

Article 1 "A Better Way"
(Contains Seven Daily devotionals)
Are You Future Focused?

Lam 1:9b ...she did not consider her future. NIV

Back in my college days, I had some pretty harebrained ideas. It is not that I don't still have harebrained ideas as an old man, I just have the wisdom not to actually follow through with them anymore. One of these foolhardy ideas which I actually followed through was riding bulls in a couple of University Intramural Rodeos. When asked in later years why a person does such a thing - I honestly have to respond, "I don't know." Why does a small child think a skunk needs to be held and cuddled? Why does a teenager think a bridge is a diving board for jumping into the river below? Maybe it is the Adrenaline. But whatever the reason, man in his infinite wisdom seems to have a way of conjuring up irrational, death defying events, what ought not be done, labeling them entertainment or sports, and seducing millions to come and pay to see the attraction. So, what makes bull riding so appealing to spectators probably has more to do with bull stomping than bull riding.

In keeping with that thought, if a first-class bull-stomping was what you came for, the attraction this day was definitely worth a million dollars. But I am getting ahead of myself. I need to introduce you to one of my college friends, Bubba. I have more stories to tell about Bubba and myself than a dog has fleas. If it took two and required little or no brains, we were your men. So, when my college fraternity needed a sucker to sit a bull for a few intramural points, I was the first, and in fact, the only one to volunteer. However, it didn't take much persuading, and Bubba was ready to ride as well. Really folks, it seemed like a good idea at the time. You have heard the saying, "misery loves company." I am convinced this is true and, in fact, is the reason rednecks run in packs, or at least in pairs.

We were not your normal rednecks who would jump into some actions with no more serious thought than, "Hey Guys, watch this!" we did our homework. We practiced religiously on a bucking barrel for a whole two weeks. We bought all the right gear: hat, boots, jeans, Copenhagen. For two weeks we were big brave professional bull riders. But sooner or later you gotta pay the piper, and so came the day of the big event. There were no droves of beautiful girls who came to cheer us on. There was no prize money to be won. The best we could hope for was a belt buckle that in essence said, "Been there, done that." But at that moment in my life, I don't recall wanting anything more than I wanted that buckle.

Bubba must have felt the same way. Fact is, he was so intent on winning that he devised a plan. You see, in watching the early contestants riding ahead of us, it was quickly determined that "spurring," or anything else one might do to increase the point value of the ride, was irrelevant. It became more apparent with each swing of the gate that if anyone just stayed on the bull, they were gonna win. So that was Bubba's plan. He stated it with such resolve that I was sure he was the first one of us that had entertained such a notion. To ensure that this would happen, he not only wrapped the cinch-type apparatus that kept one attached to the bull around his hand once - as was the prescribed fashion of doing so, but he continued to wrap until there was nothing left to wrap. So when the gate opened, I was absolutely sure his *hand* was securely fastened to the bull. However, his head, back, butt, legs and feet did not share the same firm attachment.

This, of course, is not an altogether bad thing, as nobody in their right mind would want to be superglued to the back of a bull. I believe that there is a limit to the amount of quality time one wants to spend on the back of a 1,500-pound horned beast. Here is the problem folks. Unless the hand becomes detached simultaneously with the rest of your body, the rest of the body parts will follow the hand's lead when attached to an object of greater velocity and weight. In this case, the smaller human body attached by a single hand cannot exert enough resistance or friction once unseated to overpower

the momentum of the much larger angry beast.

It wasn't as bad as you might think..... for the first second.

We used to count it this way when I was a kid: one thousand and one, one thousand and two, one thousand and three, one thousand and four, one thousand and five, one thousand and six. It really doesn't seem that long. If you Rodeo buffs think I got it wrong, remember this was an intramural rodeo. As far as I know, none, and I mean none, of us had ever ridden before. So the time required for us to stay aboard the beast was reduced to just six seconds. Don't seem long at all, does it? Unless you are the one on the back of the bull.

Well, back to Bubba. Like I said, the first second went well. From where I was standing it didn't look like the second and third seconds went as well. My friend was still on the bull alright, just as he had planned. However, he was more on the side than the top. By the sixth second, I am not sure you would call it bull RIDING at all, although Bubba *was* still attached to the bull. It was more like "bull stomping" with the bull on top. What made it precarious though, was that the bull didn't know the ride was over; and he was bucking and kicking like he was still being ridden. There was no one on top of him, however, just this hand stuck up there. He was having a hard time with this prescribed routine though, because he kept tripping up and stepping on my friend who was still "riding" underneath.

