

“Making Preparation For Marriage”
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Several years ago, USA Today carried an article from Men’s Health magazine profiling the average American male. The article was based upon “... reports, surveys, and reams of marketing data...” The report was not encouraging. The study revealed that the average American man:

- ◆ Loses his virginity at 17
- ◆ Marries at 26
- ◆ Can run a mile, but it takes him 12 minutes
- ◆ Can do only 30 – 33 ½ sit-ups per minute
- ◆ Sleeps 7 ½ hours a night
- ◆ Buys frozen pizza 4 times a month
- ◆ Can bench press only 88% of his body weight
- ◆ Has 70 – 80 pounds of muscle
- ◆ Watches TV about 28 hours per week
- ◆ Saves less than \$3,000 per year for retirement
- ◆ Earns an annual salary of \$29,533
- ◆ Is 5’9” tall and weighs 172 pounds
- ◆ Will have sex with 5 – 10 partners during his lifetime
- ◆ Will consume 11 beers in a 7-day period

Given this dismal portrait I am not surprised fewer and fewer women are marrying. We should probably be amazed that they are even marrying at all. This guy is not the kind of guy God intended a man to be. He is absolutely not the guy we discover in the Song of Solomon. He is not the guy with whom most gals would want to spend a lifetime.

When it comes to making preparation for marriage, it is imperative that we gather the facts and that we know as much about our potential mate as possible. We need to know the good and the bad. No question is out of bounds or off limits. If our potential husband or wife holds back information and becomes secretive about various aspects of their life, warning bells should start ringing immediately.

I believe there are several crucial questions God would say we should consider before saying “I do.” These questions are simple but probing, and they will assist us to better understand our future mate and make wise preparation for marriage.

Question #1: Are they transparent in their actions? 2:8-9

The scene has shifted from the city and the palace back to the country and Shulamith’s home. The wedding day of the couple in love is just a few days away. Still, every word and every action should be carefully weighed right up until the time of the ceremony. One cannot have too much information when it comes to this momentous decision. I believe the most important decision a person will ever make is whether or not they will trust Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. I believe the second most important decision is who you will marry. It is possible to

have too little information before marriage and the results are often tragic. Shulamith is a wise woman. She is a student of Solomon. She watches every move he makes. Is he the real deal? Is it authentic? Is it apparent what are his true intentions? What were the clues she gathered?

1. Watch their actions 2:8-9

It is a truism: “actions speak louder than words.” When Solomon acted, Shulamith watched, and she liked what she saw. Five times in verses 8-17 she calls Solomon “my lover.” Both words are important. He is MY lover. He is my LOVER. A tender love affair has been growing for some time. Everything seems to be falling into place. The hearts of two lovers are being knit together. Does Shulamith find Solomon’s actions to be in concert with what her heart is telling her? Indeed she does. She hears his voice calling out to her as he comes for her. She compliments his agility (“leaping” and skipping) and his attractiveness (“like a gazelle or a young stag”). His advance is a clear indication of his desire for her, and only her. He is enthusiastic. He is above board and open about his love for his lady. He is not ashamed to be public about his affection. He makes this clear as he comes up to the wall of the home.

2. Watch their eyes 2:9

As we noted earlier, “eyes are windows into the soul.” Solomon looks and gazes through the windows and lattice of the house. His eyes speak, and they speak loudly. They also make clear his desire for her. He wants her, but he approaches her with honor and respect. He comes close, with loving, penetrating glances, but there is still a distance he will maintain until they unite their lives in marriage. She is more than a sex toy he longs to play with. She is a wonderful lady deserving of his best behavior, both now and later. His present actions are quite likely an indication of his future behavior as well. She is watching his every move.

Several years ago I was scheduled to do a Family Life Conference in another state. A week or so before I was to go, I received an anonymous card in the mail from a woman with a broken heart. Listen to what she wrote.

