

It makes sense for both people to set boundaries and then abide by the stricter boundaries. People shouldn't be forced to do something they don't feel comfortable with. One way we can show love for our partners is by respecting their boundaries even when we don't share their convictions.

## SEX 4 How far can we go?

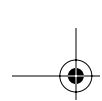
**H**ow far can we go? This question has a short answer and a long answer.

The short answer is this: Imagine for a moment that a person exists who you will one day marry. Imagine you have not yet met this person, but this person is going on a date tonight. What do you want your future marriage partner to do sexually with his or her date? Most people respond with a brief reflective look and then an impassioned "Nothing!" There's your short answer.

Now for the long answer. The overarching truth taught by the Bible and the Christian community is that sex was created by God to be enjoyed in the context of marriage. Proverbs 5:15-20 exhorts a married man to find sexual delight in his wife. The wife is likened to a refreshing source of water. Wells and springs were privately owned and of great value in the Middle East.

"Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving





doe, a graceful deer—may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love. Why, my son, be intoxicated with another man’s wife? Why embrace the bosom of a wayward woman?”

In this text, the husband is exhorted to channel all of his passion toward his wife. The picture is one of ecstasy in the context of a monogamous marriage relationship.

If you’re dating, realize you may not marry that person. It’s common to date and not end up marrying that person, so it’s always worth asking these questions:

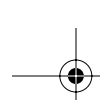
- If we break up and marry other people will I have any regrets?
- Am I giving something away that should be saved for the person I marry?
- If we break up and marry other people, would it be weird running into him or her two years from now at the wedding of a mutual friend? (Trust me, this is a very common scenario.)

Rachel Safier, author of *There Goes the Bride* (which is a survival guide for broken engagements), estimates that 20 percent of engaged couples call it off before the wedding—about 500,000 people a year.<sup>5</sup> The truth is you don’t know for sure who you’ll marry until you recite your wedding vows.

### THE EVERYTHING-BUT STRATEGY

Knowing that sexual intercourse outside of marriage is forbidden for Christians, many couples practice the everything-but strategy. When I was in college, my husband and I had dear friends who had dated for many years and wanted to save intercourse for after their wedding. However they followed the everything-but strategy during their





dating years. They would passionately kiss and touch one another, but just before intercourse, they would slam on the brakes. They continued this practice for many months. But they did wait until their wedding day for intercourse.

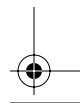
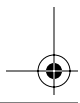
After they had been married a number of months, the wife confided in me that she was unable to go on with the full expression of sexual intercourse. She said, "For so many years I trained myself to shut down, to turn off, to abort the operation just before intercourse, that now, even when I'm married and it's okay, I still cannot allow myself to naturally continue on in the act of intercourse. I just freeze up even when I don't want to."

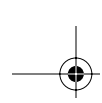
In her mind she had compartmentalized foreplay as okay but intercourse as bad. Years of programming are hard to break out of. Foreplay is intended to prepare the body and soul for sexual intercourse. It's detrimental to become highly aroused and then slam on the brakes repeatedly.

Sexual pleasure is intended by God to be a source of joy, not guilt. Fusing the experience of sexual pleasure with guilt is damaging. Later in marriage it can be difficult to shake the notion that sex is bad.

I recommend that people spend time alone with God in prayer and reflection. Ask him to show you where your boundaries should be. It's important to have clear boundaries, even if you aren't in a dating relationship. Setting your personal guidelines when you're not dating is a more effective time to think this through than on a romantic moonlit night, in a foggy state of romance.

When I was in college, I heard a speaker that challenged us to set boundaries, and I drafted mine even though I wasn't dating anyone. I came up with four concrete guidelines that I could keep track of. I'm not legislating these for you. They're to help prompt your thinking. Please ask God to guide you. Here are my four:





1. *Don't sleep overnight in the same bed.* Couples often ask, "Is it okay to sleep together in the same bed even if nothing happens?" Upon further dialogue, it becomes apparent that things *are* happening, just not intercourse. But to lie next to someone is extremely tempting and puts people in a dangerous position where falling is likely.

Also, many married people rate falling asleep in the arms of the person they married as one of the top five great things about being married. It's too precious to be shared with multiple people.

2. *Keep clothing on.* Peeling off a sweatshirt over a T-shirt on a warm day is fine. I mean don't take off clothing that results in a loss of modesty.

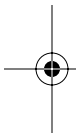
3. *Don't touch body parts that are covered by a two-piece swimsuit for women or swim trunks for men.* All of our body parts are good and beautiful, but some are so precious that they are meant to be shared only with the marriage partner.

4. *Don't lie on top of one another.* It's one thing to lie on the couch to watch a TV show or on a blanket to enjoy an outdoor picnic. What I'm referring to is lying on top of one another in a way that simulates intercourse.

A number of engaged people have shared with me that they wish they had done less sexually, sometimes with a high school girlfriend or boyfriend, sometimes with the one they are about to marry. But no one has ever said they wish they had done more.

#### INEXPERIENCE HAS BENEFITS

Occasionally I talk to a Christian guy who has kept himself sexually pure and fears that his lack of sexual experience will be a liability when he gets married. Perhaps he has heard other guys boast of sexual exploits, which causes him to wonder if he should get some ex-





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perience to know how to satisfy a woman.

I always assure these young men that their track record of self-control will make the women they marry deeply trust them. Women reason, “If he was sexually pure before he met me and was self-controlled in our dating relationship, then I know for sure he’ll be faithful to me after we’re married.”

