



Courtin' versus datin'

(Two Scenes, one a typical scenario of today, the other rare, almost a myth.)

Dramatis Personae.

Lucy 16 year old daughter to Father and Mother 1
Father 1
Mother 1

Grace 18 year old daughter to Father and Mother 2
Father 2
Mother 2

Scene 1: Neat suburban home, early Saturday evening.

MOTHER 1: (with slight anxiety) Lucy! Why is your face caked with makeup? You look sick!

LUCY: (defensively) Oh Muuum, everyone wears makeup! Do you want me to look like a Beek! You're so old-fashioned! I want to make a good impression on Jason!

MOTHER 1: What sort of impression will Jason get if you wear such a short skirt. And your blouse is see-through! You may as well go out in your underwear!

FATHER 1: (annoyed, looking up from the television) Hey! Can't you two be quiet! I'm trying to watch the News! If you want to argue go somewhere else!

MOTHER 1: What kind of father are you? Don't you care how your daughter looks when she goes out?

FATHER 1: Lucy, are you going out again? Where are you going and what are you going to do?

LUCY: Oh Daaaad! I told you already, I'm going out with Jason. We're just going for a drive and maybe meet some of his mates.

FATHER 1: Well I don't like you hanging around with that Jason! He never comes in or says hello! Doesn't he have any manners? We don't know anything about him except that he drives like a maniac! What kind of family is he from?

LUCY: (*in tears*) That's just typical of you! You're always bugging me about my friends! It's my life, you're just trying to stifle me! You and Mum are such snobs, who cares what kind of family Jason's from!

A car horn sounds, Lucy hurries out the front door.

Scene 2: A neat suburban home, early Saturday evening.

GRACE: I'm so nervous about Philip coming to see us!

MOTHER 2: Don't worry Grace, we'll all be here to help you make a good impression. I'm sure he will be bowled over when he tastes your cooking and sees how nicely you have set the table. You did a great job on the flower arrangement in the centre.

GRACE: But Mum, what if I can't think of anything intelligent to say? It was much easier to make conversation when his whole family came. Philip's mother is such an interesting person and a fine Christian, I really enjoyed talking with her.

MOTHER 2: I'm sure you'll think of plenty to talk about and anyway it is a good idea to ask lots of questions and let your guest do most of the talking. I think Philip is just as interesting as his mother.

FATHER 2: I would like to ask Philip some questions. I know he is a very polite and likeable lad and he comes from a very devout Christian family but I would like to know what his plans and prospects are.

GRACE: Oh Dad! I hope you won't intimidate him!

FATHER 2: If he is a lad with good character he will expect me to ask those sort of questions. Besides I have a duty to protect my daughter.

Bing bong, the doorbell rings, the family hurry to greet their guest.

One of the things that arose from my article on youth ministry was the asking of some pertinent questions, especially by concerned parents. One of those questions was how can young people find godly partners or friends if we limit youth activities such as camps, outings, dating etc? Since the institution of marriage predates youth culture by several thousand years, having suffered no impediment by its non-existence, one could quite confidently assert that it is not essential to the furthering of that most worthy institution. I believe 'dating' to be a most perilous activity, especially for young people. It is an activity that became prevalent about the time of the two world wars, perhaps because of the social upheaval caused by them and the heightened awareness of imminent death and destruction. It is very much part of American popular culture, exported around the world by that ubiquitous medium, television. The two scenes depicted contrast two approaches, one I believe to be much wiser than the other.

Someone once said that to allow two young people who are 'in love' to go out alone (in a car!), at night is like pulling a pin out of a grenade; it is only a matter of time before there is an explosion! That 'explosion' may be of a physical nature or it may be emotional. The effects may not become apparent immediately but eventually the 'fall out' will become evident, sometimes years later. As the maiden points out three times in Song of Songs (chapter 2:7, 3:5, 8:4), love ought not be aroused until it so desires: that is until God puts two hearts in sympathy together, binds them in faith, which culminates in marriage in the Lord. The maiden is in fact dousing her own ardour, even though it may have been only spoken or dreamed. This constitutes a warning that it is common for young lovers to get carried away by their passions and that natural as that may be, it must yet be restrained. Self-control is just as necessary within marriage as outside of it, thus it must be learned in youth before marriage.