Dear Dr. Akin,

I hope you receive my card before the Marriage Conference ... I recently married a member of [our] church (he will be attending your seminar). This past Valentine’s Day he did not acknowledge the romantic holiday and I was very hurt. I watched as my co-workers received flowers. To make things worse he joked about it in front of one of my friends. My Mom told me I should have known what to expect since he never gave me flowers while we were dating. This may sound selfish and petty on my part. I am just so discouraged! After I come home from my job I do all the housework and cooking and shopping. I wouldn’t mind so much if he would just occasionally show his appreciation. The only time he has ever given me a gift is on my birthday and Christmas. It would mean so much to me if just once he would give me something just because he loves me. I exercise and try to look nice. I iron all his clothes and cook his favorite meals. He has thousands of dollars to invest in the Stock Market but he has never spent one dollar on a romantic gift for me. I know flowers will eventually wilt but they are so beautiful. I’m afraid my love will eventually wilt. Will you pray for me?

Wow. What a terrible situation. The husband probably loves his wife but he has no clue how to show it. In fact, it appears he never has. He was insensitive before they married and he is insensitive after they married. This lady should have seen it coming shouldn't she? We can't criticize the man for not being transparent. What she saw is what she got. Transparency you see is a two-way street. What are they showing? What are you seeing? We must work at full disclosure on one end and honest evaluation on the other.

Question #2: Are they tender with their words? 2:10-14

USA Today on March 30, 2000 reported on a study that found how we talk, even more than what we say, can predict whether a marriage will succeed or fail.

“How newlyweds talk to each other, more than what they actually say, can predict which couples will divorce with 87% accuracy, new government-sponsored research says.

The results of the 10-year study from the University of Washington, Seattle, add to the growing body of research sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health that seeks to identify what saves marriages.

Interviewed within six months of marriage, couples who will endure already see each other “through rose-colored glasses,” study co-author Sybil Carrere says. “Their behavior toward each other is positive.” Those who will divorce already see each other “through fogged lenses,” seeming cynical and unable to say good things about each other.”¹

How we say things is as important as what we say. A kind attitude and a tender tone will foster receptive ears on the other end. For the third time Shulamith refers to Solomon as her “beloved,” her “lover.” With a gentleness and tenderness in his voice he speaks and she listens. What kind of things should we listen for in a potential mate, a lifelong spouse?

1. Listen for praise 2:10,13

Both in verse 10 and 13 Solomon invites Shulamith to arise and come away with him. He is again utterly transparent in his intentions. He is also precious with his words. He calls her his “love” (NIV “darling”) and his “beautiful one” (NIV). She is a joy to his heart and to his eyes. He loves her and he finds her irresistibly beautiful. He does not keep his thoughts to himself. He does not assume she knows how he feels; he tells her how he feels. He praises her publicly and precisely.

2. Listen for particulars 2:11-13

Solomon was an atypical man when it comes to romance. He understood that the way to a woman's heart is often in the details, the little things. In verse 11-13 Solomon invites Shulamith

¹ Karen S. Peterson, “Sweet Nothings Help Marriages Stick,” *USA Today* (3-30-2000).

not to have sex, but to take a walk in the countryside. She would have found this extremely romantic. Furthermore, the details with which he describes the passing of winter and the coming of spring is startling, especially for a man. It is quite likely that Solomon's elaborate description has a double focus. Springtime is universally a time for love. Falling in love is like experiencing springtime all over again and again. Everything is fresh, new and alive. Things simply look different when you are in love. You see things and notice things that previously you missed or overlooked. For this young couple in love, winter and the rainy days were long gone. Flowers were blooming, birds were singing, spring was in the air. You could see it and smell it (v.13). Love could be found anywhere and everywhere you looked or turned.

3. Listen for passion 2:14

When two people are in love they want to spend time alone, just the two of them. Solomon extends his invitation again, calling Shulamith his "dove" (cf. 1:15). Doves are gentle and beautiful. They often nestle in the clefts of the rock out of sight and safely hidden. Solomon compares Shulamith to such a dove and urges her to come out to him. She has kept herself safe and secure until God brought the right man into her life. She has saved herself for marriage. Now the right man has arrived and he asks her to come to him. One senses the passion of his request when he says he desires to see her lovely face and hear her sweet voice. Keel's comments strike home the thrust of Solomon's words, "... the voice is just as infatuating (or "sweet"; cf. Prov. 20:17) as the face is ravishing ... The usual translations ("pleasant," "lovely," etc.) are too pallid, failing to do justice to the intensity that enlivens this little song."²

Craig Glickman wisely writes, "one good indication of real love is the desire to communicate, a wish to discover all about this person whom you love so much. No detail seems too trivial to be related. No mood or feeling of one is unimportant to the other. And you care about the details and the feelings because you care so much about the person. That which would be insignificant or boring to even a good friend is eagerly received with genuine interest by the one who loves you ... The mere voice of the one loved is enchantingly special just in itself. One could read from the telephone book and the other would raptly listen simply for the sound of the voice."³

I remember reading one day about how difficult a time Olympian Al Joyner was having following the unexpected death of his wife "Flo-Jo," Florence-Griffith Joyner, the beautiful Olympic track star. He said that he had refused to change their answering machine at home. Why? Because it still contained her voice.

