

MICHAEL TODD

How to Win at
**DATING,
MARRIAGE,**
and **SEX**

RELATIONSHIP GOALS

**SNEAK
PEEK**



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HOW TO WIN
AT **DATING, MARRIAGE,**
AND **SEX**

MICHAEL TODD

with Eric Stanford



WATERBROOK

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RELATIONSHIP GOALS

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I would not know anything about relationship if it weren't for my beautiful wife, Natalie. She gave me the grace to grow from a boy into a man, a husband and a father, her pastor and her best friend. I'm sharpened daily by her passion to cultivate our family into what God has called it to be, and I'm eternally grateful to God for trusting me with her.

Nat, out of the entire human race, you truly are
my ultimate relationship goal.

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RELATIONSHIP GOALS

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1 TAKING AIM

God's plan, God's plan
I can't do this on my own

—DRAKE, “God’s Plan”

#RelationshipGoals has been a trending topic worldwide for years now. Search for this hashtag on social media, and you’ll find celebrity couples posing at exclusive clubs, stills from romantic movies at the point where the boy gets the girl, cute couples kissing on a beach or cuddled up in bed, a boyfriend-girlfriend pair holding balloons in the park and giving the impression that their relationship has never been anything but pure happiness. And when people repost these pictures with the hashtag, what are they saying? They’re saying, “I want a relationship like that!” Kim and Kanye, Jay and Bey, Prince William and Kate, Will and Jada, some unidentified couple who look really good in a picture that happened to go viral—we can easily become obsessed with their seemingly perfect images and make them our idols and ideals.

Okay, maybe you’ve never noticed the #RelationshipGoals tag online, much less posted anything with it. But if I were to ask you to think about the relationship you want, would an idealized picture flash into your mind? Maybe it’s you with a tall, handsome pro athlete who takes you on shopping sprees. Or maybe it’s you beside a girl who’s hood

like Cardi B but has a sweet side like Carrie Underwood. Is he an amazing listener with a classic swag like George Clooney and a job that pays both his bills and yours? Can she cook like your mama and get just as hype as you do when your team scores?

Now, if you just asked *What's wrong with that?* in your head, allow me to submit to you that maybe there's more to

**THERE'S MORE TO
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DREAMED UP.**

relationship than what pop culture has taught us or our own imaginings have dreamed up. Maybe our society sells an illusion of intimate relationship that's more like a mirage—the closer you get to it, the more you realize it's not real at all. Maybe the things we tend to celebrate are built on unstable foundations and are bound to eventually fall. But also . . . maybe there are some truths here

that can be unlocked about how and why human connection is so important and how we can achieve it.

I believe so, and that's why I've written *Relationship Goals* . . . about *real* relationship goals.

WHY OUR GENERATION IS SO CLUELESS

Let me rewind really quick through some of the photos of my life so you can get to know me, okay?



There's baby Mikey in his crib, born 1986 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Ain't he cute?



Here's one of me and my whole family when I was little: Mom and Dad with their four *really* active boys, minus my baby brother, Graceson, who came unexpectedly late. How could they do it with all of us and still be married today, after forty years? I don't even know.



Now, here I am playing drums at church, the place where I spent most of my childhood. So, I *knew* what was right from an early age; I only wish I'd *done* what was right more often.

There's me on tour with the late, great Wayman Tisdale, thinking I'm going to be the next Tony Royster Jr. (Look him up. He's awesome.)



This here is a picture of the most beautiful girl in the world the night we met, but I'll get to her in a little bit.



There's me at Edison High School, where I became the first African American "Mr. Edison"—an achievement that came as a surprise to many but was the start of my being recognized as a leader. After high school, I had six months of high-quality education from Tulsa Community College. (No picture needed for that.)



Then I started a business of my own. So, here's me at So FLY (Sold Out Free Life Youth) youth and young adults ministry, where I began teaching in ministry and discovered through a lot of crazy situations that the book you're holding *had* to be written.



