16—righteousness and wickedness, light and dark, Christ and the devil, belief and unbelief, God and idolatry—is rather hard to miss!

If you choose to marry against Christ, then romance, infatuation, your desires for marriage, or your fears of not being married have taken control of your life. That is idolatry. The professing Christian is actually being tempted to choose the “dark” side of 2 Corinthians 6. You think that what is actually worst for you will be best.

A more subtle version of this problem occurs when you want to marry someone whose profession of faith is suspect. We have often encountered the situation where a man who does not love Christ wants to marry a woman who is a Christian. In the course of their relationship, he finds that she will only marry another Christian, so he thinks, “Fine, I can go along with you and join your church.”

What is happening here? His ulterior motive is to win the girl, not to give his life to the Lord. Once again, the couple will be unequally yoked. You must establish as a reality that Jesus Christ is more important than either marriage

or the other person. Far from hindering your joy in life, this will lead you to greater joy and spare you much pain.

Third, does either of you have complicating entanglements from past marriages or relationships?

We live in a society of “easy come, easy go.” Marriage, sex, and children are not viewed with the sanctity with which the Lord Jesus views them. If Christ is the Lord of your life, you need to determine, according to his Word, whether he says you are free to marry or remarry now.

There are “legal” divorces that Jesus views as illegitimate (Matt. 19:1–9). There are times when the Lord commands us to continue to pursue reconciliation rather than remarry (1 Cor. 7:10–11). There are also situations where the marriage is viewed by God as broken, and a person is free to consider remarrying (Matt. 5:31–32; Rom. 7:2–3; 1 Cor. 7:12–16, 39). All the ins and outs of these questions go beyond the scope of our discussion here. But if you have prior entanglements (a prior marriage, children out of wedlock, etc.) you must think through the implications of what the Lord says. Seek pastoral counsel from others who will take the biblical passages seriously. Ideally,

the church should make a declaration that a person is or is not free to remarry.

Fourth, has God given you the gift of singleness?

God sometimes calls people to a fruitful life of ministry as a single person. This possibility is discussed by two very well known singles, Jesus and Paul! (See Matt. 19:11–12; 1 Cor. 7:1–9, 17–40.)

Unmarried persons can devote themselves to the affairs of the kingdom of God without the responsibilities to a husband or wife and children. Marriage has a cost: “Those who marry will face many troubles in this life,” as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7:28.

A single person, using his or her singleness well, has a flexibility and freedom to do things a married person cannot consider. Remember, for over a thousand years the “ideal” Christian was unmarried! Celibacy was perhaps overvalued in the medieval church, to the detriment of marriage. But in our society the church usually goes to the opposite extreme. Some of the most fruitful ministries in the contemporary church are based on the freedom that singleness gives.

In our own local church, we see singles uniquely able to meet difficult counseling

needs, to get involved with teenagers, to give time to the poor or to refugees, to help others with moving or house painting or child care. An unmarried person can have the time to volunteer in a local hospital or nursing home or to get involved in political activity. Unmarried people with good jobs are free of many financial pressures that families feel, and they are freed for generosity. One single person we know has even set up a small foundation to give away a large percentage of his salary.

It may well be that you have the gift of marriage. In this case you will thrive best by seeking to establish a family. But take time to think whether you may have the gift of singleness. What are your ministry gifts and opportunities? How strong is your sexual drive, and how well do you have it under control? How important are children to you and to what you do best? What are the advantages, as well as disadvantages, of remaining unmarried? What would be some of the "costs," as well as benefits, of getting married?

Marriage is a great gift. But it is not the greatest gift, nor does it provide the deepest and surest joys. The greatest gift is Jesus. So make sure that he is first in both of your lives. With him as the foundation, you will enjoy

building a relationship of enduring love with your brother or sister in the Lord.

For Discussion

1. Jesus Christ is called “Savior” and “Lord.” What do these mean in your life?
2. How do you pray about marriage? Is it “Lord, give me a spouse and then I’ll be happy”? Or is it “Lord, help me to be a better person, more worth marrying”?
3. Are you pretending to be a Christian in order to get a husband or wife?
4. Have you made a public profession of faith in a Bible-believing church?
5. Are you both free of prior entanglements from past marriages or relationships?
6. Does either of you have the gift of singleness? Would marriage help or hinder your usefulness to the Lord?

2. Do You Have a Track Record of Solving Problems Biblically?

Problems come up in every relationship. How do you handle them? Because we are all sinners with problems, none of us has a perfect track record here. If you are honest, you will likely answer “Sometimes” or “No” to this question. But

the key is not perfection. Rather, is your “no” becoming “sometimes” and is your “sometimes” becoming “more times”? Is there a growing “yes”? The focus is on your maturity. The question of your maturity for marriage has three parts:

1. Do you *know* how to solve problems biblically?
2. Do you *do* it?
3. If not, where do you need to *change* and grow?

In Matthew 7:24–27 Jesus says, “Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.” Jesus speaks of knowing his words, the Bible. But that, of course, is not enough. He speaks of putting them into practice. Problems will come, but if you learn to face them his way, he promises you will stand.

First, do you know how to solve problems biblically?

A pre-engaged couple can’t anticipate every problem, of course. But do you have a

general awareness of how the Bible speaks practically to the major areas of life: commitment, communication, forgiving each other, facing adversity, sexual relations, child-rearing, finances, etc.? The Bible *does* speak to these things! You ought to know something about what it says and be willing to learn more.

A Christian couple who had been married for fifteen years came in for counseling because of severe marital problems. After several sessions, the wife sheepishly confessed that she had never known that the Bible said she should make her husband a priority! Many years of pain, loneliness, and misunderstanding could have been prevented if they had started their marriage the Lord's way.

Second, do you do what the Bible says?

This takes you out of the realm of theory and makes you look at what you really do! What is your usual pattern of addressing problems? Failure to solve problems biblically shows up in lots of obvious ways. Are you a bully? Do you manipulate? Do you avoid facing problems? Do you let things slide until you forget about them? Do you whitewash matters by pretending everything is okay? Do you store up resentments? Are you a sulker? Do you blame-shift