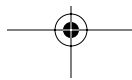
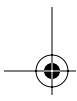
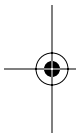
The feeling of being safe in a husband’s love allows a woman to relax and give herself unreservedly to him; sexual pleasure is unleashed. A woman’s sexual arousal has to do more with the quality of the relationship than with techniques. When I talk with married couples who are having trouble in their sex lives, they are often having problems with the way they treat each other and relate to each other. When sexual problems show up, they are not usually about sex.

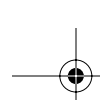
Inexperience becomes a virtue when you realize that you’re not being compared to a former lover. I’m sure that Adam and Eve had a great deal of fun figuring things out.

As you think about the dating relationship you want, also think about what you *will* do. Enjoy holding hands on long walks. Share your hearts in meaningful conversations. Learn a new sport or skill together. Take hikes and delight in creation. Visit an art gallery or attend a music concert. Practice hospitality as a couple. Care for the poor or help build a home through Habitat for Humanity. In healthy relationships, energy is directed outward to the service of others. Seek to discover what it means to follow Jesus with heart, soul, mind and strength as a couple.

#### RECLAIMING COURTSHIP

One of the things I would love to see reclaimed in today’s dating culture is the delightful process of courtship. I’m not referring to the authority of a young woman’s father in the formation of her romantic





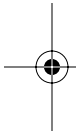
attachments, and I'm not referring to rigidly prescribed roles of parents and church in structuring the progress of a romantic relationship. Instead, by courtship I mean the unhurried development of a deep friendship between a man and a woman with the possibility of marriage, the enjoyment of time spent together without sexual involvement. Boundaries remain in place and serve to safeguard the relationship.

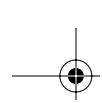
In today's dating scene many couples meet, begin dating and bypass courtship. They quickly begin to act like a married couple: grocery shopping, cooking dinner and eating together, sleeping overnight in the same bed, and sharing the bathroom. Some people want to test the relationship, wondering what it would be like to be married. Others fall into the pattern without much thought. They keep separate addresses, so they aren't officially living together, but they practice intermittent living together.

#### ANTICIPATION

When a relationship is in fast forward, people miss out on the wonderful stage of courtship. Forming a solid friendship through long conversations and shared experiences allows people to be known. Holding hands and taking long walks allows the relationship to unfold slowly. Grocery shopping and cooking dinner together may be an eventual part of courtship, but sleeping in the same bed and sharing a bathroom would not be. Words like *pursuing*, *longing* and *anticipation* are part of courtship, where people learn to savor every season of life.

Think of a little kid, Tommy, at Christmas. Tommy watches his parents decorate the house for Christmas. He helps to hang ornaments on the tree. Tommy digs through the piles of gifts under the Christmas tree and finds some with his name on them. He makes a





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tower by stacking his gifts, shaking some out of curiosity. The fancy wrapping paper and bows heightened his excitement. Special food is off limits until Christmas. His eyes dance, and his mouth salivates as he looks at the goodies.

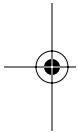
On Christmas Eve, Tommy lies awake in his bed. He's too excited to sleep. Teaming with anticipation, he imagines what gifts he might get. He thinks of the candle he made his mom at school and can't wait to see her face when she opens it. He thinks of the fun he'll have when his favorite cousin comes over. He can hardly wait for Christmas, yet he must wait.

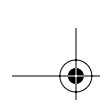
Morning finally comes, and Tommy races downstairs with his siblings. He opens his presents, dumps out the treasures in his stocking and feasts on special foods. His favorite cousin busts in the front door with the most prized Christmas gift tucked under an arm. Relatives fill the house, and the fireplace crackles. Life is good. Tommy's exhilarated!

Contrast this scenario with a different one. Tommy's mom comes in the back door from the garage, tossing a plastic bag from Target on his lap. "Here's your Christmas present." Without any fanfare, Tommy opens the bag and inside is a yearned-for toy. He's glad for the toy, but his experience wasn't much. He didn't have the opportunity to experience anticipation, longing or desire. The entire experience was diminished because they were lacking.

One of the delights of being human is experiencing anticipation. When a dating couple bypasses courtship and moves directly to acting married, they miss out on a wonderful stage of life.

They also set themselves up for hurt. When dating couples act like they're married, they bond. But to be known so deeply, to have shared life so completely only to break up leaves a person with self-doubt on a deep level. To be the rejected one can be devastating. After a simulated marriage, breaking up is similar to a divorce.





When people learn to love, to bond and to share deeply but then break up repeatedly, they learn to let go, to break bonds, to recover and to move on. This process is a setup for divorce in the future. For people who have experienced this pattern and eventually make it to the altar, it can be challenging to make the wedding and marriage special. One woman said to me, “We’re trying to figure out how to make our wedding and marriage special. We’ve slept in the same bed more times than I can count, we’ve had sex, we’ve taken trips together and stayed in a hotel together, and the cake is for sure no big deal. We’ve decided that going to a new country on our honeymoon, one neither of us has ever been to, is the best way to introduce something new and special in our wedding and marriage.”

The paradox is that our society treats sex as the most important thing in the world, something we can’t possibly live without, and also as common and ordinary. With little thought, we give away our greatest treasures: our bodies, our hearts and our sexual passions. We feel robbed, but then we realize we have been the thieves.



## 5 SEX Can we back up in our sexual relationship if we’ve gone too far?

Sarah came to our regular Monday afternoon appointment at the coffee shop, but I knew from her facial expression that this would not be a routine hour together. Her concerns spilled out. She and her boyfriend, Jason, had just come back from a weekend retreat with their Christian group. Both of them realized that a number of areas in their lives weren’t pleasing to God. Top on this list was their sexual involvement.