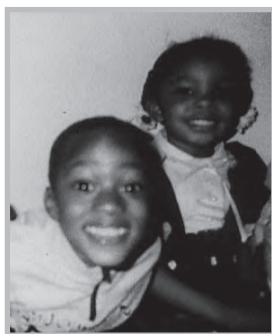
And here is a very influential person in my life: Bishop Gary McIntosh, my ministry mentor and the man who gave me opportunities to preach. Then, in 2015, he entrusted me with leadership of the church he'd founded: Greenwood Christian Center, now known as Transformation Church.

This one is of me up on stage, doing what I was created to do—re-presenting God's Word.



So, that's it—no, wait. Let me rewind some more, because I want to show you something I skipped over. Okay, there it

is: a picture of me when I was in kindergarten. I don't have a shot of the actual moment, but it was about this time that I had my first kiss. That's right, in kindergarten! I purposely built a wall out of blocks during free-play time; then I asked a girl named Sierra to come behind the wall with me, where we wouldn't be seen by the others. When she did, I kissed her straight on the lips. (Sierra, if you're reading this, I hereby apologize.) My excuse is, I was only five. Girls were already fascinating to me; I just didn't know what to do with them.



That little trip down Michael Todd Memory Lane reminded me of something crazy—in all that time, nobody ever really explained relationships to me. I grew up in church but never heard much about the biblical model of right relationship. There was the granddaddy of all rules (can you guess it?): “Don’t have sex until you get married. Period.” That was the main message preached to me about romantic relationships. Then there was the less emphasized but probably just as important “Get friends who aren’t bad influences.” Aaand yeah, that’s about it. Not very extensive, huh? I’m pretty sure you’ve heard those rules too, but have you ever heard anyone explain how to follow them or why you should follow them?

As a matter of fact, when most people think about relationships, they do not think about church or Christians as a source of wisdom at all. It's sad. But if we're honest, we can admit that many believers have failed at relationships, so we don't have as many great examples to model after as we should. Far too many saved, sanctified, Sunday school-lovin', stompin' and clappin' saints die lonely, and far too many preachers travel the world for ministry but have failed marriages and no real friends. It's no secret that the church hasn't done a great job at confronting real-life issues, so many of us didn't have much choice but to allow movies, TV shows, each big cousin who had a new girlfriend every Thanksgiving, and the slew of instafamous people who take great filtered photos to become our relationship gurus.

If you're anything like me, I'm willing to bet Cory and Topanga (from *Boy Meets World*) taught you more about romantic relationships than your youth pastor did. I might be dating myself (shout-out to all the '80s babies!), but I must admit, watching the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air make a fool out of himself chasing after any girl—"Baby, I know your feet must be tired, 'cause you been runnin' through my mind aaall day"—started to shape my idea of what pursuit was supposed to look like. At the same time, watching Martin and Gina (from *Martin*) argue was carving out my context for normal communication.

Let me warn you, some of the things you'll read in this book are not usually said in books by Christian pastors. I believe in discovering the truth by uncovering lies, so we're going to put the realities of today's relationships up against the truths in God's Word about how to live with others. The Bible, in fact, is the greatest source for relationship wisdom,

and it's time we start applying it to relationships as they really exist. In the One who made us and knows us, there's hope for better relationships for people like me who grew up clueless.

**IT'S TIME
WE STARTED
APPLYING IT TO
RELATIONSHIPS AS
THEY REALLY EXIST.**

But then, maybe your experience was the opposite of most and you did see healthy relationships all around you, live and in person. Even so, maybe you never could figure out how the gears fit together to make that beautiful antique clock work for you. Perhaps the perceived perfection of somebody else's relationship has put unhealthy pressure and expectations on you and now you feel an anxious desire to rush the process. I'm here to let you know that there's hope for you too.

Some may subscribe to the belief that there's no point in even trying to have a successful, healthy relationship, and I can't say I blame them when it seems all we see are statistics like the sky-high divorce rate and the countless celebrity break-ups recorded in tabloids. The saddest truth is that these same trends are just about as prevalent in the church. Many supposedly Jesus-loving people think it's normal and fine that many people have had more sexual relationships than they've had cars (and you know you get a new one of those every few years). That's what happens when pursuing "good times" dating, instead of faithful marriage in covenant, is your default.

