

Contents

Introduction: Less Pain and More Joy in Dating	7
1. Is Marriage Better than Singleness?	15
2. Why Is Christian Dating So Weird?	27
3. “Scalpel, Please.” Dissecting the Word <i>Date</i>	43
4. Busting Twelve Christian Dating Myths	59
5. A 4,000-Pound Paper Weight: A Sturdy Frame Supports Dating	73
6. Follow the Stages for a Great Relationship	85
7. Make a List but Avoid Creating Frankenstein	101
8. Unfriend-Zoning People and Other Ways to Meet Dates	119
9. Sex, True Purity, and Almost Jumping Out of a Moving Car	135
10. Getting the Best from a Breakup	155
11. Fall in Love with Your Cheesecake	169
12. You Found “The One” When You Can Love Like a Prince	185
Acknowledgments	199
Notes	201
About the Author	211

Is Marriage Better than Singleness?

There is no one path of service, but whatever a person's calling is, grace will be given so that that calling may be fulfilled.

—LEON MORRIS, *THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW*

I've circled the Christian and non-Christian dating block more times than I'd like to admit. People interrogate me as to why my dating hasn't led to marriage.

"Are you looking for perfection? Is singleness your calling? Did you let that special gal get away? Did you eat lead paint chips as a kid?"

Respectively, I answer, "I don't think so. I hope not. Not sure." And, "That's a good possibility."

Inquisitions don't help. I don't know why I'm not married. As someone said, it's "wise not to ask whys." I never wanted to be a "bachelor to the rapture," and being an older husband and father wasn't part of my Jeremiah 29:11 plan.¹

When I was younger, I always thought people who weren't married by age thirty lingered alone because they were socially diseased, like relationship lepers. Then I became one. After I was thrust into the "real world" and secured a steady job as an IT professional and bought a house, many thought it was a perfect time to find a good woman and get married. I agreed. But as the years passed and I dated, only more of my guy friends moved in. Confused outsiders began giving me that incredulous, tilted head and raised-eyebrow look, implying, *What's wrong with you? Why don't you have a wife?*

Though I found it uncomfortable to give a continual update on my love life, looking back, I didn't need to worry about when I would get married—nor did they. Because God knew His plans for me. And He still does.

The truth is, if I do get married or if I remain single, I'm okay, because both singleness and marriage are gifts from God. As one theologian put it, "God blesses one person with the call to be single, and another he calls to marriage."² The apostle Paul knew that "whatever you do, do all things for the glory of God." (1 Cor. 10:31). The same patriarch even made a strong case that singleness was a special option for serving Christ. Paul goes as far as saying, "I wish everyone were single, just as I am. Yet each person has a special gift from God, of one kind or another" (1 Cor. 7:7 NLT).

Whatever route you take in life, one thing I know is that if you're not content as an unmarried person, then marriage won't fulfill you. Marriage isn't superior to singleness. I didn't always think this way, though.

Dating Didn't Soothe My Loneliness

Ironically, for many years I thought marriage was better than staying single, even though I never dated during that time with any

serious intention of finding a spouse. My primary goal while attending a secular university wasn't to meet my wife but to make out. Slogging from relationship to relationship, I was searching for intimacy with a woman to fill the crater-sized hole in my heart. The physical closeness temporarily soothed the loneliness, but, like a fleeting sunset, the feeling never lasted. It wasn't meant to.

Relentlessly I sought validation from the opposite sex but was never satisfied, always pursuing but never at peace. After each breakup and new love interest, I felt lonelier than I had with the previous one. I was lost.

At that time I had no clue what the Bible said about singleness, dating, and marriage, because I didn't read the Bible. I thought all Christians were zealots. Weird. Stiff. Too religious and irrelevant. In fact, I was in my third year in college before I understood the difference between the Old and New Testaments. Heavy metal, not Hillsong, boomed in my car. During summer jobs, I stamped plastics in a factory alongside ex-convicts, not evangelicals. My college life consisted of socializing, dating, and studying—probably in that order.