In my opinion, Bubba made the six seconds and should have gotten the buckle. Judges didn't see it my way though. Fact is, Bubba was the only one that day to stay WITH a bull for a whole six seconds. Really, I think he was ready to go professional because he stayed with that bull a good ten or fifteen seconds. Nobody was really counting though. We were all distracted laughing at the silly clowns and their crazy antics as they tried to free my buddy's hand and consequently the rest of his body from the underside of the bull. It was quite entertaining.

However, you know the old saying, "It's all fun and games till somebody gets hurt." It proved to be true here as well. I really felt sorry for those clowns, they were doing some dandy didoes, but it got to a point where nobody was laughing. Don't know if they were worried about the bull breaking a leg as he tromped on old Bubba or my buddy just staying alive. But the demeanor of the crowd changed drastically to almost a horrified silence with a few groans.

Now folks, I was watching all of this from behind the chute: A place relatively safe with good visibility. So it is really no surprise that once freed by the clowns, my friend instinctively ran for all he was worth right smack dab towards me. He jumped that eight-foot fence like it was nothing and landed right square in front of me on all fours.

Now I had a friend once whose favorite dog got hit by a car. My friend went out to pick that dog up to take it to the veterinarian and that dog bit him good. I knew this was one of those kind of situations.

So, I reached out and put my hand real gentle-like on my friend's back and said, "Bubba, you alright?"

Looking back, it seems like a really stupid thing to say. I could see the torn clothes, the dripping blood, and the clenched teeth through which he was breathing heavily. But He gave me a cordial breathy-type response just the same. He said to me, "Rick..."

To which I responded, "Yeah?"

He said, "When you think you are going to fall off..."

Then he paused in what seemed to be wincing pain and took several deep breaths, seemingly waiting for a response, so I said, "Yes?"

Still no immediate response came as I waited expectantly for his words of wisdom and the counsel of what now was the voice of experience. Then finally, amidst the blood and the pain came two words I will never forget. They were very applicable, but totally unexpected. My friend said, "...LET GO!"

It seemed like a good piece of advice. I know you are wondering, did he live? I reckon he did and he was none the less worse for wear. Doc said his brain was intact (which of course is debatable)

and that he would still be able to have children (which if they turn out like their father is a scary thought as well). I had a lot of great times growing up with Bubba. I bet to this day he doesn't know he taught me one of the most valuable lessons I ever learned in life. A college degree, a seminary degree, over 40 years in ministry and it still rates right up there as one of the most important things I ever learned. Folks, there is often in life a time to, "LET GO."

We too often hold onto things that are beating us up worse than that bull did Bubba. I have seen people hold onto some little pet sin until it took the very life out of them. I am convinced that when people learn to let go of the wrong stuff and hold on to the right stuff, life gets pretty good. But we get it all confused. Instead of letting go of bitterness we hold on to it. Instead of holding on to forgiveness we let go of it.

This, in a way, is a book about letting go and holding on. One of the things I believe we need to be willing to let go of is the old Traditional American Dating Paradigm (TADP). I believe there is something better to hold on to. A paradigm I am calling, "A Better Way." Why the Change? Because the old way of doing things is beating us up more than any bull on a rampage could do. The problem is that we are so tightly attached to the TADP we cannot break free easily.

I am over sixty years old and have been in ministry since I was nineteen years of age. In all those years I have performed many weddings. I know of only a few couples that used the Traditional American Dating Paradigm and still arrived at the marriage altar with body, heart, and mind intact. I am not saying it can't be done, I am just saying it is a tough bull to ride. So, if the "gold buckle" you are looking for includes bringing the best "you" that you possibly can bring to the marriage, then it seems reasonable to give "A Better Way" or some variation of it serious thought. If your intention is to continue to hold on to the Traditional American Dating Paradigm, don't give up on this study just yet. I believe that you will pick up a few ideas in this study that will help you be more effective in making even that paradigm work. If you are someone that is interested in starting marriage with as much in order as possible to make your coming marriage work, I believe God will make your journey through these pages something that will serve you well. If this is your first exposure to the concept of courting, I am especially excited to make this journey with you. Please know that the Traditional American Dating Paradigm is so deeply rooted into our society and our thinking that it may take years for you to reprogram your thinking completely. So be patient with yourself and others. As we begin our journey together let's stop for a moment and fast forward all the way to the end of the book.