Now, don't get me wrong—I'm not here to judge (cue Tupac's "Only God Can Judge Me"). I'm here to try to help. I believe that God has given me a playbook and a platform to help each and every one of us *win in relationships*. It doesn't

matter if your current status is single, married, dating, divorced, courting, looking, waiting, thirsty, stalker, player, or it's complicated. And it's not just about romantic relationships either, though we're going to emphasize that side. Wouldn't you like principles you could use in relationships with your sis, your nana, your boss, your bro, your BFF, and every other person you're in close relationship with?

We're about to embark on a relationship roller coaster, and trust me, this is not a book you want to put down midride. I believe God is going to give wisdom and revelation through the pages you're about to read, and it's going to transform your relational life.

But first, you should have some quality assurance that when I'm saying something to you, God has already taken me through the wringer on this. So, let's go back to the most beautiful girl in the world I was telling you about.

MY PROMISE: I'LL KEEP IT 100 PERCENT

I met my future wife, Natalie, at a mutual friend's birthday party on December 14, 2001, at a rec center. I was fifteen. She was fourteen. She walked into the place with long black hair and a black dress, and I said, "What?!" I'd never seen anything so exotic and beautiful.

I promised to myself, *She's gonna notice me tonight*. I proceeded to act a plum fool. I did everything I could to make myself seem interesting. I bragged. I tried to make her laugh. I showed her my dance moves. At fifteen, I thought I had the tightest game in the world—but the truth was, I was scared it wouldn't be enough to get me this gorgeous girl.

As I was about to leave the party, I was thinking about

how to go back over to Natalie, across the room, and say goodbye. Right then, she came and found *me*! “Where’s my hug?” she said. “Don’t I get a hug?” That hug, to me, was like somebody giving me the biggest kiss in the world.

From that point on, we dated for about eight years, except for a ten-month period of insanity (more on that in a future chapter). Thank God, we got back together. We got married in a huge wedding in 2010. Now, out of our love, we have three awesome kids: Isabella, Michael Jr. (“MJ”), and Ava.



I know that to some people Natalie’s and my finding each other so early and getting married at a young age might seem like an ideal they missed out on or like we couldn’t relate to them. But even if it was quicker than for some people, we’ve been through the whole relational process, and we’ve made

and learned from plenty of mistakes along the way. We're not perfect, but we're progressing. I promise in this book I'll share authentically from my pain and mistakes and I'll keep it 100 percent.

Also, as a pastor I've had hundreds of people come to me with their stories of problems in dating, sexuality and self-control, relationships with girlfriends/boyfriends, baby mamas/baby daddies, husbands/wives, and more. With their permission, I'll share some of their stories, changing their names to protect their privacy but telling the straight stuff about what they went through.

**WE HAVE MORE
RELATIONSHIPS AND
LESS LOVE, MORE
SEX AND LESS
INTIMACY.**

We live in a world that has more and more relationships and less and less love, more and more sex and less and less intimacy. When I think about the pain I've experienced and have seen others experience from bad relationships, I can't wait to share with you what the Bible says about

how to do relationships so that you can minimize the pain and start to benefit from the rewards. To do that, you've got to have a goal.

SIXTH-GRADE BOYS DON'T HAVE AIM

A *goal* is the result or achievement toward which effort is directed. Take away the goal, and what good is the effort? Imagine an archer with a bow and arrow. If he doesn't have a bull's-eye target, he can aim and shoot if he wants, but the arrow is not going to hit anything purposeful. So, what's the point?

I've noticed that one of the key issues that hinder people from reaching their relationship goals is the fact that they don't know how to aim. It reminds me of the time when the planning committee at my middle school had the bright idea to install urinals on the wall of the second-floor boys' bathroom. I'll just say, there were clearly a lot of goals, but there wasn't enough aim.

