

## *Guidelines for Selecting a Marriage Partner (Abridged Version)*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Since God intends marriage to be a lifelong relationship between a man and a woman, since we want to know his will and have his blessing on our marriage, since we want to honor God in our marriage, and since much pain is associated with wrong choices and the dissolution of a marriage, careful consideration in the selection of a marriage partner is of paramount importance.

The following guidelines focus on the subjects that constitute the main challenges of most marriages. They are expressed as questions for several reasons, one of which is to help address these main concerns and to obtain the needed information with which to make the wisest decision in selecting a marriage partner. The unabridged version contains the same questions but with additional information.

### **ASSUMPTIONS**

1. The following guidelines assume the prospective spouse is mentally healthy and that he or she doesn't vacillate, exhibit indications of instability or excessive moodiness, and is able to make commitments and keep them.
2. The guidelines also assume the absence in a prospective spouse of such undesirable behaviors as the abuse of drugs, alcohol (e.g., drinking while driving), and an illegal as well as immoral lifestyle.
3. The guidelines assume the prospective spouse is neither married nor separated.
4. This is not an exhaustive list. Other guidelines could be added, but these are especially important.

### **I. GENERAL GUIDELINES**

Since there are several principles I would like to mention, I'm going to group them to facilitate our discussion. I'm also going to express the guidelines in the form of questions it would be wise to ask yourself.

- A. Have you made a list of all the things that are important to you that your spouse should believe and do, and, if so, have you shared this with him or her? Invite him or her to do the same. Be very specific.
- B. Do you expect him or her to change after marriage?  
**DON'T!** The motivation to please a prospective spouse is much higher before marriage. However, keep in mind that promises are easy to make; keeping them until they become willingly and even cheerfully habitual and part of one's lifestyle requires developing an observable track record over time.

- C. Are you prepared to be concerned about only the most important qualities, and if they're present to forego the quest for the perfect, albeit nonexistent, perfect man or perfect woman?
1. If he or she's OK in the spiritual and moral areas (i.e., compatible with and agreeable to what the Bible teaches), then be pleased.
  2. Forget about minor differences, e.g.:
    - a. if she won't keep the house as clean as your mother did (such as cleaning every lamp shade each week)
    - b. or if he won't pick up his clothes like your father always did.
- D. Have you gone together long enough?
1. Over time, qualities emerge in troubled people that threaten or destroy marriages (e.g., manic depression) which can be missed in courtships which are too short.
  2. Can you answer all the following questions?

## II. SPECIFIC GUIDELINES

### A. Spiritual Guidelines

1. Spiritual development is on a continuum of maturity in Christ. (Ephesians 4:13)
  - a. The spiritual questions come first, because they are the most important...by far! If you are one in Christ, the other matters will either come together by logical progression, or you'll have the basis for successfully working through any conflict that should arise.
  - b. A Christian spouse on the lower end of the maturity continuum will act only a little different from non-Christians.
  - c. Therefore, use a prospective spouse's present and past (track-record) behaviors as a guide to his or her spiritual development.
2. What does your prospective spouse think of the Bible?
  - a. Does he or she should consider it the Word of God and his or her highest authority?
  - b. Does he or she enjoy reading the Bible? How often does he or she read it? Daily?
  - c. Does he or she willingly obey God's commands in the Bible?
  - d. Is your prospective spouse a Christian, i.e., a believer in and consistent follower of Jesus Christ as his or her only Lord and Savior? (See Romans 10:9; 2 Corinthians 6:14; James 2:26.)
  - e. Is he or she trying to put into practice in daily life what the Bible teaches? If so, you'll be greatly blessed, e.g., in the times of conflict that occur in all marriages and other relationships as well.
  - f. Does he or she pray? Daily?