Know Your Destination before you Begin Your Journey. Pack Your Bag Accordingly!



Sometimes the best place to start is by determining where you want to be in the end. If I don't want to be a doctor or have anything to do with medicine, then going to Medical School is probably not a real good move. The university study or technical training one decides to pursue is generally selected based upon the place one hopes to arrive vocationally someday.

In like fashion, the method one chooses to pursue a spouse should have a clear objective as to where one wants to arrive someday. So here is the five-million-dollar question: When you are standing at the marriage altar, about to say the words, "I Do," what do you want to bring and present to your

spouse before God as the building blocks for your future marriage? A First kiss? Sexual Purity? Loyalty and Trustworthiness? Self-control and Maturity? Biblical Wisdom and Spiritual Maturity? Financial Wisdom and Stability? A Pure Mind and a Pure Undamaged Heart?

Far too often I stand with couples who have none of these things. They bring: Rebellion and Anger, Unforgiveness and Bitterness, a Scarred and Broken Heart, Lust and Fornication, Self-indulgence and Shame, Greed and Arrogance. The list seems to be endless. On a positive note, I am never short on issues to work through during premarital counseling process.

What all couples must realize is that what they bring to the marriage altar will be the building blocks of their future marriage relationship and their future home. Bring the wrong stuff and you are destined to experience a lot of unnecessary heartache and pain. Good premarital counseling can help, but nothing, and I mean nothing, replaces the strong beginning you can give yourself by bringing the right stuff to the marriage altar. By bringing the Best “YOU” That you possibly can.

The stuff you are packing in that bag right now, whether you think you are preparing for marriage or not, will affect every aspect of your future marriage relationship. It will determine the quality of your honeymoon: no amount of money spent on the most exotic retreat can bring as much to that moment as your guarded heart and purity. It will determine the quality of your communication and intimacy: all the marriage counseling in the world will never bring the intimacy that a loyal, trustworthy, forgiving heart committed before God at the marriage altar to another will bring. No home is better prepared for children than the home built on respect, truthfulness, and humility. It is far easier and more productive to bring these things to the marriage altar than it is to grope for them desperately in a pastor's or counselor's office three years into marriage.

My Goal in writing this study is to help you reach the marriage altar with the very best building blocks possible. I want to challenge you to use the best tools for the task. I believe that to be the paradigm we are presenting here or some variation of it, could be that for you.

So, whether you choose to use “A Better Way”, the Traditional American Dating Paradigm, a Christian Dating Paradigm, a Courting Paradigm, or some various combination of the four, I just want you to get to the marriage altar with as much good stuff as you can cram into your bag. I desire to see you **build a marriage that will stand the test of time** and bring you every blessing that God intended to add to your life through marriage. So maybe the Goal really isn't the marriage altar at all. Maybe the real goal is the place you will be fifty years into your marriage. So with that in mind, let's give ourselves the best start that we can. As every runner knows, it is easier to win the race if one does not trip and fall leaving the starting blocks.

In these pages, we will be comparing all four of these paradigms, evaluating their strengths and weaknesses. We will lay out some warning signs so that you will be able to rationally evaluate whether or not the paradigm you are following is working as you desire it to. Hopefully, this will allow you to react before it is too late and something is lost or damaged that you had hoped to bring to your marriage in order to give it a strong start.

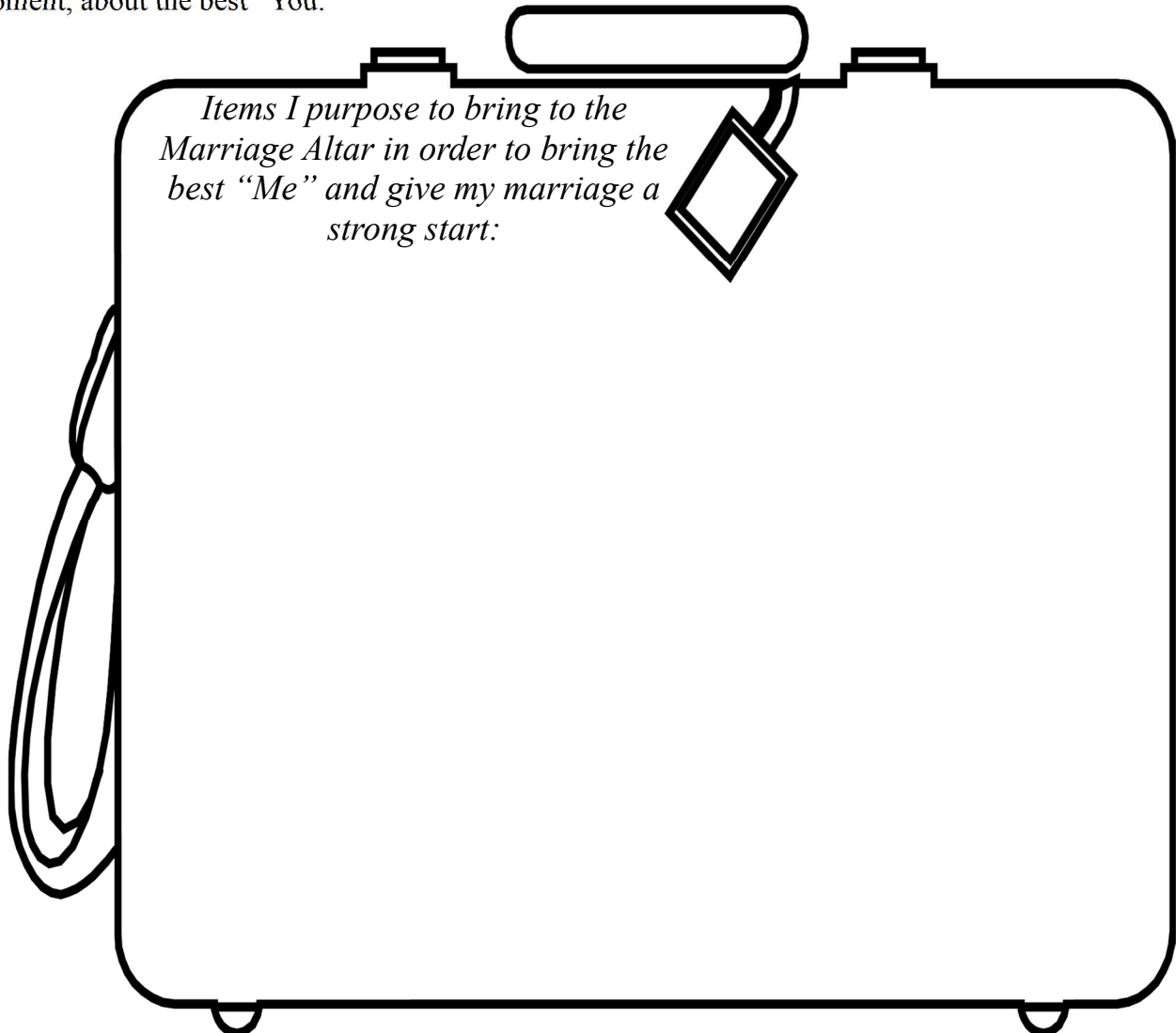
Take a minute and do a little thinking. List here the things that you consider to be significant in order to give the best start possible to your coming marriage relationship. Even if your marriage is years away and your list may change, it is not too early to start thinking about such things.

If your parents are going through this material also and even if they are not, this would be a good place to stop and do a little discussing with them. Ultimately, I don't believe your parents can make your list for you. However, you could sure benefit from their wisdom and experience by consulting them on what they have found to be significant foundational building blocks in their marriage.

Think of it like packing a bag for a journey. The journey begins at the place you are standing right now and ends at the marriage altar. When you arrive at that altar and open that bag what do you want in it? Trust me, it will be full of something. What if instead of blindly and haphazardly tossing things in a bag, we give careful consideration to that future event and intentionally put a few good

items in that bag. It can happen, but not if you try to pack the bag the day before the wedding. So start today. Think about what you want to bring in that bag to the marriage altar, write it down, and commit it to God.