At one party, I stood in the corner by myself, pensively evaluating the crowd and nursing a red plastic cup filled with Jungle Juice to fit in. A terrible sinking feeling settled into my stomach. *I hate feeling alone. Where is God?* I wondered. Soon followed with, *Is a fraternity party where I want to meet my wife?* I felt devastated that life wasn't going as planned and that dating didn't fill the loneliness I felt. I clung to the idea that if I found a goddess to marry, the loneliness would cease. Before God transformed my beliefs about relationships, however, He had to change *me*.

I wasn't a complete heathen at that point. My parents' inculcation of "being a good person" and periodically attending the Roman Catholic Church kept me from making worse dating decisions at

university. At one point, a family member had even taken me aside and said, “Eric, you’d be a great priest.” But the watershed moment came from a sermon at an evangelical church near my hometown. The pastor said, “You must jump off the cliff of faith, give everything to God, and He will catch you.” I felt like he was speaking directly to me. So moved by it, I finally decided to fully surrender my life to Christ.

Within a few months, I lost the motivation to party. God gave me a hunger for the Bible, and I attended worship nights instead of dance clubs. Rather than aimlessly pursuing women, I cut off all illicit relationships. The next spring break, instead of soaking in the sun with wild beachgoers in Florida, I raised money for my first mission trip and ministered in Haiti for a week.

I had to work hard to understand that dating and marriage don’t fix loneliness, only Jesus does. Similarly, I had to come to terms with the fact that being married isn’t better than remaining unmarried. It isn’t that a spouse won’t profoundly enhance our lives—it was God who inspired Solomon to write, “An excellent wife, who can find her? For her worth is far above jewels” (Prov. 31:10). But wives or husbands weren’t meant to usurp the place of the Savior in our lives. Without Him, we have nothing; with Him, we have everything.

As a starry-eyed baby Christian, I felt like an incomplete person again. Religious culture didn’t seem to agree that singleness is of equal value, often viewing it like a virus that needed to be cured. Older married churchgoers rarely went out of their way to include me in their activities after the service. However, many Christians concede that not being “tied down” is utilitarian for Christian service. In ministry settings, I’ve received slights like, “Since you don’t have a family, Eric, can you be the one to do the shopping for the office party?”

My non-filtered self wanted to say, *Let me get this straight: Because I'm single, my schedule is clear by default, and I couldn't possibly have any other essential tasks to complete today besides driving around town buying party supplies for everyone? Seriously?* Singleness is much more valuable than being recruited for the mundane.

I also wonder how many capable and spirit-filled single men and women get passed over for leadership positions in the church because they are unmarried. Even today, I feel less respect is offered to me and my unmarried counterparts. It's wrong to think that being unmarried is just a transitional phase, or that finding a spouse means that you're mature. Getting married only means you have a wife or husband, not that you've "made it" in life.

When I did date, the primary pair of dating directives that the church chiseled into my brain were *Be intentional* and *Don't have sex before you're married*. Though profitable advice, it didn't stop there. Well-meaning men and women told me, "You'll find your wife when you focus on the Lord" or, "Run after the Lord, and eventually you'll find the right woman running right alongside you." And, one of my favorites: "You'll meet your spouse when you stop looking." I also never understood why I had to pursue a woman with laser-like focus toward marriage when we just had one date. Apparently, I wasn't finished gulping the purple Kool-Aid from my college days after all.

There Are Only Ten Commandments

If you decide to marry, it's not better than remaining single. "Thou shalt marry" is not the eleventh commandment. You are not required by God to find a spouse, and no one needs a husband or wife to live an outstanding life. According to Jesus, you'll spend eternity with God *not* being married, as marriage won't exist in

heaven (see Matt. 22:30)—how’s that for perspective? If you marry, your spouse will be just one of the many blessings you’ll receive in the short time you have on earth.

