

What is Courtship?

By **Bill Gothard**

Courtship is experiencing the blessing of God by loving the Lord Jesus Christ and honoring both sets of parents. Its goal is to determine a couple's readiness and to discern the will of God for a covenant marriage that will benefit the world.

Foundational Principles of Courtship

1. Ensure the blessing of God

The greatest asset of any person or marriage is God's blessing. "The blessing of the LORD, it maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it" (Proverbs 10:22).

No couple will have a happy or prosperous marriage without the blessing of the Lord. If God does not bless them, the devourer will damage and destroy their present and future joy and potential.

A blessed marriage is described in the following passage: "Blessed is every one that feareth the LORD; that walketh in his ways. For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee. Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house: thy children like olive plants round about thy table" (Psalm 128).

2. Love the Lord Jesus Christ

Every believer is in a covenant relationship with the Lord and with all other believers. Therefore, the decisions of one believer affect every member of the Body of Christ. If we say we love the Lord, we must realize how our actions demonstrate our love for Him and others.

One way of loving God and others is to keep the commands of Christ, especially as they relate to marriage. Jesus said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments. . . . He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him" (John 14:15, 21).

"Hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him" (I John 2:3-5).

3. Honor parents

The foundational command for the happiness and success of any marriage is "Honour thy father and thy mother" (Exodus 20:12). God emphasized the seriousness of this command by giving the following penalty for breaking it: "For every one that curseth his father or his mother shall be surely put to death: he hath cursed his father or his mother; his blood shall be upon him" (Leviticus 20:9).

There are more than ten Hebrew words describing various degrees of cursing, from a “violent assigning” to “eternal condemnation” to a “mild disrespect.” The word used in this command is the milder term *qalal*, which simply means “to make light of” and “to bring into contempt.”

Jesus singled out this command and reaffirmed it as well as the judgment that went with it. “For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death” (Matthew 15:4).

He went on to condemn the Pharisees for giving lip service to this commandment, but then making it null and void by man-made traditions. (See Matthew 15:6.) There is no way for a couple—regardless of their age—to keep this commandment if they refuse to listen to the counsel and cautions of their parents on the matter of marriage.

If we say that a person over eighteen years of age has the legal right to make his own marriage decisions, regardless of whether they please his parents or not, we are making the law of God of no effect by our traditions.

The commandment does not say “Honor parents only if they are believers,” nor does it mean that to honor is always to obey. If parents command a son or daughter to marry outside of God’s will, that son or daughter must respectfully refuse to carry out their wishes.

To violate this command is to experience generations of grief and iniquity. “The eye that mocketh at his father, and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it” (Proverbs 30:17).

Paul pointed out that although this is the fifth commandment in the Decalogue, it is the first command to have a promise attached to it: “Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth [good health and prosperity]” (Ephesians 6:2–3).

God has entrusted to the parents, and especially to the father, the responsibility to give the daughter in marriage. Most wedding ceremonies affirm this fact when the minister asks, “Who gives this woman to this man?” (See also Exodus 22:16–17; I Corinthians 7:38.)

4. Determine marriage readiness

There are many practical considerations that parents need to evaluate before giving their blessing to a marriage.

- Does the young man have moral purity and victory over lust? (Involvement in pornography will make it impossible for him to love his wife.)
- Does the young man realize that in marriage he must give control of his body to his wife and she must submit to him? (See I Corinthians 7:4.)
- Is the young man sanctifying himself by engraving Scripture into his heart and soul, so that he can cleanse his wife by the Word? (See Ephesians 5:25–26.)
- Does the young man have the character and the skills to support a marriage and family? What proof does he have of this?

- Are both parties free of bitterness and guilt so they can “leave father and mother” and cleave to each other?
- Does the young man have a clear purpose in life that his wife can support?
- Are both parties living in total openness and in genuine love? (See I John 2:10.)

5. Discern God’s will

Since God has given the father of the girl the responsibility to protect her purity (see Deuteronomy 22:15) and the father of the young man the responsibility to evaluate his son’s wisdom (see Proverbs 10:1), God’s first line of direction will be through them.

However, even though all of the parents give their blessing, the marriage may still not be God’s will. For example, if one party is an unbeliever, marriage to that person would violate Scripture. “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers” (II Corinthians 6:14).

Also, if the son or daughter has been called by God to more years of single service, an appeal should be made to their parents for their blessing. In any case, the parents cannot force a marriage, because the individual has the final say. (See Genesis 24:58, Matthew 19:10–12, I Corinthians 7:25–37, and Isaiah 56:1–8.)

If one party has been married and divorced, and the previous partner is still living, it would not be God’s will for that individual to marry another person. (See Luke 16:18, Romans 7:1–3, I Corinthians 7, Malachi 2:13–16, Mark 10:1–12, Matthew 5:27–32, and Matthew 19:1–12.)

Note: The “exception clause” does not mean what many today think it means. When the disciples understood it, they exclaimed, “If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry” (Matthew 19:10).

6. Establish a covenant marriage

Marriage is not a contract between two people; it is a sacred covenant between two people, two families, and God, with witnesses to the vows.

A covenant marriage is joined by God and continues “till death do us part.” In a covenant relationship, there is no tolerance of competing affections in either party. God has serious consequences for those who violate their covenant vows. (See Ecclesiastes 5:1–7, Proverbs 6:24–35, Romans 7:1–3, Romans 1:31–32, etc.)

Any minister who allows for divorce and remarriage, but leads a couple in the vows “till death do us part,” must answer to God for lying to Him and causing a couple to lie to God. It would be more appropriate to vow “till divorce do us part,” although that would violate a covenant relationship and reveal a lack of genuine love.

7. Benefit the world

Paul points out that all believers are of the spiritual seed of Abraham. God blessed Abraham and said, through “thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 28:14).

Jesus said to His disciples, “Ye are the salt of the earth Ye are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:13–14). Paul also instructed us, “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10).

Those who are married with the blessing of God and their parents are “heirs together of the grace of life” (I Peter 3:7) and can raise up sons and daughters who are mighty in Spirit.

“Blessed is the man that feareth the LORD, that delighteth greatly in his commandments. His seed shall be mighty upon earth: the generation of the upright shall be blessed” (Psalm 112:1–2).

Conclusion

The actual pattern of a courtship relationship will vary from one couple to another, because no two couples or situations are the same. However, any courtship would benefit by incorporating the principles listed above.

One of the valuable rewards of courtship is the protection of emotions that are stirred up by physical and emotional interaction until the time when it is clearly God’s will to proceed into marriage.

If, during the time of courtship, one party realizes that this is not God’s will and ends the relationship, it can still be regarded as a successful courtship, because God directed and the individuals were not damaged for the one whom God has chosen for each of them.