

Preparing for a Life Together

A Biblical Guide for Couples Considering Marriage

This guide began with a simple request. A couple in our church who were preparing to marry asked whether I had anything that might help them take that next step wisely. I put together an initial set of biblical qualities and questions for them to consider. It gave them a place to begin, but looking back, it was fairly rudimentary and far from complete.

I continued returning to it over the years. The more I thought about what people carry into marriage and what helps a marriage become strong, the more I realized how much was still missing. What began as a brief exercise gradually developed into something broader and, I hope, more helpful to couples considering the life they may build together.

Part of what shaped this work was the experience Denise and I had when we were preparing for marriage. We spent six months in premarital discipleship, and we decided early that we did not want to bring unresolved residue from our pasts into our marriage. We knew that anything left hidden or unexamined could surface years later and cause harm neither of us intended.

That meant doing some difficult work on the front end. We talked honestly about our histories, expectations, fears, and the patterns we had learned in our families. We wanted no hidden agenda and no unexplored area quietly waiting to become a problem later. Some of those conversations required courage, but they allowed us to enter marriage knowing one another more fully.

That work did not make marriage effortless, nor did it complete the work God would continue doing in us. It gave us a way to face truth

together. For more than thirty-eight years, our marriage has been a profound source of strength and joy to both of us—our own experience, in many ways, of heaven on earth. I remain deeply grateful for the work we were encouraged to do before we married.

Marriage joins two people who have been shaped by different families and experiences. Each brings hopes, habits, convictions, strengths, and unfinished places into the relationship. No couple enters marriage fully prepared, and none of us reaches a point where our character no longer needs to grow.

Marriage is also one of God's most beautiful gifts. It gives us someone with whom to share ordinary days, carry burdens, worship, laugh, and grow old. Preparing for marriage should involve honest examination, but it should also deepen your gratitude for one another and your anticipation of the life you may share.

This guide is intended primarily for couples who are seriously considering or preparing for marriage. Married couples may also find it helpful as a way of strengthening their relationship and renewing important conversations.

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The Seven Conversations

The guide is organized around seven conversations:

- Assessment: The Person I Am Becoming
- The Stories We Bring
- How We Relate
- Biblical Manhood, Womanhood, and Shared Calling
- The Home We Hope to Build
- The Future We Are Choosing
- What We Have Learned and Our Next Step

Set aside 60–90 uninterrupted minutes for each conversation.

Before Conversation One, each person should complete a separate copy of the assessment in Appendix A. This will take approximately 30–45 minutes.

Before the remaining conversations, read the appropriate section separately and make a few notes. Ten or fifteen minutes should be sufficient.

When You Meet

- Begin with a brief prayer.
- Take turns answering each question.
- Listen without interrupting.
- Ask follow-up questions when you need to understand more clearly.
- Before finishing, each person should name one thing learned or appreciated.
- End by praying together.

The five questions in each part are starting points. They do not require equal time. One may lead to a conversation that takes most of the session. That is perfectly acceptable.

A Few Helpful Boundaries

Approach each conversation as an opportunity to understand one another, not as a problem to solve or a case to prove.

- Complete the personal preparation separately so that each person has time to recognize his or her own thoughts before the conversation begins.
- Treat every rating and response as a perspective to understand rather than evidence to use in an argument.
- Allow difficult parts of your stories to unfold at a thoughtful pace. Some matters are better explored with the help of a qualified counselor or pastor.
- Give important subjects the time they deserve. Understanding one another matters more than finishing a section.

- Use this guide to support your discernment, not to make the decision for you.

Both people should be free to speak honestly. If either person fears anger, intimidation, ridicule, or retaliation, pause the process and seek appropriate help before continuing together.

A wedding date should never be allowed to make a decision that wisdom says is not yet ready to be made.

A Simple Rhythm of Prayer

Begin each conversation by asking God to help you see yourself honestly, extend grace to one another, and recognize whatever he may want to show you.