While some people are meant to be married, some are called to stay single. Jesus said, “There are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 19:12). “Eunuchs” is a physical state in some cases and also can be a metaphor for people who choose to remain single to serve God better.³ As Professor John Nolland states, “Some people will sense the challenge to forego the possibility of marriage for the sake of the call of the kingdom of heaven.”⁴ Many iconic inventors, writers, and missionaries never married. A single woman named Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu served in Calcutta, India, for fifty years, aiding thousands of poor people. You know her as Mother Teresa, and the Catholic Church canonized her in 2016.⁵ And what about others, such as the Wright Brothers, Nikola Tesla, Condoleezza Rice, Amy Carmichael, Susan B. Anthony, Octavia E. Butler, Jane Austen, or the apostle Paul? They lived purposeful, powerful, and fulfilled lives—all without a spouse. Then there was Jesus—the Prince of Peace, the Bright Morning Star, and the Alpha and the Omega—God’s “only begotten Son”—He never married.

If you are single and desire to be married, you don’t have to wallow in waiting for a spouse. I’ve taught English and Bible classes to refugees in Europe, preached the gospel in Mongolia, and disciplined incarcerated teenagers in the United States. I’ve had the privilege of witnessing ruby-red sunsets in New Zealand, absorbing striking thousand-year-old ruins in Angkor Wat, and swimming in the azure seas of the Mediterranean. All the while, deep friendships, further education, and professional positions have strengthened my character and satisfied my soul. My single life has been anything but wasted, and many of my married friends long for the freedom I have.

Marriage is a choice, and both marriage and singleness have benefits and drawbacks. One thing I know for sure is that if you aren't happy in singleness, you won't be happy in marriage. Chloe was a kindhearted, vivacious, and intelligent woman in her late twenties. She grew up with stable Christian parents, loved Jesus, and studied fine arts at a top university on the West Coast. After college, she incessantly pined, "If I were only married to a great guy, my life would be perfect." Taking action, she joined a new singles group and met a handsome and successful gentleman who had just moved there from out of state. They courted for a year then got married. Chloe was living her dream. For a while, at least. To her surprise, she soon felt wistful. She convinced herself that if they could adopt a baby girl, then she'd be fulfilled. Months later, they were not only able to adopt one baby, but twins. Chloe was ecstatic for a while, but did she find contentment? No. After that, money became tight as her husband had to take a pay cut to keep his job. Chloe believed that if he could just land a high-paying position at a new company, then she'd be satisfied. And on and on the sickly cycle went.

Maybe you'd like to shove Chloe into a corner and not-so-gently remind her of all her blessings? From the outside, she looked as though she had it all. Yet clearly, her hopes for a "perfect life" were insatiable. She had a God-sized gap in her life that no human could fix or fill. We can find peace, joy, and contentment in the here and now only in Christ and Christ alone.

Marriage Is a Blessing, but It Isn't Superior to Singleness

If we're emotionally and spiritually healthy, it won't nullify our longings for marriage and children. Years of extended singleness—especially for those who ardently desire marriage—can be

miserable. Most people want a spouse. Though data shows that marriage rates are declining, we don't know yet if this trend means that more people will ultimately opt out of marriage completely or if people will continue to marry but at an increasingly older age. Historically, the vast majority of the US population will be wed at some point in their lives whether they wed when they're younger or older.⁶

The idea of finding a spouse tugs at our heartstrings. Many of our deepest hopes and dreams are tied to marriage, like emotional intimacy, family, sex, and children.

I love my single life, but I want to be married. At home, hanging out alone and/or with my guy friends sometimes gets kind of old. I'd be just as satisfied spending slothful afternoons cuddling on the couch with my sweetie as I would be surfing in Sri Lanka.

I can't wait to have a constant companion in marriage, a beautiful sex life, and the joy of writhing in pain from stepping on a Lego my kids dropped on the carpet. I'll love walking into church with the person I can always sit with instead of playing the tiresome game of *find-a-friend-in-the-haystack*. In any case, I'll continue to thrive whether I wake up to my wife in the morning or next to a German Shepherd. There's a reason why God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him" (Gen. 2:18).