Complicating matters, young people are often encouraged not to get 'serious' straight away but to have many 'friends' before settling down with a partner for life. This too can be like a time bomb. Most parents will very rightly emphasise physical purity but really this is only a part of the instruction that is necessary. It is also essential that young people remain emotionally pure. Does this sound strange? Consider what future ramifications may come about as a result of giving one's heart to several different people. Surely there would be a lessening of depth of feeling at the very least; easy come, easy go! I suspect that this emotional promiscuity may encourage a divorce mentality rather than helping to prepare for marriage. In an age where one in three marriages end in divorce (and the Church has not been exempt from this problem), it would be prudent to avoid any practice that could possibly contribute to that continuing disaster.

The practice of dating tends to encourage young people to be rather independent in the choice of companions and partners, the criteria usually focusing on appearance, level of 'cool' and feelings, all of which can be rather impermanent. Dates focus on the pursuit of fun; going to the pictures, romantic dinners, parties, the beach, all of which are certainly not evil activities but they are no serious preparation for the responsibilities of covenant marriage. Neither do they provide a realistic means of determining what a person's true character is. It is easy enough to be witty and amusing in easy circumstances but many a young bride or groom has realised with a jolt that they did not really know their new spouse before marriage and that they only showed their true 'colours' when difficulties arose.

Family to family fellowship and supervised courtship appear to be the wisest means for young folk to 'get together'. This way would preclude much opportunity for temptation to overwhelm vulnerable young ones. My parents understood this and rather than only focusing on ways to restrict interaction, shrewdly kept courting couples in our family busy. When Hans was courting me, we spent a great deal of time renovating old furniture in my Dad's shed. My parents happily bought us a few old pieces of "renovators dream" and we also hunted down and purchased other worthy junk. We learned useful skills applicable to many areas of home maintenance to be wise with money and how to work together. Hans was not deluded by any false glamour that could be painted on (me, not the furniture!), he knew what I really looked like in paint splattered overalls and dishevelled hair and we both knew what we were like under sometimes 'dire' circumstances, (I hate that colour! Well you didn't sand those boards properly!). We are still using that furniture.

Court'n time is a delightful time for the family as well as for the couple. It allows the couple time to grow together as well as into each others' families. While dating tends to be an independent activity, courtship is in the bosom of the family, thus protecting particularly young women from frivolous approaches. Since it is proper to ask the head of the (covenant) household permission to commence courtship, the cad or the bounder mostly would be deterred. Of course we are dealing with human nature, so yes, one could get past the 'photo scanner' but since wisdom and victory is found in the counsel of many (Proverbs 11:14, 15:22), it is less of a danger than for a single, inexperienced, likely heart-ruled young person. The family has the son or daughter's best interests at heart so their advice, based on Biblical principles, would seek their long term good. The faithful family also understands that marriage is a means of Kingdom work, both through the begetting of covenant children and the outworking of the dominion mandate. This understanding helps to prevent the folly of a match based purely on romance. Which is not to say that romance has no place but that is another article...

Will Lucy and Jason get married? Who can tell, the heart is very fickle. Their parents will probably lose many hours sleep, awaiting their safe return on those Saturday evenings. Grace and Philip will find out with less 'cost' if they are suited to each other, their reputations and hearts remaining preserved due to the protection provided by their parents. In the meantime, their families will enjoy the increased fellowship with each other, which is surely a benefit. As Christian parents, we advocate a return to courtship, since it seems wise and covenant strengthening, rather than a trauma for the family. So happy court'n!

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