

## *Introduction & Overview*

In the pages that follow, I've compiled a series of nine pastor's pages written in 2010 reflecting on singleness, marriage and the church.

Most of this contemplation was done while mulling over thoughts from the book *Getting Serious About Getting Married*, by Debbie Maken. While I don't endorse all that Maken has to say, I think her book offers a helpfully provocative re-examination of how we currently treat single adults in the church.

May you be stimulated to careful thought by what follows; and may the Lord use it to bring blessing upon you and upon His Church!

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### *Taking a Closer Look at Christian Singleness*

Lately I've been struck by the number of *single* young adults in Christian circles – and by their laments about how hard it is to find a Christian spouse.

I'm not talking only about the young adults in our own congregation. I see and hear the same among friends from my youth and among college friends. At gatherings with other ministers and elders, I hear the same concerns raised.

Having said that, my concern is *heightened* by the members of the church in Hills. We have a number of Godly young adults who are single – each of whom would be a real catch, in my humble opinion. I can't help but wonder what we as a church family could do to help our single members who long for the blessing of marriage.

And the whole question has begun to weigh upon me.

It weighs on me because, to be honest, I deeply love being married. Yes, marriage presents its share of challenges. Put two sinful people in one house, and conflict is sure to arise. But the same is true of having a roommate. And I believe the blessings of a Godly marriage infinitely outweigh the challenges.

There's no doubt that God calls some people to singleness, as Paul so eloquently explains in 1 Corinthians 7. However, both anecdotal evidence and census statistics show that the percentage of people "called" to singleness is increasing substantially with every decade – and, judging by their own view of their singleness, many of them don't *feel* like they are "called" to remain single.

So what's the deal? Why is God allowing so many young adults today to remain single? And for those who *don't desire* singleness, what can they – or the church as a whole – do about it? Anything? Nothing? Lots?

Some time ago, I picked up a book with an intriguing title: *Getting Serious About Getting Married*. Its subtitle: "Rethinking the Gift of Singleness."

Last week, I finally dove into that book, in the hope that it would offer some wisdom. And I think the author, Debbie Maken, has some helpful insights.

So for the next few pastor's pages, I intend to interact with *Getting Serious About Getting Married*. First, we'll examine what the Bible says about marriage and singleness. Then we'll look at some historical views on marriage that have changed in recent decades. Next we'll evaluate some common sentiments about singleness. And finally, we'll look at some practical ideas presented by Mrs. Maken for "getting serious about getting married."

My hope is that this interaction can serve as an opportunity for *all* of us – single or married; young or old – to ponder what Scripture says about marriage and singleness ... and what *we ourselves* (not others) ought to do about it. I urge you to read along, prayerfully considering how we can encourage the young adults (and the children who will become adults) in our lives.

Mrs. Maken begins her book by telling some of her own story. She was a well-educated Christian in her late-20s, with a successful career as an attorney.

And she was increasingly frustrated and depressed by her singleness.

The frustration was compounded by the counsel of Christian friends who told her that singleness is a *gift*, and that she should be content.

"We have been told over and over that singleness is a gift. But it's the kind of gift that makes us cringe and smile politely while we desperately search for a gift receipt so we can return it," she explains.

Finally, Debbie decided to search Scripture to see what God was really saying about singleness. After all, it's the truth of God's Word which sets us free (John 8:32) – not the truth of trite sayings and cultural expectations.

What she found, as she examined Scripture, was that the Bible doesn't champion singleness as a widespread calling – or even as a commonly received gift. Instead, Scripture upholds *marriage* as the norm which God desires for His people.

On the basis of that study, Debbie began looking at the history of Christian society. What she found surprised her. The idea that singleness should simply be accepted, she says, is relatively new. Past generations – and respected Christian leaders of the past, including Martin Luther and John Calvin – held that Godly marriage should be actively pursued by young Christian adults.

She concluded that there has been a significant cultural shift in recent decades which has not been helpful for Christian singles.

However, to see that – and to evaluate Debbie's recommended response – we need to begin by studying what God's Word says about marriage and singleness. Lord willing, we'll do that next week. In preparation, I encourage you to read Genesis 1-3; Matthew 19:1-12; and 1 Corinthians 7. Then pause to pray for God's blessing and guidance for the single adult Christians in your life.

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## *Singleness, Marriage, & God's Word*

So what does the Bible say about singleness and marriage?

Last week, I noted that I had been reading a book aimed at "rethinking the gift of singleness." Ultimately, the question with which such a discussion must begin is: what does God's Word say?

We don't need to go far in our Bibles to find out that God's plan for mankind in general includes marriage. In Genesis 1, time and again we hear: "And God saw that it was good." At the end of the sixth day: "God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good."

Then we come to Genesis 2. God plants a beautiful garden and sets man in the midst of it. "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him'" (Gen. 2:18). Man's solitude is the one thing that God declares *not good*.

So God sets Adam to his work of naming all the animals. By means of this work, Adam learns that there is no helper suited to his needs. So God causes Adam to sleep and, from his very flesh and bone, creates a woman. *Here* is a helper who will meet his needs. Here is one who will *complete* him.

Matthew 19 shows how Jesus looks back upon these chapters to teach that God's intention from the start was that the two should be joined as one in a marriage bond that man must not separate (Matt. 19:4-6).

Marriage is *good*, in the judgment of Scripture. "He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord" (Prov. 18:22). "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil" (Eccl. 4:9).

By means of marriage, man gains help in fulfilling his calling (Eccl. 4:10). Marriage enables man to be fruitful and increase (Gen. 1:28), bringing forth the Godly offspring the Lord desires (Mal. 2:15). The relationship established by marriage gives purpose to the work we perform (Eccl. 4:8; Eph. 5:28-29).

On the whole, the testimony of Scripture toward marriage is positive. Marriage is assumed as the state in which God intended man to live. Thus 1 Cor. 11:9-10 reminds us that woman was created for man; and man and woman are not independent of one another. Young women are addressed with the assumption that they will marry and bear children (Titus 2:4-5). The married standing of Godly men is likewise assumed (Titus 1:6; 1 Tim. 3:2,11-12).

In fact, God created the marriage state to be a living image of the most blessed relationship of all: that of Christ and His Church (Eph. 5:22-33).