At the end, each person should thank God for something seen more clearly in the other and ask for help with one area of personal growth.

These prayers do not need to be lengthy or eloquent. A few sincere sentences are enough.

Part One: Assessment—The Person I Am Becoming

Individual preparation: 30–45 minutes

Conversation together: 60–90 minutes

The strength of a marriage will eventually depend less upon how impressive two people appear while dating and more upon the kind of people they are becoming.

The assessment in Appendix A considers twelve character qualities that can help support a healthy, Christ-centered marriage.

Before You Meet

- Print two copies of Appendix A.
- Complete your copy privately.
- Rate yourself first.

- Rate the other person only on what you have actually observed.
- Use zero when you have not seen enough to know.
- Bring your completed copy to Conversation One.

Keep your own assessment in front of you while you talk. You may show it to one another if you both wish, but you do not need to exchange papers.

The ratings are not grades. They should not be added together or turned into an overall score. Their purpose is to help you notice strengths, differences in perception, and areas that may need attention.

Prayer focus: Ask God to help you see yourself clearly and recognize with gratitude what he is forming in the other person.

Conversation One

- What three character qualities do I especially appreciate in you, and what have I seen that leads me to choose them?
- Where did our ratings agree, and where did we see something differently?
- Which response surprised me or helped me understand you better?
- Which quality may need greater attention before marriage?
- What is one step of growth that belongs to me?

Receive a different rating as an invitation to listen. A quality you value inwardly may not yet be visible in the way you live.

Before finishing, write down one matter you want to revisit later:

Close by thanking God for the character you already see in one another.

Part Two: The Stories We Bring

Individual preparation: 10–15 minutes

Conversation together: 60–90 minutes

None of us enters a relationship as a blank page. We have been formed by the homes in which we grew up, by the people who cared for us, and by experiences we may seldom discuss.

Some of what we learned will help us build a strong marriage. Other patterns need to be recognized before they are repeated.

This conversation is not an invitation to criticize your family or disclose every painful detail. Its purpose is to help the person you may marry understand what has shaped you.

Prayer focus: Thank God for what was good in your stories and invite him into anything that still needs healing.

Conversation Two

- What was the emotional atmosphere of my childhood home, especially when people expressed affection, anger, or disappointment?
- What is one good gift, memory, or tradition from my family that I hope to carry into our marriage?
- What family pattern do I hope not to repeat?
- Is there a past experience that still affects the way I respond when I feel hurt, afraid, or misunderstood?
- When that part of my story is stirred, what response from you would be helpful—and what response would make it harder?

As you listen, resist the urge to analyze the family or explain why the speaker should feel differently. Try to understand what the experience meant to the person you love.

Honesty does not require graphic details or disclosures that belong in a professional setting. If part of your history involves trauma, abuse, or profound shame, consider discussing it first with a counselor who can help you share it wisely.

Before finishing, name one good gift from each family that you hope will become part of your marriage.

Close by thanking God for the people and experiences that helped shape each of you.

Part Three: How We Relate

Individual preparation: 10–15 minutes

Conversation together: 60–90 minutes

Most couples communicate well when the subject is easy and both people are rested. More is revealed when someone feels disappointed, misunderstood, or afraid.

The important question is not whether you will ever experience conflict. You will. The more searching question is what happens to your respect for one another when you do.

Learning to Stay in the Room

During our premarital discipleship, our counselor sometimes put her finger on an area of my life I did not want to see. More than once, I became defensive and walked out angry. After I had time to think and allow God to deal with me, I returned with flowers and apologized.

The flowers were not what mattered most. What mattered was returning and allowing the truth to continue its work.

I began learning that even when I believed I was 95 percent right, I still had to take responsibility for the 5 percent that genuinely belonged to me. It was much easier to see the speck in someone else's eye than the beam in my own. Learning to remain present, listen, and own my part became some of the most important work I did before marriage.