Question #3: Are they tenacious in their commitment? 2:15

"Foxes were notorious in the ancient world for damaging vineyards ... some ancient sources also suggest that foxes were particularly fond of grapes."⁴ Here the "little foxes" represent those dangers and problems that can sneak into a relationship and do untold damage almost without notice, until the damage is done. Even in the very best relationships a couple is vulnerable to potentially destructive problems. Here the proverb is certainly true: "an ounce of prevention is

² Keel, 107.

³ Glickman, 47-48.

⁴ Snaith, 41.

worth a pound of cure.” A couple must be determined and tenacious in their commitment to “catch the little foxes.” Interestingly, the word catch is an imperative, a word of command from the Lord. We should take to heart at least two important truths in this regard.

1. Remember: trouble is usually in the small things

Foxes are little animals not large ones. You hardly notice them, and they are real good at hiding. Only when the damage is done do you even realize they were there. Issues like role responsibilities, conflict resolution, goals, expectations, finances, sex, spiritual compatibility, interpersonal compatibility and social compatibility do not just naturally work in a relationship. They must be addressed and worked through on an on-going basis if a marriage is to grow and develop.

2. Remember: relationships are uniquely sensitive things

Solomon says “our vines have tender grapes.” They are vulnerable to attack and so is our marriage. We must provide necessary and essential protection. In our words, actions, and attitude we must with dogged determination resolve to nurture and tend to our relationship with great care and concern. There are a number of questions which any wise couple will consider as they contemplate the prospects of marriage. They address several small things that could become big things if not faced head-on.

- 1) Have you discussed and come to agreement on what the Bible means when it says that the husband is to be a loving leader and the wife is to be submissive? (Ephesians 5:22-31)
- 2) Have you agreed to always tell your partner the truth?
- 3) Have you committed to never criticize your partner in public?
- 4) Are you in agreement on how decisions will be made when disagreement occurs?
- 5) Are you both committed to intimacy in your communication as a couple and to the effort this will require?
- 6) Do you both want to be used of God to help your partner come to full maturity as a Christian?
- 7) Do you like the outlook on life and the values of your partner?
- 8) Are you personally committed to making your marriage a success whatever the cost or sacrifice?
- 9) Have you determined premarital sexual standards by open discussion so that each feels that the decision reached honors the Lord?

- 10) Does the wife-to-be realize that men move from the visual to the physical and therefore need a healthy sexual relationship with their spouse to deter temptation?
- 11) Does the husband-to-be realize that women move from the emotional to the sexual and therefore need love demonstrated in verbal and practical ways often?
- 12) Do you have complete confidence that your partner will be faithful to you – i.e. could you trust her/him with a member of the opposite sex?
- 13) Can you identify a day or time period when you placed your faith in Christ for salvation?
- 14) Do you have the certainty that your partner has come to faith in Christ?
- 15) Has your partner demonstrated a lifestyle of similar spiritual commitment as you have?
- 16) Have you decided where you will attend church and to what degree you will become involved?
- 17) Are you comfortable sharing feelings, desires and goals with your partner?
- 18) Do you experience a sense of emotional pain when you are separated from your partner?
- 19) Have you demonstrated a willingness to be flexible in your relationship?
- 20) Have you been able to forgive your partner for an offense, reconcile, and forget the matter?
- 21) Are both sets of parents in agreement with your intentions?
- 22) Have you objectively looked at your partner's family to see the major influences in shaping her/his life?
- 23) Do you really respect your partner and are you proud to have people for whom you have high regard meet them?
- 24) Do you find generally that you like the same people?
- 25) Have you observed differences in your social backgrounds that might cause conflicts?

