



Father to son

Ten things I'd like my son to know before he starts dating

The book of Proverbs begins with a father giving practical advice to his son about what he wants him to know about life and love. This is profoundly important since fathers, in particular, are told in Scripture to bring their children up in the fear and admonition of the Lord (Col. 3:21; Eph. 6:4).

When it comes to the subject of relating to girls and women, what should I be encouraging my sons to do? Well, in this "open letter" to my son who, by grace, is a believer, I would like to suggest the following words of advice:

1. It's worth the wait!

There's no doubt about it, physical intimacy is one of the Lord's choicest gifts (outside of salvation, of course). However, the Scriptures constantly remind us that the best way to enjoy intimacy is to experience it strictly within the covenant framework of marriage. This is the main point of Solomon's Song of Songs – since the refrains "*Stir not up, nor awake my love, till he please*" form a thematic backbone to the entire book (Song 2:7, 3:5, 8:4).

2. God's will for you is ... to be holy

One of the things that really tripped me up when I was single was the question of which particular person the Lord wanted me to marry. I hate to think how many hours I wasted fretting over this particular question. Then one day I came across 1 Thessalonians 4:3 and I realized that the Lord was more concerned with how I was relating to members of the opposite sex than necessarily with whom I should spend the rest of my life.

Don't get me wrong. Choosing a spouse is the most important decision you'll ever make, apart from placing your trust in Jesus. But what we find here is one of the few places in the Bible where the specific expression "*God's will*" is used. The text tells us that God is supremely concerned that our behavior with members of the opposite sex is above and beyond reproach. We need to be holy and treat a woman with respect and honor.

3. Find an accountability partner

As Protestants, confessing our sins to a priest is something that we rightly avoid. However, I wonder whether we have inadvertently thrown the proverbial baby out with the bath water. James 5:16 is very clear that if we're struggling with sin then we should confide in another Christian who is walking closely with the Lord. We should share our struggles with him and make ourselves accountable. It's a humbling thing to do, but it's the means through which James says the Lord will bring healing, which I understand to be spiritual as well as physical.

4. You can't fool God

There are two things in particular that I want to say to my son here. First, God knows everything about us – even what is going on in the recesses of our own hearts. I want him to know that if he believes that he can secretly cherish lust in his heart towards a woman, then he shouldn't expect the Lord to listen to any of his prayers (Ps. 66:18).

Second, he needs to realize that just because the Lord is merciful and forgiving it doesn't mean that He won't chastise us when we stray. In fact, the exact opposite is the case! We're told in Hebrews 12:4-13, "*For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth.*" Elsewhere, the apostle Paul reminds us that while there is always forgiveness for sexual sin, we should not presume that we won't

experience unpleasant and painful consequences if we break God's commandments in this area (1 Thess. 4:3-8; Heb. 13:4, as well as 2 Sam. 12:13-14).

5. Make a covenant with your eyes

While Job raised this particular point almost as an aside (Job 31:1), it's a vital precaution in the battle that every man faces against sin. The Lord Jesus went even further and said that we should cut off whatever part of our body leads us into sin (Matt. 5:27-30). Obviously, the problem is ultimately not with the body part itself but arises from our hearts and the environment around us. Internet pornography is certainly a challenge these days, and if my son is to be pure he needs to police his use of the internet and take every precaution not to succumb to this particular vice, even if it means that he locates his computer in a common area of the house or stops using the internet entirely.

6. There is always a fresh start with God

One of the great dangers when it comes to this particular topic is that we can feel defeated by the tragedy of our own sin. While I don't want to detract from my exhortation for him to be morally pure and holy (1 Pet. 1:15-16), I want him to recognize that some of the Lord's greatest servants have fallen into sexual temptation (e.g., David and Bathsheba). But that is not the end of the story. There is always the possibility of forgiveness and restoration following true and heartfelt repentance (Ps. 51; 1 Tim. 1:15).

7. Get off the couch and go to war

I believe that David got into trouble long before he saw Bathsheba bathing upon her roof. David erred when he stopped doing the good works he was supposed to be doing. The writer of 2 Samuel says,

"After the year was expired, at the time when kings go forth to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel... But David tarried still at Jerusalem"

(2 Samuel 11:1)

That is, when real leaders were fighting the Lord's battles, God's man had stayed at home and was sitting around on his couch (2 Sam. 11:2).

This inactivity made him all the more susceptible to falling into sin. As a Christian friend once said to me, "Idle hands are the devil's workshop."

8. Be good at running away

Resisting sexual temptation requires only one basic response – to run away. Joseph's example in Genesis 37 and Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 6:18 come down to the same thing: "Flee!" While this might seem quite simple, it actually takes an enormous amount of courage and strength. Plus, it's what the Lord God Almighty says is our only course of action.

9. It could happen to you

One of the dangers of being raised in a strong Christian family is that it is very easy to develop a self-righteous attitude towards those who fall into sin. However, what I want my son to realize is that falling into sexual sin, or any sin for that matter, can happen to us all.

So, as Paul says, *"Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall."*

(1 Cor. 10:12)

The book of Proverbs also tells us that pride comes before a fall and a haughty spirit before destruction (Prov. 16:18). Therefore I want my son to always appreciate the truth, *"There, but for the grace of God, go I."*

10. When you are tempted, take God's "exit"

The Bible says that temptation is not so much a matter of "if"; it's more a question of "when." The thing that I want my son to remember, though, is that God will always provide a way out when he experiences temptation. 1 Corinthians 10:13 is helpful in this regard. It says that he will only be

tempted by things everyone else has been tempted by before – he’s not unique – and that God in His sovereign providence always provides means of escape if he will but look for it and take it.

Obviously, there is much more that I would like to tell him before he goes out on his first date. But I believe that these ten points are a good foundation upon which to build a discussion that prepares him for the spiritual challenges that he will face.

What’s more, rather than being a legalistic ten-point plan, I want to relate my concerns to him in the context of a relationship based on love and grace. It is precisely because my son is forgiven and restored through Jesus Christ that I want him to live this particular way; it’s not as though he has to do these things to make himself acceptable to God or even me. As the Lord Jesus does so perfectly, I want my son to gain encouragement and strength from the fact that he should live this way out of grateful response to what has first been done for us. It is only when we see our lives in the light of the cross that we can have the freedom to live in the way we were originally designed.

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