I still have to practice it.

Matthew 7:3–5; James 1:19–20

Prayer focus: Ask for humility to listen, courage to speak honestly, and grace to take responsibility for whatever belongs to you.

Conversation Three

- When do I feel most heard, known, and accepted by you?
- What usually happens between us when one of us becomes defensive or upset?
- Can we acknowledge our part and apologize without immediately defending ourselves?
- What helps us repair a conversation after it has gone poorly?
- When are we most relaxed and fully ourselves together, and how can we protect more of that in our relationship?

A Listening Exercise

Choose one concern that matters but is not the most difficult issue in your relationship.

- One person speaks for several minutes without interruption.
- The listener explains what he or she heard and what seems most important.
- The speaker clarifies anything that was missed.
- The listener asks one question intended to understand more clearly.
- Reverse roles.

When both have spoken, briefly share what helped you feel heard and what you might do differently during your next disagreement.

Close by thanking God for one way the other person helps you feel known.

Part Four: Biblical Manhood, Womanhood, and Shared Calling

Individual preparation: 10–15 minutes

Conversation together: 60–90 minutes

Men and women are both created in the image of God. Together they received responsibility for caring for what God had made. Both are called to follow Christ, develop their gifts, and participate in his work.

Marriage does not erase the person God created either of you to be. It joins your lives in a covenant where your abilities and callings can strengthen one another.

The qualities considered in Part One belong to both people. A man needs gentleness. A woman needs courage. Both need wisdom, faithfulness, initiative, and self-control.

Genesis 1:27–28; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:12–14

The Calling of a Husband

Scripture calls a husband to love his wife as Christ loved the church. His leadership is not permission to dominate or insist upon his own way. It is a responsibility to serve and place the good of his wife and family ahead of personal advantage.

A husband should welcome his wife's wisdom. Her gifts are not an interruption to his calling; they are part of what God is joining to his life. Headship never gives a husband the right to force submission or use Scripture to silence his wife.

Ephesians 5:21–33; Colossians 3:19; 1 Peter 3:7

Before meeting, the man should consider where he most needs to grow in carrying responsibility, welcoming his future wife's wisdom, and loving sacrificially.

The Calling of a Wife

Scripture describes the woman as a suitable helper corresponding to the man. Her support is neither weakness nor the loss of her voice. She brings strength, wisdom, and God-given ability that are essential to the marriage.

A wife's submission is offered before Christ. It is never something a husband can demand or enforce. It does not require a woman to

participate in sin, tolerate abuse, hide wrongdoing, or set aside her responsibility to pray and speak honestly.

Genesis 2:18–24; Ephesians 5:21–33; Colossians 3:18; 1 Peter 3:1–6

Before meeting, the woman should consider where she most needs to grow in bringing her strength, speaking truthfully, and offering respect.

A Shared Covenant

In our marriage, Denise and I have voluntarily covenanted that we will not make a major life decision unless we are in agreement. At times, that has required us to wait, pray, and talk further. It has also protected us from using a role or position to force a decision upon the other.

Couples do not have to divide every responsibility in the same way. An arrangement that works during one season may need to be reconsidered during another. What matters is that neither person is taken for granted and that both remain fully engaged in the life they are building.

Prayer focus: Ask Christ to shape your understanding of marriage and teach you how to serve one another faithfully.

Conversation Four

- What do sacrificial leadership and responsibility mean to us in ordinary married life?
- What do strong support, honest counsel, and respect look like?
- How will we make major decisions, especially when agreement does not come quickly?
- What experiences or concerns influence the way each of us hears biblical teaching about marriage?
- What quality in you gives me confidence about the husband or wife you are becoming?

Before finishing, write a simple statement describing how you hope to make major decisions:

Close by thanking God for something you see developing in the other person.