I'm sure you can imagine the rest of that scene. But what I'm trying to say is, a lot of messes had to be cleaned up, and it left a nasty situation for other people to walk into. It also lowered the standard for everyone else. I'm sure the thirty-ninth boy who walked into that restroom took one look, shrugged, and thought, *What's the point in aiming?*

This scenario looks a lot like our society's perception of relationships; most people see them as messy and stained with a lingering aroma that tells where people have been and how badly they've missed the mark. When the damage is done, attitudes have formed, innocence has been stolen, and questions begin to flood our minds. *Is love even real? Does anyone's relationship last longer than a few months? What's the point in aiming at these goals?*

The truth is, having a goal without aim is senseless, but having a goal without God is pointless.

Many of us don't have our aim directed when it comes to relationships. We take whatever comes. We do whatever's comfortable. But we don't really know where we're going or why.

**IN RELATIONSHIPS,
WE DON'T REALLY
KNOW WHERE WE'RE
GOING OR WHY.**

Don't believe me? Have you ever known a girl who dated pretty much any guy who happened to show an interest in her, without ever stopping to think

about the kind of guy who would really be right for her? Or a couple who have dated for a long time and have gotten so comfortable with it that they aren't making any move toward marriage? Or a married couple who have let their former passion turn into a business partnership for child rearing and home maintenance?

Don't feel like I'm trying to pick on you or lock you into something. I don't know you well enough to do that. Truth is, biblical principles are unchanging, but we're at different places and we can have a variety of relationship goals within the guardrails that God has set up. So, relax and remember . . . you don't have to have your whole life figured out from the start. Your relationship goals can, and actually should, change over time. You aren't doomed if you've made a mistake; every one of us has access to heavenly redemption. I should know.

What I am asking is, What is your goal? And what I'm suggesting is for you to align your goal with God's goals for relationships. Set the target and sure up your aim so that the relationship arrow of your life doesn't go astray.

RIP UP YOUR LIST

So, maybe you're the kind of person who somehow has never gotten around to making conscious relationship goals and has just fallen into the relationship ruts. But more than likely you've got some kind of goals, targets, or markers of success in mind when it comes to relationships. That's better. Still, even if you do have targets, I want you to be open minded about whether these are the *right* targets. You might need to

reexamine them. Because, see, it's possible to have a target for your arrow that's the *wrong* target.

Let's say you're single and ready to mingle and you've made a list of things you want in a significant other. One could be "He's got to be at least this tall and make this much money" or "She's got to have the cute face and a tiny waist." This shows that most of our lists tend to be a little (or a lot) superficial and might reflect not what we actually need in a partner but more of just what we want at the time. I assure you, life has a way of changing, modifying, and redefining what success in relationship looks like for all of us.

**LIFE HAS A WAY OF
REDEFINING WHAT
SUCCESS IN
RELATIONSHIP
LOOKS LIKE FOR US.**

When I'm going on a road trip, I usually tell my phone where I want to go, and it gives me directions on how to get there. But success for the journey happens only if I've given my phone the right destination. Let's say I've planned to take my family on vacation to Disney World in Florida, but I get careless and accidentally say to my phone, "Grand Canyon." Then I just mindlessly follow the directions electronically spoken to me by my phone. Do you think I'll arrive at the correct destination? Of course not. My kids will be looking for Mickey Mouse, but all they'll see is a bunch of dusty rocks. On top of that, I can guarantee there will be disappointment, frustrated expectations, wasted resources, and lost time.

My point is, many of us are tapping in our own destinations for relationships, but they are not necessarily the goals that we should really be pursuing. We should follow a plan

(directions) that will get us to the goal (destination) that we actually want to reach.

Let's be honest—many of us make plans that fail, even though they seemed really good at the time.

There is a path before each person that seems right,
but it ends in death. (Proverbs 14:12)

I've seen that verse proved true so many times—that everything that seems right isn't always right. And someone else who is learning the same lesson is a young woman named Sarah.

When I met Sarah not long ago and talked to her about her relational life, she was kind of down. She was still single past the age when she'd hoped to get married.

"Would you say that you have a clear idea of the kind of guy you want?" I asked, trying to be helpful.

"Oh yeah. And I'm starting to think that's the problem."

Years earlier, Sarah had developed a lengthy list of requirements for any guy she dated. I tried to keep a straight face while she ran through them for me. I'll just share a few with you . . .

- come from a two-parent home (That eliminates about a third of the population right there.)
- be a successful business owner (Notice: not just have a job but own a major business.)
- be a preacher or work in ministry (A successful businessman *and* a preacher?)
- be able to tell jokes that make her laugh
- be very athletic

After years of refusing to get to know men or let them get to know her because they didn't line up with her criteria, she was starting to wonder if her list was a bit unrealistic. *Yeah, girl. Maybe just a little.*

It's good to take aim at relationship goals. That's a whole lot better than just passively letting society or the media or our family experience teach us how to do relationships. But we also have to make sure we have the right goals, ones that will contribute to the life we ought to be leading. For that, we have to go to the source of meaning.

GOD'S PLAN

I believe the beauty of life is being a part of something that is way bigger than yourself. It's God's plan.

I know you may think that your plan is pretty awesome, but what if a plan was made for you before you were even born? Yeah, I like that: God's plan was made for you *before you!* Let me prove it.

Once, God told the prophet Jeremiah,

Before you were born I set you apart
and appointed you as my prophet to the nations.
(Jeremiah 1:5)

In other words, Jeremiah had a God-given mission before he even took his first breath. But before you dismiss that as a special case, let me tell you that it's not just prophets or other unusual people who have a place in God's plan. We *all* have God-given, inborn purposes.

An apostle said it: “We are God’s masterpiece. He created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago” (Ephesians 2:10). You’re a *masterpiece*! He’s got *good things* for you to do, planned before you were born!

I’m going to be talking a lot about purpose in this book. We all have a variety of purposes in life that I truly believe we’re supposed to fulfill. These aren’t just things we dream up. They’re dreams that God has planted in us. And my purposes added to your purposes, added to the purposes of millions of others, combine to produce the kingdom that God is building. Within that perspective, what seems small (my little dreams and aspirations or yours) is really big.

So, we should look at this purpose thing in a context—the context of what God is doing. What is God’s purpose in relationships? What guidelines has He been teaching about relationships that we need to follow so that we’re doing this His way?

Our encouragement is this: It’s not all on us. God instructs us, guides us, and teaches us how to aim at the right relationship goals.

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will guide you with My eye. (Psalm 32:8, NKJV)

**GOD WILL HELP
US FIND THE
RIGHT TARGET FOR
OUR RELATIONAL
ARROWS.**

The more we seek Him, the more we’ll find out what He wants for us and the more we’ll desire to pursue it. God will help us find the right target for our relational arrows. And it will be better than we could find anywhere else.

Culture's views on relationship are a moving target. Culture says marriage looks like this in one decade, then like that in another decade. The term *dating* used to imply physically going out somewhere. But now we have "Netflix and chill," and you don't have to be committed to anybody to cross the line into private areas.

God wants every single one of us to have successful relationships, but we have to have a goal that is stable enough for us to aim at. So, let me point out to you that the only thing that is unchangeable, unwavering, and immovable is the Word of God. Isaiah 40:8 tells us, "The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever." So, I dare you—no, I double-dog dare you—to let the standard of your relationships be God's Word, even if it's just for the time it takes you to finish this book. Let's just see what would happen in our hearts, minds, and lives if we would follow the stable, biblical model of relationships instead of following our own feelings or other people's examples.

MY TARGETS, YOUR TARGETS, OTHER TARGETS

As you speculate about relationship goals for yourself, the temptation will be for you to compare what you need and want in relationships to everyone else's needs and wants. But remember this: we all have different targets. Your age, stage, experiences, and place in life are unique to you. I challenge you to take some time to really think about your individuality and your special calling in life as you're praying and thinking about what you're going to aim for in your relationships.

Just to suggest the diversity that's possible, here are some relationship goal examples:

- “I need to break up with my abusive boyfriend, move out of his apartment, and spend some time not dating anybody. I need to rediscover who I am and focus on getting back to God.”
- “I’m so used to being in multiple relationships for fun, but I’m tired of empty relationships. I want a relationship with depth.”
- “I want to find a wife who is cool with a lot of travel and a small income because I am committed to a career as a musician in a band.”
- “I want to get to the point where I can forgive and reconcile with my dad so that my kids and I can have some kind of relationship with him before he passes.”
- “I want to be free of my addiction to porn and start living in the real world instead of a fantasy world inside my head. I’ve failed at this before, and I know I need God to help me.”
- “My new company is big. I’d really like to find a few co-workers here who are believers like me.”
- “I’ve prided myself on being independent, but lately I’m realizing my need for companionship and community.”
- “My sponsor says my sobriety is at risk if I keep hanging around with friends who are drinkers. I want some new people to hang out with who know how to have fun without a glass in their hands.”
- “I really want to get engaged, but I have so many fears and so many memories of past failures. I need the courage to ask my girlfriend to marry me and begin to lead her boldly in Christ.”

- “I want to find a junior partner who shares my values and whom I can confidently give my business to when I retire.”
- “I’ve been the cause of so much hurt in other people’s lives that I feel like I don’t deserve good relationships. But I want to try again.”
- “I know I’m only a teenager and haven’t had a serious relationship yet, but I really feel God is calling me to be a mom of several children. I need to start getting wisdom to prepare for that future.”
- “Our separation was a mistake. I think she feels it as much as I do. I know the kids do. I want to explore with her how we can reconcile and try again, with God in the middle of our marriage this time.”
- “I never had the example of godly parents, so I want to start learning what that means before this baby is born.”

So, where are *you* in your relational journey? Are you starting to sense new relationship goals forming in your mind or heart? If you quiet the loud cries of culture, you might just hear the Holy Spirit start whispering to you. That’s my prayer for you.

**IF YOU QUIET THE
CRIES OF CULTURE,
YOU MIGHT HEAR
THE HOLY SPIRIT
WHISPERING.**

HOW TO WIN IN RELATIONSHIPS

How much time do we spend pursuing relationships that would be a mistake if we ever got them, trying to make bad relationships work better, or healing from past relationships

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that blew up on us? From the perspective of a pastor whom hurting people tell their stories to, I can assure you, it's a huge amount of time!

Wouldn't it be better if we put our energy into having the best possible relationships in the first place? It's not a perfect world, we're not perfect people, and no relationship on earth is ever going to be perfect. But God has given us the Bible and the church to help us win in relationship. He helps us find the right targets and straightens our aim.

You don't have to listen to me if you don't want to. You can go ahead and secretly envy what other people's relationships are like (or what you *think* they are like). Or you can make up your own goals based on selfish and probably unrealistic desires. But do that and you'll keep getting the kinds of results that you've already been getting: heartache, disconnection, disappointment. Am I right?

Or you can take aim at new relationship goals that will help you fulfill your purposes in life and keep you in line with God's eternal truths. I don't care how old you are, how many relationships you've had, or what your current relationship status is—you *can* do relationships differently. You just need the right goals, ones that will enable you to get a W.

God is the real, ultimate, and total winner in this universe. If you're with Him, you'll be a winner too. Set your relationship goals in partnership with God and in keeping with His teaching, and you'll find fulfillment—not just in the relationships themselves but in your whole life.

I told you earlier that my relationship with Natalie, my wife, is not perfect but it is progressing. *Progression, not perfection*—that's a phrase we throw around a lot in our church, and I believe it's appropriate for you, too, as you look

at forming new relationship goals. There's pressure here, but it's the pressure to get started; it's *not* the pressure to get everything right all at once.

**PROGRESSION, NOT
PERFECTION.**

You can win at relationships. I don't care what your Christian walk looks like or even if you aren't sure you really believe. If you're sprinting, jogging, or barely stumbling ahead, keep moving forward. I believe God will get you to the place you're supposed to be. He'll do it because He loves you and because, whatever else might be going on in your relational life, He is faithful in His relationship with you.

*I believe you can win at relationships. Now *you* believe it.*