- g. Does he or she talk about Jesus, the church, and the Biblical implications of aspects of life without being prompted by you? That is, do these subjects emerge naturally in conversation?
3. Is your prospective spouse a member of a church congregation where the Bible is consistently held to and taught as the infallible and inerrant Word of God and our highest authority, i.e., where what is said in sermons and taught in classes is consistent with God's Word? Is he or she willing to be a faithful member of the same church congregation with you? ("*Willing*" means with neither prompting nor nagging needed by you, and "*faithful*" includes regular, preferably at least weekly, attendance.) What church congregation will that be?
    - a. Jesus said, "a house divided against itself will not stand." (Matthew 12:25)
    - b. Throughout my ministry, in which I've worked with thousands of couples and families, I've never seen a family growing in and serving the Lord Jesus Christ and achieving its potential, when the mother and the father were not both part of the same congregation as the rest of the family. Even if it were possible for such development to occur, it is not likely. In your hope for personal and family maturity in Christ, you surely don't want to follow a practice that has built in challenges and drawbacks and which lacks a productive track record. Further, a high correlation exists between spiritual maturity in Christ and family cohesion, harmony, and ability to overcome adversity.
  4. What does your prospective spouse consider to be the Biblical teaching of the husband's role, and how does it compare to or contrast with your view?
    - a. Do you both agree that the husband will assume leadership in helping the children grow in the understanding of the Bible and the faith at home and in having them attend church with him? Contrary to "politically correct opinion," Christian women want to see such leadership in their prospective husbands. (Ephesians 5:21-6:4)
    - b. What is the Biblical role of the wife, and how does it compare to or contrast with your view? (Ephesians 5:21-6:4)
  5. Is your prospective spouse willing to attend an adult class or some other Bible study opportunity with you?
  6. If any of the above questions cannot be answered "Yes," hold off on marriage until you talk about these vital matters together and until you can say "Yes" to these questions.

## **B. Personality Guidelines**

1. Does your prospective spouse pressure you to do things against God's will and your will? For example, does he or she pressure you to have a sexual relationship outside of marriage? *This is a serious red flag!* (Exodus 20:14, 1 Corinthians 7:2, Ephesians 5:3-5) NEVER do anything someone else wants you to do with a threat of coercion, for such is not motivated by love for you. (1 Corinthians 13:5, RSV)

2. Does your prospective spouse have a lot in common with you? Opposites attract only for a brief period of time, and in limited ways.
3. Does your prospective spouse have a healthy self-concept?
  - a. How well does he or she handle corrective feedback?
  - b. How often does he or she “build you up” (compliment you) privately and in front of others?
  - c. Does he or she tend to “tear others down?”
  - d. Does he or she brag?
4. Does your prospective spouse handle anger well?
  - a. Does he or she internalize anger? Anger should be expressed constructively, i.e.,
    - 1) communicating how he/she feels
    - 2) and why he/she feels that way
    - 3) admitting at the time that he/she owns the problem
    - 4) but that the other(s) who are involved need to know how and why he/she feels as he/she does, so they can help resolve the difficulty.
  - b. During an argument, can he or she express his or her anger rationally? Or does he or she become excessively emotional and lose self-control?
    - He or she should express his or her anger in terms of acknowledging the personal threat involved but also indicating the need to share his or her frustration with the person or people who is or are perceived to be partially responsible.
  - c. Can he or she accept and request forgiveness?
  - d. After having talked out the problem which has caused the anger, does he or she carry a grudge?
  - e. Does he or she should use previous arguments, or the awareness of the other's weaknesses to try to hurt the other or to gain advantage in current conflict situations?
5. Does he or she consider whether others will be affected by decisions he or she makes, and, if so, take their viewpoints into account before acting?
6. Is your prospective spouse reliable?
  - a. Is he/she habitually punctual, an indication that he/she considers others in his/her decision-making? Does he or she apologize when arriving late and keeping you waiting?
  - b. Does he/she keep his/her word? Does he/she honor commitments? Can you trust that when he/she says he or she will do something, you can rest assured it will be done?
    - All these are indicators of the degree to which he/she values commitment and his/her word—indicators of the degree to which he/she is likely to honor and follow through on the marriage vows, including not seeking an unprovoked (or any) divorce from you.
7. Does your prospective spouse value marriage as a lifetime commitment?
  - a. Don't get married with the idea that if it “doesn't work out, we'll just get a

divorce.” Love can be rekindled. Arranged marriages still exist in many places in the world.

- b. How did your prospective spouse's parents view marriage? How many marriages did they have, and what was their marriage like? (Children of divorce tend to divorce.)
  - c. What commitments, especially irrevocable commitments, has your prospective spouse made *and continues to keep*?
  - d. Has he/she indicated a desire for a prenuptial agreement?
8. Is he or she realistic?
9. Is he or she well organized?
- a. Does he or she set goals and accomplish them in spite of distractions?
  - b. Does he or she become so absorbed in accomplishing a goal that he or she forgets to do other important things?
10. How did your prospective spouse's parents view marriage?
- a. What was their marriage like?
  - b. How many marriages did they have? (Children of divorce tend to divorce and more easily than those whose parents have never divorced.)

### **C. Social/Relational Guidelines**

1. Does he or she give as well as want to receive? (Is he/she a "giver" or a "taker" or both?)
2. Does he or she show concern for the feelings of others? (Not just you) When talking with others does he or she draw out others in discussion or prefer to talk only or mostly about him or herself?
3. Have you met or do you know your prospective spouse's friends?
  - Friends tend to be a lot alike.
4. Am I receiving little or no encouragement from others who know and love me to pursue this relationship into marriage?
5. What is the mentality of your counterpart in the marriage of your prospective partner's parents?
  - a. Look at how your intended's mother functions (if you're female) and how your intended's father functions (if you're male).
  - b. Then ask yourself if this is the way you want to be, for there is more than an even likelihood that your intended is going to have these expectations of you.
    - If you see something that you don't want to do that your counterpart does in his or her marriage, ask your boyfriend or girlfriend if he or she expects you to do this in your marriage? If so, then tell him or her that you don't want to do that in your marriage.

6. How do/did your prospective spouse's parents treat each other?
  - a. If your intended's father beat up his mother, watch out!
  - b. Did either one tend to "win" most of their disagreements, or was resolution more by consensus?
  
7. What do your parents think of this person you are considering as a prospective spouse?
  - a. Do they see any "red flags?"
  - b. What advice do they have?
  
8. What does your prospective spouse want to do for entertainment? Is his or her idea of fun wholesome?
  
9. How does your intended relate to children?
  - a. Do you agree with your prospective spouse on how many children to have and how to raise them?
  - b. Do you both agree to raise your children to believe in, love, and obey Jesus Christ?
  
10. Is physical attractiveness (i.e., beauty or handsomeness) or athletic success very important to you?
  - Keep in mind that physical attractiveness diminishes over time. Look for lasting beauty inside your prospective partner in marriage for the greatest satisfaction that will last as long as you both live. Remember these vital words from God's Word:
    - "The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7 NIV)
    - "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." (2 Corinthians 4:16-18 NIV)
  
11. If your prospective spouse has been divorced, what went wrong with the previous marriage?
  - a. First of all, do you have Biblical grounds for even considering marrying this person? (Matthew 19:9)
  - b. What indicators do you have that the same problems will not occur if you marry this person? Careful social science research reveals that divorcees tend to marry the same type of person whom they divorced, which is one reason why statistically 70% of second marriages fail and 90% of third marriages fail. Be very careful and take much time in considering marriage with a person who has been divorced, and only do so after counseling with a pastor who holds the Bible to be the Word of God, infallible, inerrant, and his or her highest authority.
  - c. Consider also that people who have come from a broken home are more inclined to divorce when problems occur than those whose parents have had an

- intact marriage, who work out their problems with a commitment to remaining married “until death they part.”
- d. Consider also that 80% of divorces are initiated by the woman. If you are a man, how committed is your prospective bride to remaining married throughout your whole life together, no matter what problems arise? If you do so, when the end of life does come, you’ll be glad you maintained your commitment to each other. So will your children and grandchildren. And many others.
12. Do you feel comfortable communicating with your prospective spouse about any and all subjects? E.g., can you ask him or her if he or she has had sex with anyone else?
    - a. You don't have to probe for details. If you are both in Christ, the power of God can enable you to overcome the sins and other misdeeds of the past. However, the consequences of these sins and other misdeeds of the past can be devastating physically and negatively affect you as a couple in other ways if they are not addressed.
    - b. Before AIDS and the other 50 sexually transmitted diseases, some of which are latent, not showing up until many years later, and some of which can be life-threatening, this conversation was elective...*now it is mandatory.*
    - c. If yes:
      - 1) How long ago did you have sex outside of marriage?
      - 2) With how many other persons? Be aware that if your prospective spouse has had sex with someone outside marriage, he or she has been affected and likely infected by the sexual relations that other person has had with others and all with whom they’ve been sexually active, even if condoms were used.
      - 3) Are you willing to be tested?
  13. Has your intended **ever** cohabited with someone outside of marriage?
    - a. Living together before marriage is contrary to the teaching of the Bible, the Word of God, and highly correlated with early divorce, violence, and many other unpleasant outcomes. (1 Corinthians 7:2-7)
    - b. Since sex outside of marriage is contrary to God’s will (the preceding passage from the Bible and many others, e.g., Ephesians 5:3-7), we are not surprised to see many negative and painful results from doing so, as social science research amply illustrates. See “Guidelines for Selecting a Marriage Partner (Unabridged Version)” Appendix A: *Is Cohabitation an Option for God’s People?*
  14. Does your intended smoke? Are you aware of the scientific research on the effects of first-hand and second-hand smoke?
  15. Does he or she gamble?
  16. Does the person you are considering marrying use pornography? Has he (or she, usually the male) ever done so?