Part Five: The Home We Hope to Build

Individual preparation: 10–15 minutes

Conversation together: 60–90 minutes

Marriage eventually becomes very practical. Bills arrive. Meals need to be prepared. Families want time and attention. Work takes energy. A couple may love one another deeply and still discover that they carried very different expectations into daily life.

Those expectations are much easier to discuss before they harden into disappointment.

Prayer focus: Ask God for wisdom about the ordinary life you may build together.

Conversation Five

- What place will Jesus, Scripture, prayer, church, and generosity have in our home? Where do our present convictions differ?
- Have we fully disclosed our income, assets, debts, credit history, and continuing obligations? What basic principles will guide the way we handle money?
- What expectations do we carry about employment, provision, career, and the sharing of household responsibilities?
- What boundaries will help us honor our parents and extended families while making our marriage our primary human covenant?
- If someone spent an evening in our home ten years from now, what would we hope that person experienced?

You do not need to settle every detail. You should identify any expectation that could later become a source of disappointment.

Before finishing, agree upon one practical matter that needs to be decided before marriage:

Close by thanking God for the home you have begun to imagine together.

Part Six: The Future We Are Choosing

Individual preparation: 10–15 minutes

Conversation together: 60–90 minutes

Some of the most important subjects in marriage can also be the easiest to avoid. Postponing them does not make them less important. It simply means the conversation may occur later, when the consequences are greater.

You do not need to resolve every future possibility. You should know whether you can face the future honestly and make room for one another's hopes.

Prayer focus: Thank God for the future you can imagine together and entrust what remains uncertain to him.

Conversation Six

- What expectations do we carry concerning affection and sexual intimacy? Is there any history or present struggle that needs to be disclosed or addressed with professional help?
- Do we both desire children? How do we presently think about timing, parenting, infertility, adoption, or other unexpected other possibilities?
- Have we shared important physical-health, mental-health, medication, substance-use, or personal-habit concerns?
- What do we genuinely enjoy doing together, and how will we protect our friendship when life becomes busy?
- Imagine an ordinary day in our life ten years from now. What would make that day deeply satisfying, and how do our individual callings fit into the future we are imagining?

Questions involving trauma, addiction, pornography, betrayal, or serious mental-health concerns may be better discussed with a qualified counselor present. Honesty matters, but so do wisdom and appropriate care.

Before finishing, name one part of your possible future that excites you and one matter that needs more conversation.

Close by thanking God for one hope or dream you are excited to share.

Part Seven: What We Have Learned and Our Next Step

Individual preparation: 10–15 minutes

Conversation together: 60–90 minutes

Marriage deserves more than momentum. Once a relationship becomes serious and wedding plans begin to take shape, it can be difficult to admit that more time or help may be needed.

This final conversation gives you an opportunity to step back and consider what you have learned. It does not require an immediate decision. It asks you to be truthful before God and with one another.

Prayer focus: Ask God to free you from pressure and give you clarity about your next faithful step.

Conversation Seven

- What have I learned that gives me greater confidence in our relationship?
- What remains unsettled or needs more attention?
- What have I come to appreciate more deeply about you, and what have I learned about myself?
- Is there anything that needs more time, healing, or wise counsel before we continue?
- What seems to be our next faithful step?

Choose the statement that best describes where you are:

- We are ready to continue preparing for marriage.
- We believe we are moving toward marriage, but some matters need further attention.
- We need more time before making a decision.
- We have identified serious concerns and should pause while seeking help.

Choosing to wait is not necessarily a failure. Sometimes it is evidence that two people are taking marriage seriously.

A Simple Growth Commitment

The quality I most want to strengthen in myself is:

One practice we believe would strengthen our relationship is:

The person we may invite to help us is:

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, thank you for allowing us to know one another more deeply. Give us wisdom about the future and courage to face what is true. Continue forming our character and teaching us how to love well. Keep us from moving ahead because of pressure or holding back because of fear. If you are leading us toward marriage, prepare us to build a covenant that honors you and brings life to both of us. Amen.