Bubba's problem ultimately was that he wrapped his hand too tightly to the bull, and even when he wanted to let go, he couldn't. I believe we can wrap our mind, as it may be, too tightly to a paradigm that isn't working for us. I believe the lesson I learned from Bubba is your key to survival in this journey toward the marriage altar. **Be ready to quickly “let go” of any paradigm, or part of a paradigm, that looks or feels like it is about to leave you bruised and scarred.** The journey to the altar can be fun, but not if you make the ride under the bull. So be ready to let go, try a new idea or two, and I am confident God will bless you in your journey to the marriage altar. Think with me for a moment, about the best “You.”



Is it reasonable to assume that if the paradigm we are using on our road to marriage does not help and encourage us to bring the best “Me” (as you have defined above) into our marriage, that we should immediately stop and modify our paradigm or move to a different paradigm altogether?

If we agree upon this then our next step might be to officially identify our paradigm for interacting with the opposite sex, other possible paradigms, and a plan for making adjustments as needed. To discover your paradigm See the “Paradigm Attachment for Article 1” at <http://eastkelsobaptistchurch.com/> You will find it under Resources, “A Better Way.”

The following Pages contain seven daily devotionals. I believe we process things better in small bites over longer periods of time. Taking each day, one day at a time and working through the processes suggested will give you an opportunity to truly interact with the material and ideas presented here. May God Bless your Journey.

Packing Your Bag.

Day 1

Prov 22:3 A prudent man foresees the difficulties ahead and prepares for them; the simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences. TLB

I grabbed my bright orange backpack and started stuffing it with gear. Survival equipment went into the pack first. Hunting bear and elk in the Northwest can become life-threatening almost instantaneously. I wanted to be ready.

Since I was born and raised in the flatlands of Texas, the dense forest of the Northwest where I have lived and hunted for the past twenty years has always been intimidating to me. I have never been lost, but I don't want to be. Therefore, my GPS and several extra sets of batteries are always the first thing to go into my pack. I don't even have to think about it, that GPS is going every time. Even if I am very familiar with the area, that GPS is going. As I look at what I want on any future hunting trip, being lost is not a part of the equation. Thus, I plan accordingly.

What about you? As you are thinking ahead to the marriage altar, with a long-term view toward your "50th Wedding Anniversary," how do you want to prepare? What do you absolutely know you want to bring with you? Is there something that you want to be equipped with whether or not you ever really desperately need it?

Over the next few days we will look at several pieces of "survival gear" that I believe are non-optional. As a *prudent man foresees the difficulties ahead and prepares for them* should not a part of the investment we make in our young adult years include preparations that will enable us to avoid some of the more common marriage difficulties? As you live in the single years, think beyond the moment, look ahead, and invest in your future marriage as you live for the Glory of God.

Marriage can be a dense forest, plagued with fog, rainstorms, and a host of hostile situations. But if the right equipment has been packed, the worst situations are easily overcome. In fact, proper packing makes it possible for us to even ENJOY difficult experiences that might destroy others.

Prayer: Lord teach us to be prudent as we think of our future and marriage. Guide our preparations that we might avoid future difficulties.

The Extra Mile: What are some difficulties you have observed in other folk's marriages (Maybe your Parents) that you would like to avoid? Is there something you could bring to the marriage altar that would help you avoid any of these difficulties?

Healthy Love Relationships.

Day 2

Matt 22:37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. NIV

If you read the Introduction to this study, (I hope you did) you understand that this material is written from a Christian perspective. I believe that the best journey to the marriage altar and beyond includes a love relationship with God through Jesus Christ. So, the "Better Way" paradigm assumes that you have a love relationship with God the Father through Jesus Christ, His son, and that the love relationship you have with the Lord is the top priority of your life. If not, please go back and read the introduction article before you read any further. Thanks! Now let's move on.

It seems to me that in life there is a natural love progression that is supposed to happen. It doesn't always, for a number of reasons, but when it does it is a very productive progression.

It begins as a child; the first people we learn to love are our parents. If we are fortunate enough to have a house full of siblings, then we next face the challenge of loving our immediate family. With the proper teaching, it is an easy step from here to begin a love relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ. Next, we are thrust into our new family of faith, the church, and we learn to love the brethren. By now, we are old pros at love, so when God adds to our life a spouse, children, and eventually grandchildren, we are ready to love with each new addition to our life. Our parents lead us to love the Lord, the Lord leads us to love each other. Each love in its proper place prepares us for the challenge of the next love relationship. Short circuiting any of these love relationships impedes our ability to advance properly to the next love relationship. Fortunate is the individual who has a strong relationship with their parents, siblings, church and a love relationship with the Lord in which they are consumed heart, soul, and mind, because this person is most ready for the marriage altar.

Prayer: Help me to work out the Love Relationship you desire me to have with my parents, siblings, family of faith and most of all to learn to love you Lord with all my Heart, Soul, and Mind.

Extra Mile: Some of the best survival gear that you can bring to the marriage altar is a strong love relationship with Jesus, your parents, your siblings and the family of God. Evaluate your love relationships. In what ways has your home and church helped you develop a healthy concept of love? In what ways do you feel they have damaged or impeded your ability to love? Is there something you need to learn from these damaged relationships? What investment can you make to strengthen each of these love relationships? The skills you learn here will be invaluable to you in your future love relationship with your spouse and your future love relationship with the family you will share with him or her.

A Love Relationship with God.

Day 3

Matt 22:37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. NIV

What, or who, you love directs your life. I have a love for fishing, so I spend too much money and as much spare time as I can pursuing my elusive fin tailed friends. In doing this, I have worn out many old boats. I have over time acquired a fishing pole for every occasion, much like women have shoes. Believe it or not, I like to hang out with fishermen. I like to swap fishing tales and show off pictures. I'd rather hang out at the bait shop for coffee than the local Starbucks. When I walk by a magazine rack, my eyes gravitate to the fishing magazines. I subscribed to "Salmon, Trout, & Steelhead" for years. I drive an old truck because it will pull my old boats, and a little foreign car won't do that. My favorite fashion attire is a pair of chest waders and my lucky hat. See what I mean? What I love effects everything: how I spend time, how I spend money, who I like to hang out with, where I like to drink coffee, what magazines I read, what vehicle I drive, and what clothes I like to wear. And fishing is not even my first love! I would give it all up in a heartbeat if it interfered with my love relationship with the Lord.

So, what do you love?

Because of my first love, my love for the Lord: I hang out with Christians, I spend money supporting my church and missions, nearly every morning I start my day with a cup of coffee and the Bible, I pray bunches, dress so as to honor my Lord and try to keep my eyes on the fishing material at the magazine rack. I love to brag about my Lord more than I like bragging about the monster sturgeon I caught. I don't want to do anything to offend him.

Seriously now, do you want to be standing at the marriage altar with someone whose FIRST love is or has been another person, or persons, or themselves? Consider the ramifications of standing there with this individual whose life behavior patterns up to this point have been inspired and influenced by their love for another person, or persons, or themselves? And now if you are lucky, at best for a season, this primary love relationship will be switched to you? Compare that with the person whose first love has been and still is the Lord. Which one do you think works best? Which is more stable? You have nothing to lose and everything to gain if the person you are standing by loves the Lord with all their heart, soul and mind. You have everything to lose and nothing to gain if that person you are standing by has a "first" love for anything other than the Lord. So why not pack that in your bag and give it to your spouse? What a great gift to start your married life with.

Prayer: Lord, Help me to show up at the marriage altar with a steadfast love for you that trumps every other love in my life. Amen

Extra Mile: If Jesus is a person's "First Love" (As in Priority and Intimacy) how do you see that positively contributing to what is brought to the marriage altar? How do you see it positively contributing to the marriage itself? What does making Jesus "The First Love" of your life look like? Does that describe your walk with Christ Jesus?

Consistent Behavior.

Day 4

Prov 31:10 A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. 11 Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. 12 She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life. NIV

Presented here is the picture of a wife of noble character. She is said to be a woman who brings good and not harm to her husband *all the days of her life*. This would include premarital days as well. So the question is, how does one bring good to their spouse all the days of their life – including those premarital years?