- If the answer to these questions is Yes, obtain counseling from a pastor who holds to the Bible as God’s infallible Word and his or her highest authority. If the pastor recommends professional counseling on a deeper level, be careful to ask him or her for a recommendation. Many psychologists and psychiatrists are not well qualified. The social science literature indicates that 80% of those who go into psychology do so to solve their own problems. I personally have known some excellent psychologists and psychiatrists, but I also know many who are incompetent and more mixed up than those they “counsel.” Prefer a psychologist or psychiatrist who is a Christian; your pastor can help you find one who is a believer in Christ and also competent and caring.

#### **D. Economic Guidelines**

1. Does the husband-to-be have a full-time job with which he is satisfied and which produces an income that will meet your needs and desires?
  - a. If not, does he have specific plans for obtaining such a job?
  - b. What is his track record on employment?
    - 1) Has he had jobs before?
    - 2) Does he commit to working with his employer, or does he practice “job hopping” and times of being out of work? (Keep in mind that there is a significant difference between looking to advance and “job hopping.”)
2. Does he or she have any indebtedness which will limit you in your marriage?
  - a. Do you each know the financial condition of the other?
  - b. Does your intended spouse have large debts? (E.g., does he or she have a large amount of unpaid balances on credit cards?)
    - Debt is a huge factor in limiting the growth of wealth. Debt restricts and retards the attainment of wealth. Follow the guidelines in Dave Ramsey’s book, *The Total Money Makeover*. Use his Web site for further resources to become debt free and grow and use wealth most productively. The URL is <http://www.daveramsey.com/home>. Enroll in his Financial Peace University.
  - c. Are his or her wages garnisheed?
3. Do you agree on whether the female member will work and, if so, how much, for how long, and when? How does she feel about needing to work? New reports indicate that an increasing number of women want most to be a wife and mother, prioritizing the role of homemaker.
4. Do you have a budget and agree on how the money will be managed (e.g., who pays the bills, reconciles the bank statements, files the income tax), on having wills (and what’s in them) and on insurance matters?
  - a. Do you both agree on the type of budget you will use and to which you’ll adhere?
  - b. Do you agree on whose money the money is?
  - c. Do you agree on how the family income will be spent? (I.e., who decides, e.g., does he or she have to account to the other for every dollar spent or do just big amounts need to be cleared with your spouse? How big is big?)

5. Are you thinking of a December wedding? Be wary of being married in December. Check out how it will affect your taxes; you may wish to wait a month.
6. Do you intend to tithe your income to the Lord? Does your prospective spouse agree?

## **CONCLUSION**

- A. If these questions sound like too many and too specific to go to the trouble to answer, remember that they are the stumbling blocks over which many marriages have fallen. Furthermore, you wouldn't buy a house without asking as many or more questions. Why not put forth this effort for a marriage which in God's sight is infinitely more important than a house?!
- B. Use these guidelines as a frame of reference which will help to filter out the undesirable or less desirable prospective spouses you daily meet and to gradually narrow the field to him or her with whom you will have the greatest possibility of building a successful marriage as you walk together as one flesh in and through Christ Jesus our Lord.
- C. I have commented further on the above questions in my essay, "Guidelines for Selecting a Marriage Partner (Unabridged Version)" which is available without charge on the Marriage page of my Web site at [www.fromacorntoak12.com](http://www.fromacorntoak12.com). I used these questions as the basis for a premarital seminar that I developed and taught throughout my ministry in the churches I served and in other places as well. These subjects are so vital to the well-being of a marriage and family, to the church, and to the society, for stable and functional families are the basis of a society, that many churches require attendance for the couples who want to be married in those churches. If you will carefully consider and implement the guidelines in the unabridged version, with God's help you will significantly increase the likelihood of a long, satisfying, and fulfilling marriage.

Always remember: The information above is not to discourage but to inform and give you the surest foundation on which to build a successful and fulfilling marriage. Again, the most important factor by far is that you and your prospective spouse are both maturing in Christ Jesus. If you are, then you have the all sufficient power and love of God who can overcome anything to help you. One of the ways he already helps is to enable you to be fully aware of all the realities involved, which is what these guidelines are able with God's help to do. As you both mature in Christ you have a good future to look forward to with each other.