In her book, *Getting Serious About Getting Married*, Debbie Maken says, "When we ignore the fact that God made marriage for our benefit in these ways, we deny our very nature. God created us for marriage" (p.27). That, she says, is why so many people feel dissatisfied with their singleness.

If that's the case, though, why are there so many single Christians? God is sovereign; why doesn't He send a spouse to those who want to marry? And what about those passages that seem to praise the unmarried state?

Maken points out that singleness is clearly authorized in two passages. In both cases, singleness is advocated for those meeting certain "qualifications."

The first passage is Matthew 19:3-12, where Jesus interacts with a group of Pharisees and then with His own disciples concerning divorce and marriage.

First, Jesus answers the Pharisees' question about whether divorce is permissible. In answering, He points back to Genesis 1-2, emphasizing that God's purpose for His people has not changed. God created marriage as a good thing, and it is wrong to break the marriage bond that He has established.

The Pharisees challenge Jesus on this, wanting to enjoy the benefits of marriage while preserving the option of easy divorce – which, on the whole, Jesus refuses to allow. But His disciples, watching this exchange, go to the opposite extreme: perhaps it's better not to marry at all!

In answer, Jesus says that not everyone is given the gift of singleness. He then speaks of three kinds of "eunuchs." (A *eunuch* is a man who is unable to have a physical relationship with a woman.)

Some are eunuchs because of a physical deformity; that's the first kind of which Jesus speaks. A second kind comprises those who have been injured in such a way as to render them incapable of physical relations with a woman. And there's also a third kind of "eunuch." This is the kind who refrains from having relations with a woman "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven."

That third kind of "eunuch" isn't physically unable to marry. But he has been called to serve God in a way that won't allow for marriage. We find an example in Jeremiah, whom God commanded to remain single for the sake of his calling (Jer. 16:2ff.). Likewise Paul and Barnabus, whom God set apart for an intense work of evangelism and church planting (Acts 13:2). They had a right to marry (1 Cor. 9:5-6); but because of their work, they were given the gift of celibacy, that they might be content to remain single (1 Cor. 7:7; cf. 1 Cor. 9:15).

That leads to the second passage authorizing singleness: 1 Corinthians 7.

Here, Paul presents two options: having no physical marriage relations (vs.1), on the one hand; and having a spouse (vs.2), on the other. Paul commends singleness as a good thing – but he does so for specific reasons.

First, he says it is good for those who are single to remain single "in view of the present distress" (vs.26). To what distress does he refer? Some (including Maken) believe Paul was referring to hardships afflicting the church in that age. Calvin and others (myself included) believe Paul was referring to the difficulties of the age in which we live. In either case, however, Paul was saying: it will be easier on you if you have only yourself to worry about when facing persecution and hardship. Singleness will allow you to devote yourself entirely to serving the Lord, to a degree unattainable by those who are married (vss.32-34).

However, Paul takes pains to point out that the Lord has not commanded singleness (vs.25) and that it is no sin to marry (vss.28, 36, 38, 39).

Paul also says that singleness is a gift (vs.7) which is *not* given to all. This gift involves self-control that permits the person to be content without a spouse (vss.8-9), being convinced of his or her ability to control physical desire (vs.37), for the purpose of securing an undivided devotion to the Lord (vs.35).

Those who lack that gift, Paul said, should marry. This is not sinful (vs.36); for God provided marriage, in part, so that one man and one woman might meet each other's needs (vss.2-5,9). Those who marry do well (vs.38).

This is supported by what Paul says elsewhere – such as when he tells Timothy that young widows should marry to avoid sin (1 Tim. 5:11-14).

So where does this leave us, Biblically speaking?

The Bible shows us that marriage is God's intention for *most* of His people. It was His intention from the start that we should be joined, husband and wife, in a relationship that completes us.

*Some* of God's people are given the gift of singleness – which includes the ability to be content and self-controlled, for the purpose of more fully serving God. But such a life of contented singleness is the exception – not the norm. And it should be coupled with a life devoted to intense Christian service.

"Let marriage be held in honor among all," says Heb. 13:4.

Satan, of course, wants to destroy all that God has created to be good. Thus he attacks Godly marriages wherever he can – including at the root. That's why an ungodly society extols *self-centered* singleness, in which the opposite sex is merely a tool for selfish gratification and marriage is regarded as a prison. Singleness is commended for the selfish pleasures it allows.

In the church, our culture should be different. We should support those given the gift of singleness; while encouraging those not gifted with singleness in their pursuit of the godly marriage they desire.

That leads to the question: how can we foster a marriage-supporting culture within the church? We'll consider that discussion, D.V., in the weeks to come!

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## *The Long View: Marriage in Historical Perspective*

When Grace and I married, we were 21-year-old college students – nearly penniless and blissfully ignorant of how much work marriage requires.

It was great!

To be sure, we struggled to balance school, work, marriage and children. We had our share of stubborn arguments and learned lessons the hard way.

But God set wonderful mentors in our path, taught us to rejoice in one another, and gave us blessings beyond anything we expected.

What has been fascinating, however, is how many folks have remarked that we were *too young* to marry. I was old enough to have died for my country three years before I said “I do.” Grace was old enough to live on her own, a thousand miles away from her parents.

*But we were too young to marry?*

That sentiment is telling – because it reflects a radical shift in the way our society regards marriage.

Two weeks ago, I began writing about singleness and marriage while working through Debbie Maken's book, *Getting Serious About Getting Married*. Looking at all of the young adults and children in our midst, I've struggled with how to counsel and guide them. I long for them to know the joy that I've experienced – even as I see so many of my own peers still waiting for that “special someone” to enter their lives.

Last week, we considered the Bible's perspective on marriage and singleness, seeing that marriage is God's intention for most of His people. Some receive the gift of singleness, that they might more intensively serve God. But for most of us, “it is not good that the man should be alone.”

That Biblical survey is the necessary foundation to every subject. Scripture provides the only accurate map for plotting a Godly course of life – and without that map, we're sure to go astray.

However, we also do well to retrace our steps and see where we've been, as a society. History gives us a helpful perspective for evaluating the present.

In her book, Debbie Maken draws on a number of historical studies to reveal how former generations regarded marriage. And what she shows is telling – because it reveals attitudes toward marriage and singleness that are radically different from what we see in society today.

Until recent decades, Christian societies have always regarded marriage as the rule and singleness as a rare exception among adults.

Martin Luther expressed this conviction in a sermon entitled, “The Estate of Marriage.” Pointing out that Eve's creation revealed marriage as God's clear intention, Luther said, “as it is not within my power not to be a man, so it is not my prerogative to be without a woman. . . . Just as God does not command anyone to be a man or woman but creates them the way they have to be, so he does not command them to multiply but creates them so that they have to multiply. And wherever men try to resist this, it remains irresistible nonetheless and goes its way through fornication, adultery, and secret sins, for this is a matter of nature and not of choice.”

In other words, marriage is God's will for most people, which we are both called and compelled to fulfill. When we reject His will, we reap the consequences of rebellion.

Thus, in ages past, young men were taught that marriage was the goal at which they should aim. To be an adult was to take a wife and provide for her, both in body and in soul. Young women, likewise, were urged to prepare themselves to become good and Godly wives. Marriage was not seen merely as one option among many.

To willingly refrain from marriage was regarded as choosing a life of loneliness, filled with temptations to sin and lacking a worthy goal. Our forefathers found it difficult to imagine what would motivate a young man to work hard without a wife and children to provide for.

In fact, earlier generations of Americans in some cases required single adults to become part of an established family, in order to ground them in the stability and accountability that a household entails. Parents regarded it as part of their duty to ensure that their adult children found a good and godly spouse.

Then came our age – and everything changed.

Of course, attitudes so significant don't change overnight. Starting especially in the 1960s, much fruit was borne from the seeds of emphasizing individuality and questioning authority and tradition. Society began to see marriage less as a matter of the public good and more as a matter of personal preference. Feminism sought to erase the essential differences between men and women, regarding neither as dependent on the other. The public virtues of marriage – stabilizing society and providing godly offspring – were replaced by individualistic ideals of “personal fulfillment.”

All of these shifts in attitude brought about a radical change in worldview. And the change has been most evident in the young men of our society.

In ages past, a young man was taught that providing for his family was the mark of true adulthood. But today, the goal of “family” has been replaced by the goals of “fun” and “self-fulfillment.” Marriage is seen as a regrettable end to a man's freedom – a “ball and chain” that restricts the potential for self-fulfillment.

Feminism is often blamed for the skyrocketing number of unmarried adults in our society, and it *has* had an impact. But a more significant factor has been a lack of male leadership.

While we pay lip-service to leadership, the popular culture downplays leadership in favor of individual freedom and personal experiences. Young men are urged to keep their options open and are discouraged from “tying themselves down” with a wife and children. “What's being sold is a life of fun and freedom,” Maken explains. “Men are encouraged to pursue their own happiness and to extend their adolescence as long as possible.”

Problem is, that's not the ideal presented by God's Word. And the church – either from ignorance of the Bible or from fear of offending – has seldom contradicted society's siren song.

Combine the church's lack of leadership with the prevalence of divorce and a society that regards marriage as dull (at best) or even as the enemy of self-fulfillment, and it's not surprising that our modern society has a higher rate of single adults than has been seen in any previous age.

The question is: what shall we do about it?

The answer has at least three parts. First, we – the church – must not hesitate to proclaim what the Bible reveals: *marriage is good*. It was God's plan for mankind from the start. Second, we must give our children solid answers to society's objections against marriage. And third, we must help our young adults to prepare for and to embrace the blessing of marriage.

We've already considered the first of those three. Lord willing, we'll consider the other two in weeks to come.

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## ***Evaluating Counsel to Christian Singles, Part 1***

How should we regard single adults in the church? What counsel should we give to them? And ... what counsel must we *reject*?

Over the past few weeks, I've been writing about marriage and singleness while working my way through Debbie Maken's book, *Getting Serious About Getting Married*. Although I can't say I agree with every one of Maken's thoughts, she has helpfully challenged some of my assumptions and caused me to re-think the counsel I've offered single friends in the past. And I deeply appreciate her insistence that we evaluate our attitudes and ideas by Scripture – which always must be our standard of judgment.

Thus far, we've looked at the Bible's high view of marriage – and the way, until recent decades, that high view of marriage was echoed by the church.

In the second section of her book, Maken begins systematically evaluating what the church today teaches – both openly and by its overall attitudes – regarding marriage and singleness. The church is not silent about the subject. But Maken makes a strong case that silence would be better than some of the counsel offered to Christian singles today.

First, she tackles the counsel based on *God's sovereignty*.

The argument goes like this: God is sovereign, and He determines all that will come to pass in the life of His people. For some people, He ordains marriage; and for others, singleness. (We certainly can't object so far! But ...) Because God is sovereign, it would be wrong for a single person to pursue marriage. If God wants a person to be married, it will happen in His time. Meanwhile, the single person should be content with the “gift” of singleness.

Maken takes issue with this argument on several levels – and rightly so.

For one thing, she points out, *singleness* is not a gift. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul extols the gift of *celibacy* – the gift of being content to remain single in order to serve the Lord. But to those who lack the self-control which lies at the heart of celibacy, Paul says, “they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion” (1 Cor. 7:9).

*Celibacy* is, indeed, a gift that God gives to some people. But simply being single does not mean one has received the gift of celibacy.

What if you are single *and* you *desire* the blessings of marriage? Is it offensive to God if you actively seek marriage? Many in Christian circles have said yes. But that’s not the biblical answer. If God has shown us what is good, there is no sin in seeking that good thing. And marriage, according to God, is very good (Gen. 1:27-31; Gen. 2:18; Matt. 19:6; Prov. 18:22).

If marriage is so good (and it is!), then why doesn’t God arrange for more single people to be married? Maken suggests that part of the reason lies with the attitudes toward marriage fostered by our culture at large. Marriage is not valued as highly as it once was. This leads to less emphasis on marriage – and a greater acceptance of the idea that singleness is an equal alternative. In short, there’s no pressure on the younger generation to *pursue* marriage.

But pursuing marriage isn’t necessarily wrong. Yes, God is sovereign. But His sovereignty doesn’t remove our actions from the equation. Look at the birds of the air. In His sovereign goodness, God provides them with food (Matt. 6:26). But, Maken points out, “He doesn’t drop worms into their nests. They have to go out and search for them.”

There’s a lesson in that about how God provides for marriage, isn’t there?

A related argument often encountered by single Christians today is that God wants us to wait on His timing – Isa. 40:31. Patience is a virtue, after all, so we shouldn’t rush God.

In answer, Maken asks: “Is patience really a virtue when it delays God’s revealed will for us?”

It’s a fine question.

For those not gifted with chastity – not given the self-control necessary to contentedly serve God without a spouse – continued singleness comes at a cost. Singleness means doing without the *blessings* of marriage – the stability, companionship, spiritual accountability, children, and purpose for one’s work that marriage brings.

We know that God is sovereign; only He can provide those blessings. But if a person longs for those blessings, are they denying God’s sovereignty or rebelling against His timing by actively pursuing marriage?

An analogy might be helpful in answering the question. There are many blessings in a rich agricultural harvest: pride, joy, profit and financial security among them. We know that God is sovereign, and only He can provide a rich harvest. So ... is the farmer denying God’s sovereignty and refusing to be patient if he fertilizes and tills his fields, uses equipment to plant his seed, and sprays for weeds? Of course not! He’s simply using the opportunities and gifts God has given in order to obtain the blessing God has taught him to seek!

So too with marriage. Rather than a denial of God’s sovereignty or evidence of impatience, those who “cultivate” and “sow” in an effort to find a Godly spouse are wisely using the opportunities and gifts God provides in order to obtain the blessing He has taught them to seek!

“When we know what God wants for us, we should pursue it,” Maken explains. “God made us, and He knows what’s best.”

But shouldn’t the single Christian simply strive to be content in his situation, as Paul seems to teach in 1 Tim. 6:6-9 and Php. 4:11-12?

Maken points out that this is a common bit of counsel heard by single Christian adults. They are taught time and again that it is wrong – even sinful – to not be content with their situation. Sometimes they are even warned that God will not give them a spouse until they learn to be content without one.

“Jesus is all you need,” the counsel goes. “Learn to be content with *Him* as your spouse.”

Problem is, we were *created* to desire the blessings inherent in marriage. It was *God Himself* who said, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18) – and He said it when man had *perfect communion with God!*

God gave mankind certain desires for good reason. We experience hunger because God created us to need food. We desire a warm and dry home because God created us to need shelter. And we experience the desire for a spouse because (with rare exception) God created us to be united in

marriage as husband and wife. That desire for a spouse is not a *substitute* for God, to be sure; but neither is our relationship with God a substitute for the marriage relationship He designed.

All of which means that *it's OK* to be discontented about not (yet) being married. It's not OK to grow bitter or obsessive about it. But it *is* OK to express sorrow regarding your situation, as David did in so many of the Psalms. It *is* OK to weep and to pray, as Hannah did when she desired a child (1 Samuel 1). And it *is* OK to pursue a spouse, as Jacob did while seeking Rachel's hand (Genesis 29).

But wait a minute – isn't singleness really an *opportunity* that allows a person to know and serve God more fully? And what's the hurry, anyway? Shouldn't you enjoy all of the opportunities that singleness affords?

We'll look at those bits of counsel next time, before beginning to ponder how single Christians can properly *pursue* marriage – and how their married brothers and sisters in Christ can help.

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## ***Evaluating Our Counsel to Christian Singles, Part 2***

*Being single is an opportunity to know and serve the Lord more fully. And since God has given you the gift of singleness, you should make the most of it, until God decides that it's time for you to marry.*

That's the counsel many single Christian adults hear from others in the church today. But we really need to ask: is that counsel *Biblical*?

Author Debbie Maken doesn't think so. And I agree – at least in part because the counsel is too general to be helpful to specific individuals.

For the past month, I've been working my way through Maken's book about marriage and singleness among Christians – and the more I've studied her book, the more I've come to appreciate her insights.

Maken begins by showing the high view of marriage taught by the Bible and reflected in earlier Christian societies. She then evaluates what the modern church is doing and saying, before presenting suggestions for a better way.

In my last pastor's page, I laid out three kinds of counsel that often are received by single adults in the church. Today, we'll look at two others.

There have been times that I have thought: "What our single adults really need to do is get more involved in missions and service ministries. That may even be the reason they're single!"

But Maken points out: although such counsel may be perfect for some singles, it's not good counsel *simply because* they are single. "Being single by default," she explains, "is no reason to become a missionary by default."

It's true that Paul said, "It is good for them to remain single as I am" (1 Cor. 7:8). After all, "The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided" (7:32-34a).

But notice Paul's concern – that the unmarried are able to focus on pleasing the Lord. That doesn't necessarily mean that their lives are *free* for service. Someone still has to shop for groceries, do the laundry, and pay the bills – and the single person doesn't have a spouse to share the burden.

Singleness *can* be an asset to missionary service – no doubt about that. Paul and Barnabas are excellent examples.

But Peter did missionary work in the company of his wife (1 Cor. 9:5), as did Aquila with his wife Priscilla (Acts 18). Marriage is not necessarily a barrier to missionary work. In fact, depending on the field of labor, marriage and a family can be a distinct advantage.

Here's the point: God doesn't call people to be missionaries or to take on a particular kind of service on the basis of their singleness. Those who feel called to missionary service ought to consider a whole range of factors, their family status being one of many. Along similar lines, God doesn't reserve service ministries only for those who are single. *All* of God's people are called to serve, according to their gifts and opportunities (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:4-11).

When it comes to how we minister, singleness certainly is one factor to be considered – but it's not the *only* factor. And being single doesn't necessarily mean one is called to the mission field!

Moving on to another concern, Maken points out that some of the counsel single Christians receive is unhelpful simply because it's wrong. Such is the case when we confuse *singleness* with *celibacy*.

There is only one proper context for the expression of sexual desire, and that place is within the confines of marriage. However, Maken points out, being single doesn't eliminate that desire. Sometimes, quite the opposite is true!

Too often, the counsel single Christians receive from their minister and trusted elders is simply to avoid temptation. And, to be sure, Christians should strive to avoid temptations. But how does one avoid the desire that gives the temptation its power, when that desire is something we're "wired" to have?

Part of the confusion stems from improperly equating two distinct concepts. "Singleness" is the state of anyone who is unmarried. It's a term that describes a person's situation. But "celibacy" is a gift from God, in which He removes desire for the sort of intimacy that ought only to be expressed in marriage.

Jesus said that some people are given the gift of celibacy for the sake of their service to the Kingdom (Matt. 19:8-9). Paul echoed that instruction (1 Cor. 7:7-8), teaching that the gift enables a person to be "firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control" (1 Cor. 7:37). That's celibacy – and it is *not* a gift given to *all* unmarried Christians.

That's not to say that it's OK for some single Christians to give in to those desires! But it *does* mean that we shouldn't limit our counsel to: "Be chaste."

We need to recognize that the desire for marital intimacy is natural – not sinful. God is the One who said, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18). Then He gave Adam a wife who would help him in his work, take away his loneliness, give him children – and give him a Godly way to express the desire he felt for intimacy.

Although Paul commended the blessings of celibacy for the sake of serving the Lord, he recognized that God does not give that gift to all. Therefore he said, "because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband" (1 Cor. 7:2). And: "if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (7:9). And: "let them marry – it is no sin" (7:36).

Statistically speaking, the church isn't doing a great job at leading its young people to save themselves for marriage. Maken suggests that at least part of the reason is that we're telling our young adults to *restrain* a passion which, within marriage, is *good* – but we're not offering them much hope that the restraint is *temporary*. We're not showing them a light at the end of the tunnel.

Instead, we're telling them to wait, then leaving them to ponder the implications. Meanwhile, they live in a culture where young adults are encouraged to "enjoy being single" for as long as they would like.

Maken says, "Because their very natures will drive them to seek adult pleasures, the only way to subdue and delay [their desires] is if the hope of marriage actually exists."

In other words, we need to balance the counsel to *wait until marriage* ... with the counsel to *seek marriage*. "We must acknowledge human nature and have the faith to believe that God will bless those who pursue His chosen outlet for the expression of that nature," Maken explains. "We must preach abstinence, but hand in hand with God's design for us to be married. There must be hope of a timely marriage for abstinence to be successful."

In saying this, Maken is simply echoing what our forefathers wisely counseled in ages past. Speaking with his characteristic boldness, Martin Luther declared: "Whoever finds himself unsuited to the celibate life should see to it right away that he has something to do and to work at it; then let him strike out in God's name and get married."

Of course, it's not as easy as striking out and buying a car, is it?

But neither should the pursuit of marriage be frowned upon – or left as a burden to be borne *alone* by our single members. The church is called to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:32).

*How* we are to help bear the burdens of our single brothers and sisters – that's the question we'll turn to in the coming weeks as we begin wrapping up this discussion.

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## *A New Way to Play the Dating Game*

Something has changed with regard to singleness and marriage – and not for the better.

After five pastor's pages examining singleness and marriage, that's my conclusion: our society's view of marriage has undergone *an unhealthy change*.

Once upon a time, not so long ago, marriage was a goal at which young people aimed. Those who failed to do so were seen as immature. To willingly remain single was to invite questions, gossip, and even a measure of scorn – because society recognized marriage as God's intention for most people.

Today, however, teens and young adults are told that they need not pursue marriage. Since God is sovereign, they should simply await marriage, learning to be content with singleness until God brings them a spouse. Those who do otherwise are thought to be presumptuous – unwilling to wait on the Lord.

Single adults hear that their singleness is a *gift* – generally without hearing how that gift is supposed to bless them or others. They're reminded that Paul told single believers, "it is good for them to remain single as I am" (1 Cor. 7:8), because "he who refrains from marriage will do even better" (1 Cor. 7:38).

However, no one talks to them about how that counsel related to the time of persecution in which Paul wrote. No one talks about the difference between the *state* of singleness and the *gift* of celibacy. Seldom do they hear Paul's counsel, "Because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband" (1 Cor. 7:2).

In short, singleness is extolled, complacency is excused, and marriage is not honored as an institution which God created at the start to be a rich blessing. The proverb is seldom heard which declares: "He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord" (Prov. 18:22).

So ... what?

What should we do about it? Is there anything we *can* do about it?

Debbie Maken thinks there *are* a few things – and I plan to wrap up this series, over the next few weeks, by exploring those suggestions.

The first suggestion Maken offers is that we start encouraging our young adults to say no to the *game* that dating has become.

In recent years, a number of authors have proposed that we shun dating entirely. They call us to return to the old practices of supervised courtship or even arranged marriage.

I appreciate their enthusiasm. But I'm pessimistic about their success.

Each society has certain *conventions* – norms and practices people are expected to follow. Sometimes, Christians absolutely *must* ignore those conventions. But when possible, it's wise to work for change *within* society's conventions. To a large degree, that's what Maken advocates.

First, she points out the many ways in which "the dating game" is broken. She convincingly demonstrates that the modern practice of dating is inefficient, unfair, uncomfortable, and fraught with pitfalls both practical and moral. Dating often leaves women unprotected. For men and women alike, it frequently results in wasted time and lost innocence.

However, dating is the system our society uses to match man to woman. And there are ways to make dating *useful* – minimizing its pitfalls and maximizing its potential for creating Godly marriages.

First we need to be clear on the purpose of dating. Whether consciously or not, people always have a reason for dating. They might want entertainment. They might be looking for friendship. They might be seeking a husband or wife. They might be looking for the benefits of marriage without the commitment.

It's legitimate (and wise) to ask about intentions early in the process.

Of course, done without a bit of tact, this could scare off the best of suitors. But why not make the first "date" a low-pressure encounter in a public area where the two of you can get to know each other through talking? (Yes, a meal is a better first date than a movie.) Sure, the questions will begin on a superficial level. But as the conversation progresses, some careful questions can help you to see whether the other person is mature and looking for marriage – or not.

Young people, don't be afraid to ask questions about goals, plans, and faith. Chatting about music and work is fine – but don't stop there. Ask about their church, their family, their thoughts on marriage and having children. If such questions produce wide-eyed silence or a quick change of the subject ... there's your warning flag. If you're looking for someone mature and marry-able, this probably isn't him/her. (Or maybe it is – if you're willing to wait a few years!)

If the first date goes well, look into the person's history. Maken advises, "If you're buying a car, you want to know about mileage, service history, and previous accidents. This is the rest of your life we're talking about – don't require less from a date than you would of a car dealer!"

That's good counsel. Ask whether the person has dated much. Ask if he/she has ever been serious with someone. If so, gently ask what happened. If you have friends in common, ask for their opinion of the person. The more you learn early in the relationship, the better-equipped you are to decide whether it's a relationship to pursue.

When you find a person who does seem worth pursuing, be honest. Tell him or her that you believe marriage is a blessing. If that sends the person running ... well, that's hard. But it's better than investing two or three years before figuring out that this person has no interest in commitment.

And if the person says he or she *is* interested in marriage, see if the words are followed by actions. Does this person seem interested in learning about what makes you tick? Are they interested in meeting your family and friends? Are they eager to talk about serious things, attend church, pray with you? *Will this person make a Godly spouse?*

In short, Christians need to learn to *date with a purpose*.

Don't just go with the flow, hoping things will work out. Prov. 18:22 says: "He who *finds* a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord." That implies *searching*. Dating needs to be a tool that is used to *seek out* a Godly spouse. And that requires being *intentional* about how you date.

Such purposeful dating also requires learning to say no. When it becomes clear that the other person isn't willing to commit or won't be a Godly spouse, don't pretend. To continue a relationship that clearly isn't bearing fruit is like going to a college that you know won't give you a degree. Why waste the time God has given you, pursuing a person who won't help you to serve God?

That might sound less than romantic. Sorry about that.

But understand: a Godly marriage can and should be *tremendously* romantic – infinitely more so than any dating relationship ever could be. Dating is not the goal, but the *path* to the goal.

To put it in different terms: a person who wants a fulfilling career doesn't just take the first job that comes along. But neither does he change jobs every year or two. To find a fulfilling career, you take the time to figure out what your work suits you, and then you carefully investigate to learn which companies will enable you to do that work.

In seeking out a Godly spouse, dating is the period of careful investigation. It's not the goal, but the process that leads to the goal. And if you do it right – with much care, prayer, and purpose – it *can* lead to an incredible, Godly marriage. But only if you keep your eye on the goal – and on God.

But you don't have to do it alone! Next time, we'll talk about how to enlist some help in finding Mr. or Miss Right.

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## ***Enlisting Agency: Applying Old Rules to a New Game***

Finding Mr. or Miss Right isn't easy – and today's dating scene doesn't make it any easier.

In recent pastor's pages, we've been considering singleness and marriage among Christians in today's world. In the process, we've seen that society's view of marriage has undergone some unhealthy changes.

On the whole, marriage is no longer the goal at which young people intentionally and carefully aim. As a result, extended singleness has become the norm, rather than the exception; and people are marrying later – if at all.

And it's hurting our young adults.

As a congregation that has been richly blessed with children, this should cause us some concern. For the sake of our children and young people, we need to be asking how we can help them to overcome the challenges of our culture in order to experience the blessing of Godly marriages.

Toward the end of her book on the subject, Debbie Maken points out that the Bible does more than to extol Godly marriage. It also shows parents taking responsibility for helping their children to find a Godly spouse.

Take the example of Abraham and Isaac. When Abraham saw that his son had grown mature but lacked a wife, he took action. Since he was too old to go himself, he sent a trusted servant to find Isaac a suitable bride. And so Rebekah entered the picture.

When Isaac had grown old, his son Jacob was in need of a wife. Seeing their son's need, his parents taught him what kind of woman to seek and urged him to seek her out. (No doubt Esau's unwise choices served as a strong motivation – see Gen. 26:34-35 and Gen. 27:46.)

But ... wait a minute – weren't those arranged marriages?

Well, the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah certainly was. But even if arranged marriages are distasteful to us, we can learn some helpful principles from that account, as well as from Jacob's experience pursuing Rachel.

Consider Abraham's course of action, as related by Genesis 24.

First, he limited the scope of the search, ensuring that his son would not seek a wife from among the ungodly nations of Canaan. Then he sent his servant to find a woman who was both suitable and willing. The servant went about his task prayerfully – asking God to lead him to the woman of His choosing and to give success. He brought with him evidence of Isaac's wealth, in order to show that Isaac was capable of caring for a wife. And he sought the permission of both Rebekah and her family.

Forget for a moment that this was an "arranged marriage," and consider the wisdom of the help Abraham provided.

- ✓ Isaac was given help in finding a wife who could share his faith.
- ✓ God's guidance and blessing were sought from the very start.
- ✓ Care was taken to show Isaac's maturity and ability to care for a wife.
- ✓ The woman's family was involved in the process, ensuring that she was protected, provided for, and satisfied by the result.

We see many of the same elements when Jacob goes off to seek a wife, as related in Genesis 28-29. Of course, Jacob acted on his own behalf, rather than through the actions of another. However, he didn't just run off to Paddan-Aram and start asking women out on dates.

- ✓ Jacob received the counsel of his parents concerning what kind of woman he should seek.
- ✓ He sought God's blessing on his search.
- ✓ He asked the permission of her father, Laban, and submitted to his oversight throughout the engagement.
- ✓ He agreed to serve Laban for a period of time, in order to show his maturity and ability to provide.

Do you see the common threads? Godly counsel and guidance from parents. Fervent prayer. Demonstrated maturity. Submission to and involvement by the woman's father.

Those same elements have been present in later Jewish and Christian cultures throughout the centuries – for a reason. God's people have recognized that young people don't inherently know how to find a Godly spouse.

- They need guidance and encouragement from their parents.
- They need to fill the process with clear reliance on God.
- Young men need to show maturity, pursuing a wife-to-be with purpose.
- Young women need fathers to guard their hearts and their honor.

But very little of that is present in our modern dating practices. Instead, parents often feel as though they would be intruding to offer their counsel or oversight. Rare is the young man that seeks permission from a young woman's father to pursue her hand in marriage. Exceedingly rare is the father who would require it of the young man.

Countless young people continue in unmarried loneliness.

And that's no coincidence. A young man has little motivation to pursue marriage when he has unlimited access to his girlfriend's companionship and affection, while also being free to run off and play as much as he wants.

As Maken puts it, "just as familiarity breeds contempt, access breeds complacency."

The answer is *agency*. Our young adults need assistance – and the adults in their lives are called to provide it.

Parents – especially fathers – *need* to get involved in the process.

Young ladies, your fathers can protect you and help you to find a Godly husband. Young men, your parents can give you wisdom, and her parents can encourage and motivate you. God gave you these parents to bless you – but only if you are willing to submit to them (Eph. 6:1-3).

The only real argument *against* having parents involved in the process involves a desire to remain immature for as long as possible. And I'm hoping that our young people aren't buying those arguments. After all, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord" (Prov. 18:22).

But how can we enlist parents without reverting to the old idea of arranged marriages? And is there a role for other mature adults – like the elders and mature members of the church – to assist?  
Stay tuned next week!

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## *Enlisting Agency Part 2: Sharing the Burden*

Being a single adult isn't easy in today's world.

Where do you go to find the kind of man or woman who would make a Godly spouse? How do you move things along from casual dating to courtship without seeming pushy? How do you avoid potentially wasting some of your strongest years, wondering if marriage is going to "happen" for you?

With our culture's current practice of no-commitment dating, there are no guarantees. The rate of marriages is on a steady decline, as young adults are counseled to enjoy their "freedom" before getting "tied down" with marriage.

But at the very start, God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18). And His Word assures us, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord" (Prov. 18:22).

So how can the mature members of God's family ... help?

Last week, I said parents – especially fathers – can and should help.

From examples in the Bible, we learn that single young adults need their parents' guidance in seeking a Godly spouse. Young men need to be encouraged to show maturity and to pursue a wife with purpose. And young women need fathers who will guard their hearts and their honor.

That's not to say that we need to return to the practice of arranged marriages! But wise and loving parents can go a long way in sharing the burden of seeking a Godly spouse!

In her book on the subject, Debbie Maken relates how she enlisted her parents to this role. She began by asking them to help her find men who would make good husbands. When she was introduced to someone who interested her, she sought her parents' opinion – even as she herself took some initiative.

Early in the process, said Maken, "I asked him what he was looking for. What were his hopes for our relationship. Did he have any specific goals in mind in terms of how we interacted? ... We talked and came up with a plan that would allow both of us to discover if we were compatible."

Soon thereafter, they met one another's parents. His parents asked questions aimed at gauging whether she would make a Godly wife and mother. Her parents asked about his intentions, his ability to provide, and his faith.

The help was invaluable. "If you're looking for a job, you enlist people in a position to help you. It's the same with looking for a spouse. It helps to have some friends in your corner instead of going it alone," she explained.

Parents can have a special role in this, because they love and know their adult child better than anyone else. Fathers are called to protect and teach their children, even in adulthood. Mothers are called to nurture and guide.

There are at least five roles parents (and fathers especially) can fill in serving their single adult children as "agents."

First, they can *protect*. Daughters, especially, need someone to protect their interests and their honor. It can be difficult for a young lady to ask if her boyfriend is serious about their future. However, fathers can (and should!) inquire about intentions, making it clear that those who aren't serious are not welcome to waste their daughter's prime years and set her up for heartache.

But sons, too, need protecting. They need protection from being blinded by beauty to the extent that they fail to see spiritual immaturity. They need help seeing when they are setting themselves up for excessive temptation. They need someone to point out when they ought to step up – or to step away.

Second, parents can serve as *scouts*. Two sets of eyes are better than one, and three sets are better yet. Because parents know their children, they are well suited to discern whether another young adult's faith, attitudes, interests and maturity are a match for those of their child.

Third, they can serve as a *filter*. Young people, your parents will see things that your eyes – blinded by beauty or excitement – cannot. When they see warning signs, take those signs seriously. And if they see a serious problem (for example, evidence of insincere Christian faith), take them at their word.

Fourth, parents can help as *schedulers*. If a young man truly loves a young woman, he will grow intent on marriage. But if the relationship stalls, a father has the unique opportunity to jumpstart the

situation. With his daughter's knowledge, he can remind the young man that he needs to demonstrate biblical manliness and pursue the course of action God has prescribed (see 1 Cor. 7:9,36) – or to pursue someone else.

And fifth – but most importantly – parents can and must provide *prayer support*. Dad and Mom, begin praying for your child's spouse *today* – even if that child is still in diapers. Pray all the more fervently as they enter their teenage years. Pray that your children will have wisdom; that they will seek your help; that they will find a godly spouse at an early age; and that they will enjoy marriage as the blessing God intended it to be.

But what about the rest of us? Does the rest of the church have any role in all of this? Is there a way that *we* can share the burden? *You bet!*

Elders, you especially should be helping our young people to find the blessing of marriage. In catechism class and wherever else you interact with them, talk to our young people about the blessing of a Godly marriage. *Show* them how much of a blessing it is to *you*. Ask them how their budding relationships are going – and whether marriage is on the horizon. If the relationship grows long, urge them to marry, rather than burn with passion.

But not only the elders.

All of us can (and should) encourage our young people and young adults to honor and pursue marriage. That encouragement could be as simple as inviting some of the young people over for supper and getting to know them. As they enjoy your hospitality, let them see the blessings of marriage in a home other than their own. If asked, be willing to offer advice – or even to keep your eyes open for potential “candidates.”

And above all, let us pray for our singles. Let us bring them before the Lord continually – even as we continually pray (I hope) for our young children, for the marriages in our church, and for our elderly members. Let us intercede on their behalf, asking God to bring them Godly spouses.

One last word needs to be said about this idea of “agency” – specifically addressing our young people.

Young people and young adults: Does the idea of getting your parents involved sound ... unromantic? Lame? *Blech?* Even *eeuwww?*

Do me – and yourself – a favor: don't write it off just yet. Instead, think about it for a bit. Pray about it for a day. And then read this column again.

Finding a Godly spouse in our culture is *not* an easy task. And it's far harder when you try to do it on your own, without any help. You probably wouldn't try to find a job, or a college, or even a car all on your own. No – you would enlist the help of anyone willing and able.

Your parents – and the other adults of the church – are willing and able.

You don't have to do it alone. God gave you parents to bless you. And He made you part of a church family that is here to support you.

But won't their help take all the romance out of it?

Not hardly! Understand: romance isn't flowers, or candlelit dinners, or moonlight strolls. *Romance is what happens when someone desires you enough to pursue you!*

In our no-commitment culture, there's little incentive for *pursuit*. Why pursue someone when you can see them all you want, for as long as you want? Why pursue them into commitment, when you can keep your options open?

But with the involvement of parents and others who love you, there's someone there to make it clear: “this is a limited time opportunity.” That inspires *pursuit*, in the Godly sense. And *that* makes romance essential, from the start.

Give it some thought. Pray about it – sincerely.

And next time, we'll wrap things up by addressing “biblical manhood.”

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## *Shepherding the Flock Into Marriage*

The marriage rate in the U.S. is on a steady – and steep – downward slope.

A decade ago, in 2000, some 57 percent of all American adults were married. In 2009, it was down to 52 percent – the lowest percentage since the U.S. Census Bureau began collecting that information. During the same period, the percentage of American adults aged 25 to 34 who were married dropped from 55 to 45 percent. In the mid-1960s, 80 percent of that group was married.

What's happening?

There are lots of answers in society at large. But we're concerned with the answers inside the church – where the marriage rate is no different.

Over the past couple of months, we've explored some of the answers to that question. One thing we've clearly noted is that our younger generations don't pursue marriage with the *intentionality* of former generations.

That relaxed attitude toward marriage rests on an *individualistic* view of marriage. Marriage and its pursuit (or avoidance) are seen as each person's choice, period. If you want to get married ... <shrug>. If you don't ... <shrug>.

Thing is, it *matters* whether our people marry. In society at large, marriage brings stability and growth. And the same is true in the church. The church has long recognized that one of the purposes of marriage is the growth of God's Kingdom – both physically, through children, and spiritually, through the discipleship and maturity that marriage fosters.

When someone decides to not marry, that decision doesn't just affect one person. Someone else is deprived of a wife. The church is deprived of a growing young family and of the children who would form the next generation of disciples. Parents are deprived of the blessing of grandchildren.

In other words, attitudes and decisions about marriage have consequences that affect both society and the church.

I point that out not to foster feelings of guilt. Marriage isn't something you can just up and *do*, if only you set your mind to it. That's one of the reasons we've considered the need for the church as a whole to help bear the burden.

However, the willingness of the church is of little help if single adults – and especially single *men* – aren't committed to *pursuing* marriage. And that's one more place where the church needs to help bear the burden of its adult singles.

The Bible gives to the man the burden of initiating a marriage relationship. From the very start, God called Adam to *seek* “a helper fit for him” (Gen. 2:20). When he found Eve, God declared: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). It is the man who leaves and cleaves – the man who takes the initiative.

That's not to say that the woman is powerless – passively waiting to be found. Women are made in God's image. No less than men, they are called to develop their gifts and to pursue growth in Christ-likeness.

Young women are called to cultivate “the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious” (1 Pet. 3:4). The wise young lady will model herself after the excellent wife of Proverbs 31, cultivating wisdom and skill, generosity and trustworthiness, counting these as having greater worth than physical beauty that passes away.

But it is the young man who – like Jacob – is called to pursue the woman he desires, showing himself worthy and proving that he can provide for her.

That's not going to happen, however, if no one ever *teaches* him that he is called to pursue a wife. Nor will it happen if he can receive the benefits of marriage – or even some of them – without the commitment of marriage. Why get married when you can have the companionship of a woman, enjoy her cooking, even enjoy some of the physical benefits – while still having the freedom to run and play, buy expensive toys, and stay out late with the guys? Why grow up, when you can keep enjoying the benefits of adolescence?

That's where we, as the church, have a calling to disciple the coming generation of young men.

Fathers, first and foremost, need to take an active role on this front. We need to be teaching our young men that marriage is a great blessing. In part, we do that by cultivating *our* marriages and delighting in *our* wives. But we also need to speak – clearly telling our boys and our young men that marriage is one of the greatest gifts God could give us.

As they mature, we need to shepherd our young men in their relationships. When they start showing interest in girls, talk to them about what they find attractive – and about what they *should* find attractive. Teach them the value of the “imperishable beauty” that increases as the years pass and faith grows.

When they get old enough to date, emphasize to them that dating has a purpose. Dating should be done with the goal of finding a wife – or not done at all. (Remember what God says about fleeing temptation? See 1 Cor. 10:13. And remember 1 Cor. 7:2 – marriage was given as the antidote to temptation!)

As dating gets serious – and assuming that the young people are equally yoked – fathers need to encourage their sons to make the commitment, rather than stringing a young lady along for years. They need to be told to grow up.

But fathers aren't alone in that calling! Elders, you are to shepherd and be examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:1-4). Treat those young men as your own! Use catechism classes, family visits and private conversations to teach them about the value of marriage – and the need to pursue it wisely and intentionally.

Nor should the elders be alone in offering such counsel.

You young married men have a great opportunity to shape the generation following you. Show them what it means to delight in the wife of your youth! Tell them what a great blessing marriage is! When you see them starting to date, talk to them about the importance of finding a Godly wife – and pursuing her!

You older men, too. You have the experience – and those young men respect you. They will listen, eagerly, if you show interest in them.

And let's not forget to help our young ladies.

Our mature women have the opportunity – and the calling – to shape and mold our young women into godly wives-to-be (Titus 2:3-5). Don't waste that opportunity! Talk to them about the blessings of marriage, the joy of nurturing your husband and children, the rewards of cleaving to your husband as the church cleaves to Christ. Gently warn them against wasting time on men who aren't Godly or who fear commitment. Show them you care.

We also must *protect* our young ladies. When young men start calling, a father needs to get over his shyness and show that his daughter has a protector. If a young man wants to pursue her, he needs to show that he is a Godly and responsible young man, willing to submit to the Lord – and to Daddy.

Dads, the dating age brings a great opportunity to disciple the potential father of your grandchildren. Take the opportunity! Ask him to help you fix something. Take him hunting, fishing, hiking. Use the time to discuss what a Godly husband is. Gently explain that your daughter is worth nothing less.

Yes, some young men will run away from that kind of approach. That's OK. Their flight shows that they weren't mature enough for your daughter anyway.

But other young men will accept (even welcome) the interest you show. They will respect you for protecting your daughter – and they will treat her accordingly. And you will have begun a relationship that will bear fruit in the years to come, if God sees fit to allow that relationship to continue.

Here's my plea: let's not leave our young adults to fend for themselves. Instead, let us shepherd, nurture, disciple and teach them as they become adults and learn to pursue that excellent gift God has given us in marriage.

It's a fine line we have to walk – both as parents with our children, and as fellow members of the church. But remember what the church vows to do when our children are baptized. We agree – God helping us – that we will “receive this child in love, pray for him, help care for his instruction in the faith, and encourage and sustain him in the fellowship of believers.”

Can we keep that vow without carefully disciplining these young adults as they approach the most significant human relationship they will ever enter?