Dealing with these types of questions will provide a helpful and healthy protection that will make it extremely difficult for those little foxes to do their damage.

Question #4: Are they trustworthy for life? 2:11-17

Solomon and Shulamith are realistic about their romance. They love each other but they also know problems are inevitable. They will come. They have an initial strategy for facing

difficulties when they arise (v. 15). Still, do they have what it takes to go the distance? Are they serious about the words “till death do us part?” I believe they are, and so must we be as well. “How will I know if he (she) really loves me,” and will he (she) love me for life?

1. You must know you belong to each other 2:16

There is a confidence and commitment in a healthy relationship. Each will know of the love and devotion of the other. Shulamith could say with bold assurance “My lover is mine and I am his.” They enjoy an intimate and exclusive love. Like 90% of Americans, they believed extramarital affairs are wrong. However, unlike the 35% of women and 45% of men who allegedly cheat on their spouses,⁵ they were determined to be true to one another. “He browses among the lilies” indicates he enjoys the love and pleasures she has to offer. Again, because she is confident of their relationship, she freely gives herself to him. Security is essential to maximum sexual enjoyment.

2. You must know you want each other 2:17

The couple longs for marital union and sexual consummation. Because they belong to each other they want each other with no barriers standing in the way. Thinking ahead to what they will enjoy, Shulamith invites Solomon to come unto her with the agility, strength and beauty of a gazelle or young stag (cf. v. 9). Her invitation includes an episode of all night lovemaking. Would any red-blooded, sane male say no?! “The mountains of Bether” (NIV, “the rugged hills”) is literally “hills or mountains of separation.” This would seem to be a not so subtle reference to the woman’s breasts (cf. 4:6). With all his desire and passion she welcomes him. “Until the day breaks” (lit. “breathes”) and the shadows flee away, (in other words “all night”) be my lover and enjoy the fruits of our love. Shulamith has come a long way in her own personal self-evaluation. The unreserved love of this man who has entered her life has effected a great change. She is now the woman God created her to be. Together the two of them are far better and more beautiful than they could have ever been alone. Love will do that when we pursue it God’s way and with all our heart.

Conclusion

Norman Wright tells the story of “The 8-Cow Wife.” Now before you wonder if I (or he) have lost it, just read on and see if God doesn’t teach us all something very valuable.

“When I married my wife, we both were insecure and she did everything she could to try to please me. I didn’t realize how dominating and uncaring I was toward her. My actions in our early marriage caused her to withdraw even more. I wanted her to be self-assured, to hold her head high, and her shoulders back. I wanted her to be feminine and sensual.

The more I wanted her to change, the more withdrawn and insecure she felt. I was causing her to be the opposite of what I wanted her to be. I began to realize the demands I was putting on her, not so much by words but by body language.

⁵ *Psychology Today*, Jul/Aug 2000, p. 10.

By God's grace I learned that I must love the woman I married, not the woman of my fantasies. I made a commitment to love Susan for who she was - - who God created her to be.

The change came about in a very interesting way. During a trip to Atlanta I read an article in Reader's Digest. I made a copy of it and have kept it in my heart and mind ever since.

It was the story of Johnny Lingo, a man who lived in the South Pacific. The islanders all spoke highly of this man, but when it came time for him to find a wife the people shook their heads in disbelief. In order to obtain a wife you paid for her by giving her father cows. Four to six cows was considered a high price. But the woman Johnny Lingo chose was plain, skinny and walked with her shoulders hunched and her head down. She was very hesitant and shy. What surprised everyone was Johnny's offer - - he gave eight cows for her! Everyone chuckled about it, since they believed his father-in-law put one over on him.

Several months after the wedding, a visitor from the U.S. came to the islands to trade and heard the story about Johnny Lingo and his eight-cow wife. Upon meeting Johnny and his wife the visitor was totally taken back, since this wasn't a shy, plain and hesitant woman but one who was beautiful, poised and confident. The visitor asked about the transformation, and Johnny Lingo's response was very simple. "I wanted an eight-cow woman, and when I paid that for her and treated her in that fashion, she began to believe that she was an eight-cow woman. She discovered she was worth more than any other woman in the islands. And what matters most is what a woman thinks about herself."⁶

⁶ H. Norman Wright, "The 8-Cow Wife," *Marriage Magazine* (May/June 2000).