Appendix A

Personal Character Assessment

Print two copies—one for each person.

Complete the assessment separately before Conversation One.

The qualities considered here apply to both men and women. Biblical manhood, womanhood, and the responsibilities of marriage are discussed in Part Four.

How to Complete the Assessment

Read each statement twice:

- First, consider how consistently it describes you and record that number under Self.
- Then consider how consistently it describes the person you are considering marrying and record that number under Partner.

Base the partner rating only on behavior you have actually observed. Use zero when you have not seen enough to know.

0 — I have not seen enough to know
1 — Rarely evident
2 — Sometimes evident
3 — Usually evident
4 — Consistently evident, including under pressure

These ratings are not grades. Do not add them together or calculate an overall score.

1. Love for God and Others

Matthew 22:37–39; John 15:1–8

Private choices are consistent with professed faith.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

Love for God is reflected in the way other people are treated, especially when they inconvenience or disappoint.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

2. Integrity and Truthfulness

Proverbs 10:9; Ephesians 4:25

Tells the truth even when honesty may be embarrassing or costly.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

Does not hide important relationships, habits, financial matters, or parts of personal history.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

3. Humility and Teachability

Proverbs 12:1; James 1:19–20; James 5:16

Can acknowledge being wrong without immediately becoming defensive or shifting blame.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

Receives honest correction without retaliating, withdrawing, or punishing the person who spoke.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

4. Faithfulness and Trustworthiness

Luke 16:10; 1 Corinthians 4:2

Keeps commitments or communicates promptly when circumstances prevent doing so.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

Maintains appropriate emotional, physical, and sexual boundaries.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

5. Self-Control and Steadiness

Proverbs 16:32; Galatians 5:22–23

Handles anger and disappointment without threats, contempt, intimidation, or silence intended to punish.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

Can pause a heated conversation and return to it respectfully.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

6. Empathy and Attentive Listening

Romans 12:10; Philippians 2:3–4

Makes a sincere effort to understand another person before offering an opinion.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

Continues to treat people with dignity when their feelings or conclusions differ.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

7. Responsibility and Stewardship

Luke 16:10–12; Colossians 3:23–24

Takes care of personal responsibilities without repeatedly needing someone else to rescue or remind.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

Seeks to use time, money, possessions, and opportunities wisely.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

8. Courage and Initiative

Joshua 1:9; 1 Corinthians 16:13–14

Addresses important problems rather than waiting for someone else to take care of them.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

Is willing to speak or act when something is wrong without becoming harsh or controlling.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

9. Wisdom and Sound Judgment

Proverbs 2:1–6; James 1:5; James 3:13–18

Seeks God, Scripture, and wise counsel before making consequential decisions.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

Learns from mistakes rather than allowing shame to define the future or pride to prevent change.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

10. Servant-Hearted Love

John 13:12–17; Ephesians 5:1–2

Willingly accepts inconvenience when doing so serves the genuine good of another person.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

Helps carry shared burdens without using that contribution as leverage later.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

11. Peacemaking and Repair

Matthew 5:9; Matthew 7:3–5; Colossians 3:12–14

Addresses conflict directly and respectfully rather than attacking, avoiding, or allowing resentment to build.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

When harm has been caused, accepts personal responsibility and remains engaged in rebuilding trust.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

12. Purpose and Shared Flourishing

Genesis 1:27–28; Proverbs 16:9; Ephesians 2:10

Is gaining clarity about the abilities, responsibilities, and work God has entrusted to his or her life.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

Desires to help a future spouse become more fully the person God created him or her to be.

Self: ____ Partner: ____

Personal Summary

The three qualities I most appreciate in the person I am considering marrying are:

The two qualities in which I most need to grow are:

One rating I believe we should discuss is:

One encouraging example of character I have seen in my partner is:

One matter I believe deserves attention before marriage is: