

**Q&A with Matt Chandler, author of
*The Mingling of Souls:
God's Design For Love, Sex, Marriage & Redemption***

Q: What motivated you to write a book about relationships?

A: In the church I pastor, I am continually bombarded with questions about how dating should work, and we spend thousands of hours a year in premarital and marital counseling. Although there appears to be a deep desire to approach dating, marriage, and sex in a way that would please God, there nevertheless seems to be a profound lack of wisdom and practical know-how. There is a sizable gap between our understanding of the gospel and our knowledge of the Scriptures on one hand and our application of that knowledge on the other. The sheer amount of confusion, heartbreak, and fear that I have witnessed at The Village Church in regards to romantic relationships and sex provides my primary motivation in writing this book.

Q: Explain how you uncovered this Old Testament guide to modern day relationships

A: Right there in the middle of the Bible, God has inspired five books we have traditionally called “the Wisdom Books”—Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. These books of divine wisdom reveal to us in song and poetry and dialogue the Lord’s beautiful ways of living and dying and everything in between. And in that fifth wisdom book, the “Song of Songs” (or the “Song of Solomon”), we watch a couple navigate the age-old pursuit of romance—the pursuit, actually, of one another—as they fight for purity against their flesh, embrace the gracious covenant of marriage, celebrate the amazing gift of sex, and learn how to gracefully grow old together. All the while, disagreeing honorably, encouraging constantly, and keeping the fires of a godly romance burning. The bride and her groom do all of this in a way that gives God a lot of glory and brings themselves great joy and deep intimacy. We would do well to watch and imitate them.

Q: You talk about the extraordinary value of grace to cover over sin in past relationships.

A: Yes. The grace of God in Jesus Christ, the sinless bridegroom who lays his life down for the church in order to present her blameless to the Father in great glory, so secures the children of God who make up this bride that they need not fear, as Luther says, “sinning boldly.” Luther isn’t encouraging us to walk in ways that are contrary to the commands of God. Rather, he is reminding us that regardless of whatever perversions we are guilty of, God’s grace covers that perversion, and we are encouraged to run to Him and not from Him. We can come just as we are to Jesus Christ; he does not love some future version of us, but the real us, the wounded us, the messy us, the broken us. And what we learn in Song of Songs is that a marriage shaped according to this gospel of grace, forged over years of hard-earned trust and forgiveness, can be an unsafe place for sin but a very safe place for sinners. In a gospel-centered marriage, when two souls are mingled together with the Holy Spirit’s leading, we find confirmation after confirmation that grace is true, that grace is *real*—that we can be really, truly, deeply known and at the same time really, truly, deeply loved.

Q: What about the dangers of porn?

A: Porn is unbelievably devastating. It holds out an ever-increasing promise of satisfaction while simultaneously, gradually *removing* the ability to be intimate. Porn makes sex purely physical, and when it becomes purely physical it loses the glory God has designed it to have. You lose that glory even in marriage when sex becomes purely about the physical act of intercourse, and you certainly forfeit this glory when you engage in sex outside of marriage. Sex outside of marriage is deliberate disobedience of God’s commands, which are for your good, and therefore they are a deliberate forfeiture of your own spiritual well-being, as well as your own *sexual* well-being!

Q: Any encouragement for engaged couples who are “waiting” until they get married?

A: The repeated warning in Song of Solomon 3:5 is well-timed, because the good desire for physical intimacy will likely only grow as a couple approaches marriage. Even as a couple nears the commitment, the temptation can become greater to begin “bending” some rules, assuming that the intention to commit authorizes some things, blurs some lines, or what-have-you. The pull towards physical intimacy will feel almost overpowering at the courtship stage, and that lie that “We are going to get married anyway” will be one that must be addressed and confessed often. This temptation is one anyone who has been married and spent a considerable time engaged is familiar with. It’s important for us to understand that when the Bible

says, “keep waiting,” it’s not trying to take anything from us. God’s not trying to rob you of an experience, but rather lead you into a greater one.

Q: Still, you believe a couple should be growing in their sexual desire for each other, even before marriage.

A: Yes. We have to keep saying this over and over again, because of the mixed messages the church has historically sent young people about sex, it is not a bad or wrong thing to have a growing desire for sexual touch. I’m going to keep coming back to this truth more and more because religious folks have mishandled the Bible’s message on sexuality for way too long and it’s really messed a lot of us up. We are told so many times that sex is bad, wrong, sinful, gross. And then we are expected to embrace it fully for marriage. This is not a great way to set a couple free to marital intimacy. And the couples who are desiring help many times have to go to the world to get their advice and wisdom, and the world just doesn’t know how to correctly handle something God designed because they don’t know God.

Sometimes I meet young men who despair of their sexual appetites and say things like, “I just want God to take this away from me!” And I always say, “You really don’t!” What they should want God to do is empower their discipline and strength to be obedient. Because sexual desire is good. It’s a good gift. And we shouldn’t ask God to take one of his good gifts away from us. We should ask him to help us steward it well, and lead us into the covenant relationship where we can finally enjoy it according to his design.

Q: Do you believe God has prepared “the one” person for each person to marry?

A: Although I am a passionate believer that God is at work in space and time, and that he is sovereign over all things, I have never been particularly convinced by the idea that there’s a “one” for you. I just see no reason to agree with the worldly-romantic notion that every person has just one “soulmate” out there waiting for them. In fact, I find that idea to be anti-covenantal, contrary to grace. It forces prospective spouses into a routine of measuring up, of being investigated or even interrogated rather than considered. It turns the search for a godly spouse into an audition to be the one who “completes” you. Do you see the subtle pride at work there, the arrogance? Instead of appropriately considering the character of any potential spouse, the romantic relationship becomes about scrutinizing every potential spouse to see if they are “the one” for you, as if you are the end-all, be-all. No spouse can complete you anyway. Don’t look for a spouse to do what only Jesus can. Even if it were true that there is one person out there for you, isn’t it possible that someone messed up the whole relationship order, like, fifty years ago? I mean, if just one person married the wrong spouse back in the day, do the math—the whole system’s broken. One person had to “make do,” but now you’ve got a whole lot of people marrying the wrong “ones” like a domino effect of incompleteness. So quit looking for “the one.” You have a better chance of finding an Oompa Loompa riding a unicorn fighting Bigfoot.

Q: What about the person who feels like they have fallen out of love with their spouse?

A: For the Christian who understands the marriage relationship to be a covenant based on the grace of God in the gospel, we recognize that we do not “fall out of love” with our spouses, because love is not based on how we feel. It’s based on the covenant itself, on the promises we made. Remember, marriage is not a contractual arrangement. True love doesn’t say “Make me feel this way if you want me to stay.” That’s not love. Instead, true love says in commitment, “I’m giving myself to you *regardless*.” Yet there is anxiety, fear, and weariness that take their toll the longer a couple is together. Sometimes it has a lot to do with biology. Bodies change, metabolisms change, hormones change. Kids introduced to the home always change the dynamic. People change jobs, homes, or cities. A marriage is constantly changing day by day based on the growth (or lack thereof) of the couple and on the shifting circumstances around them. All of these stressors can dampen the fire of the relationship—cut off the oxygen to it. If we’re not careful, they can dampen and cut off the heat of our love for one another. But if we’re mindful, our fire doesn’t have to go out. It may rage or flicker, but it won’t go out, so long as we keep tending to it. You just have to keep putting logs on the fire. And maybe you’ve got to be out in the darkness, wandering around blind in an ice storm to find them, but the work will be worth it.

Q: You say the commitment to a “covenant” love is how a couple can stay together.

A: Absolutely. There’s a word for “love” used in Song of Songs 8:6-7 called *ahava*. It’s the clinging love, the “I’m not going anywhere” love. *Ahava* is as strong as death. Its flashes are fiery, sourced in the consuming fire that is God. All the oceans covering the earth cannot drown *ahava*. It is worth more than all the treasures of the world. If we’re going to be faithful to the end, we will have to often lean into the covenant that we made with our spouse and with the Lord. We will need to access again and again, by God’s grace, the love of the

will, this devoted *ahava*, which says, "It's not an option for me to go anywhere, because Jesus would not abandon his bride."

Q: Describe how the gospel message is the pattern for how to live our relationships?

A: Do you find your gladness ultimately in Christ? Only in him is ultimate gladness found. Learn to find your rest in Christ alone. Learn to lean into him as your only strength and wisdom. If you don't, nothing else will make the forever kind of sense. If you don't understand that, despite yourself, Christ died for your sins, and if you don't know that you are loved, forgiven, and adopted then you will miss out on the joy that no date, no wedding, no marriage can deliver. It is the gospel and our belief in it that makes dating, courtship, engagement, marriage, and growing old together unbelievably vibrant. It is our understanding that God just keeps forgiving us for the same things over and over and over again that informs our patience with our spouse. It is the unbelievable romancing of God towards us as the bride of Christ that should inform and motivate our romancing and pursuit of our spouse. So first and foremost we must consider Jesus. We must consider this great salvation offered to us in Christ.

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By Matt Chandler

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