In our society we have two standards of behavior. One which is applied before marriage and one that is applied after marriage. The “after marriage” standard is very exclusive. We expect our spouse to be physically, mentally and emotionally faithful to us alone. Let me illustrate that for you. My wife doesn't walk around holding hands with other men. She doesn't take other men out to dinner for any reason. She does not call other men on the phone and just visit with them for hours. She doesn't ride around with other men in their cars or go to the latest movie with any male but me. Why? Because, we are married. We made some vows we intend to keep. Our understanding of marriage means that I am to be the only man in her life and she the only woman in mine. That does not mean that I do not have women that are my friends or that she does not have male friends as well. However, we are very careful about the level of intimacy that we allow ourselves to have with any member of the opposite sex. We are always sensitive to anything that might compete with or damage our marital love relationship.

There have been times in our marriage when we were not careful about such things and the results of such indiscretions were always damaging & painful. In hindsight, I believe we were just carrying over our premarital behavior to our post-marriage relationship. Ouch! The Traditional American Dating paradigm gave approval for couples to be involved in flirting, holding hands, kissing, dinners for two, and drive-in-movies (Showing my age, right!). We moved from one “steady” relationship to another, emotionally damaging others and ourselves in the process. Bringing those behavior patterns to marriage meant having to do some reprogramming in order to stay married. In retrospect, when I think about doing good and not harm to my spouse all of my days, I don't believe that those type of premarital relationships would qualify.

So the rule of thumb I am proposing with this new paradigm is, **if it is not appropriate behavior** (toward members of the opposite sex other than your spouse) **after marriage, then it is not appropriate before marriage?** How about bringing to the marriage altar a consistent behavior pattern that does not require changing because it has faithfully honored your spouse all of your days.

Prayer: Lord please guide me in the course of this study to develop a noble character that will honor you, my spouse and my marriage all the days of my life.

Extra Mile: Here is something to ponder. Until I have entered marriage, What are appropriate boundaries for interaction with the opposite sex in areas such as holding hands and other physical intimacies, dining out and other entertainment activities, Phone time and other communication, that would prevent me from damaging my future marriage and yet still allow me enough real time with a person of the opposite sex to truly, genuinely get to know them?

A Purposeful Invested Past.

Day 5

Gal 6:7 Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. 8 The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. 9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. NIV

As a kid I cheered for my dad as he was involved in several company golf tournaments. That meant I got to hang out at the golf course, swim, and eat lots of BBQ! It was almost as good as a Sunday picnic. There was a neat little item in these company tournaments called a handicap. The handicap allowed a poor golfer the chance to compete with a good golfer. Simply put, the poor golfer got to subtract strokes from his score. The number of strokes he was able to subtract was based on the personal average acquired in previous play. So, when the two golfers walk up to the tee box and pull out that driver, based on how well they have done in the past, adjustments were made so that each had the same chance at victory. My dad did quite well in these tournaments. He was a consistent golfer and could play well under pressure.

In my years of Ministry I have seen a lot of people who have approached marriage like an amateur golf tournament. Their record shows that the last several times they played the course they performed miserably. Yet they walked up to the marriage altar expecting adjustments to be made so that their marriage has the same opportunity for success as the one who has played well for years. It just doesn't work that way. In fact, it is all cumulative. Every good decision and every bad decision has a payday that comes **later**, in **like** fashion, and in **larger** quantity. Too often we think of this as bad news. How tragic! This is good news! Why? Because no matter what I have sown in the past, I can start today sowing good stuff. What you bring to that marriage altar is not only a part of the payday for the good or bad seed you **have** already sown, but today is the beginning of a seed sown for a future payday. Start today! Sow some good stuff!

Prayer: Lord, today I choose to look to the future with hope. Help me to see the mate you have for me (I may not even have met him or her yet) and sow things which will contribute to our future life together. Help me to sow to please your Spirit. If I do this, it will glorify you now in the present as well. So I have both a future and present return on my actions.

Extra Mile: Make a list of some good seed you could sow that might directly effect your wedding day and your first 50 years of marriage in a positive way. Connect the dots and think through what the payoff might be. Let me give you one example.

Sow purity.....reap an incredible honeymoon.....a marriage bed full of holiness, worship & purity (free from STDs, bad memories, guilt, comparisons, sensuality, trading children every other weekend with ex-lovers, and child support).....a lifetime of fidelity in marriage made easy and natural.....

A Clear Conscience

Day 6

1 Tim 3:9 ...keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. NIV

This is just good advice for us all.