For years research has documented the physical benefits of marriage. Couples who wed live longer, experience fewer strokes and heart attacks, and survive a major operation more often.⁷ Another study found that married people are 14 percent more likely to survive a heart attack and leave the hospital two days sooner than their single counterparts.⁸ As researchers noted, "The size of the health gain from marriage is remarkable. It may be as large as the benefit from giving up smoking."⁹ Regarding mental health, marriage not only "reduces depressive symptoms for both men

and women,”¹⁰ but couples “have a lower chance of becoming depressed.”¹¹ In *The Meaning of Marriage*, Dr. Timothy Keller notes that the holy union also provides a “profound ‘shock absorber’ that helps you navigate disappointments, illnesses, and other difficulties.”¹² When life gets you down, you have a tangible shoulder to cry on. Indeed, “if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion” (Eccl. 4:10).

And if you’re a man—I hope you’re reading this—researchers “found that young men in their 20s were more likely to have difficulty with depression and excessive drinking if they were single, compared with their peers who were married. Forty-eight percent of single men ages 24 to 29 reported they were frequently drunk, compared with just 28 percent of their married peers.”¹³ Marriage is exceptionally healthy for us guys.

And what about sex? I’ve heard some say it’s overrated, but I’d like to engage in extensive personal research with my wife before agreeing with that conclusion. Movies shortchange us by portraying the *search* for a spouse and sex before marriage as the most exciting part of any relationship. But many experts agree that husbands and wives, not the sexually promiscuous, experience the most under-the-sheet activity. Why? Marriage provides convenience, consistency, and security. God designed a permanent relationship bond for us to feel safe and secure in our most vulnerable places. Who else would you be more comfortable sporting your birthday suit to other than the one who promised never to leave you?

Our culture might paint sex within marriage in drab colors, but true intimacy follows vows and the ceremony. Keller states, “Passion may lead you to make a wedding promise, but then that promise over the years makes the passion richer and deeper.”¹⁴ Simply put, the best part of your romance will be after the altar, not before it.

If you're a lady, the hunt for a hunk pales in comparison to the happiness, safety, security, and intimacy that a covenant union with a husband will bring. Guys, you might have the skills to woo women to date, but your most profound satisfaction will be in winning her heart daily in marriage.

Marriage is a big deal, but compared to eternity, it's a mist.

Committed couples get to dream together, share life's mountaintops and valleys, feed other people, and build a kingdom-life beside one another that glorifies God.

And yet we are also well aware that many must battle to keep their marriages afloat. I know that even if you find a godly man or woman to marry, at some point the relationship will be challenging. As my mentor taught me, manure might smell bad, but it makes great fertilizer. You can learn a lot about yourself, grow in your character, and even become closer to your spouse through conflict. Indeed, as the apostle Paul noted, those who marry will face certain kinds of "trouble," and he wanted to "spare you" (1 Cor. 7:28). If you take your eyes off of Christ, obligations to kids, in-laws, and the desire to please your spouse could make it harder to be fully devoted to the Lord (1 Cor. 7:32–35). Married couples also face the risk of a stale marriage, infertility, divorce, the pain of a spouse or a child becoming sick, or any number of potential tragedies unique to a husband and wife.

Caveats aside, God designed marriage to be an abundant blessing for you, your spouse, and the rest of the world. But it is not superior to singleness. And the good news is that if you get married and have problems, you can still have hope. One long-term study found that "two out of three unhappily married adults who avoided divorce or separation ended up happily married five years later."¹⁵

Either Way Is a Win

Both singleness and marriage have unique benefits. If your identity, happiness, well-being, and ultimate hope is rooted in marriage and not in God, you'll have a tough life. God is most interested in you knowing Him, being loved by Him, and loving others regardless of your relationship status on social media. Marriage is a big deal, but compared to eternity, it's a mist. Finding a spouse or staying unmarried is a "win-win." Either way is a vanishing mist compared to the kind of life we'll have with Christ in eternity. So go ye therefore into the world and know that there's no battle between getting married or staying single, and you're just as complete, capable, and competent as your betrothed counterparts.