So far we have talked about packing your marriage bag with a **regenerate heart** redeemed by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ (see the introduction of this course for more details on how to become a Christian). We have learned the importance of cultivating a genuine growing **love for the Lord, our family, Church and others**. We took a quick glance at **noble character with a consistent lifestyle** that has honored your spouse all the days of your life. And finally, we have considered **purposeful investment** and the seemingly endless list of **good seed** that could be sown which would reap for us a thousand good rewards not only in this lifetime but also in the one to come.

However, knowing the world we live in all too well, I want to suggest a couple more items that would be extremely valuable to bring to the marriage altar. The first is a **clear conscience**. Unfortunately, most in our culture don't maintain a very spotless past. We all have an old nature and live in a fallen world, but by dealing with the past in a responsible manner you can give your future marriage a big boost. Breaking those ties with past relationships gone awry in a healthy fashion is imperative. Breaking the strongholds of bitterness, pride, lust, rebellion, etc. may take a lot of effort but is well worth the investment. Reconciling with parents and siblings when possible, making restitution and apologies where necessary, and getting back under Biblical authority are some of the best things you can do to be sure you are bringing your best to the marriage altar.

I would start this process by a run through Neil Anderson's material entitled Steps to Freedom in Christ. If you struggle with the material and get bogged down in any way, consider walking through the material with a trusted pastor, or some older sage in your local church who has walked with the Lord through many seasons of life. Just to be sure you are entering marriage with a clear conscience, I would put a little "icing on the cake" by walking through Beginning your Marriage Free by the same author as a part of the premarital counseling experience shared with your fiancé. There are, of course, many tools out there and trusted spiritual mentors who, under the direction of the Holy Spirit and God's Word, can help facilitate your victory in these areas. Ultimately, they will all lead you into the arms of The Wonderful Counselor and His great love. However, do yourself a favor, deal with your past in the present, don't wait till the future. Start the process today.

Prayer: Lord give me the wisdom to deal with my past responsibly and secure a clear conscience and the hope for a tomorrow that would not otherwise be possible.

Extra Mile: Check your conscience before God. If His Spirit leads you to deal with some issue or person, develop a plan for moving forward in that process and begin today!

Press on toward the Goal

Day 7

Phil 3:12 I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. NIV

Press on with purpose - go for God's best, don't settle for less! This God-inspired calling is the final item I would encourage you to Pack after dealing with your past.

In my many years of ministry I have observed five items that are absolute marriage killers. Make sure if these items are a part of your past that they are not a part of your future. Until you have dealt with these five, you don't have a future marriage. They are: drug addiction, alcohol addiction, physical abuse (which may look like an angry or violent attitude before marriage), infidelity with an unrepentant heart, (which may look like fornication before marriage) and, a newcomer on the scene that I have been observing for the last couple of decades - pornography addiction. If any of these look remotely familiar to you, then get some help. Find that peer group that will encourage you on to faith and good works. Find that spiritual sage that will prayerfully walk with you out of the darkness into the light of God's best for your life. *Press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called you heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

I have stood with many parents whose children had become engrossed in activities such as these, and the heart of every one of them is this, "Forget what has been done; I don't care about your yesterdays. We will deal with that as it comes up. Let's just focus on the future and get it right today and tomorrow and the next day and the next...." I believe God feels the same way about each of us. Maybe He would say to some of us, "You gave your yesterdays to sin, self, and Satan; how about you give your tomorrows to me?"

My hope and prayer for you is that you will **press on** from this day forward toward the marriage altar with purpose, packing your bag, not just looking at that altar or your 50th wedding anniversary, but gazing heavenward and receiving God's very best. There are no shortcuts. Start working on that handicap today. Become the Christian that God wants you to be, fall in love with the Lord, consider carefully your dating paradigm and build a noble character. Sow some good seed with a clear conscience, and do not be weary in well doing but rather Press On Toward the Goal!

Prayer: Lord give me an honest look at where I am today and a determined hope to press on to a better tomorrow in your truth, power, love and grace.

Extra Mile: If God's Spirit has convicted your heart during these last few days concerning items you know God desires you to deal with, stop here. Put in place a plan and secure the people necessary to help you move to a spiritually free tomorrow.