

REVISED & EXPANDED

# Preparing FOR Marriage

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Help for Christian Couples



JOHN PIPER



*Preparing*  
FOR  
*Marriage*

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**JOHN PIPER**

*Preparing for Marriage: Help for Christian Couples*

Revised and Expanded Edition

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# Editor's Preface

Getting to know that special someone naturally includes learning about family and friends, education and athletics, favorite pastimes, and your hopes and dreams. Ideally you'll ask each other all kinds of questions, some vital and some trivial, and you'll talk about life's best moments and worst, the brightest places in your background and the darkest.

But what about God? What is his role in your relationship? What do each of you believe about him, and how do you understand his dream for marriage—for your marriage?

At *Desiring God*, one of our most accessed pages online is a set of questions John Piper put together for couples preparing for marriage (an updated version appears in Appendix I). You'll find many of the typical questions here—about friends and entertainment and lifestyle and children, and many people have found that

John's way of putting these questions helps get right at some pretty deep stuff.

But you'll find other questions here, too—about theology, worship and devotion, and the roles of husband and wife—questions that far too many couples don't think to ask. When preparing for marriage, or even in just beginning to consider it, it can be immensely helpful to have the perspective of someone like John Piper, not only a seasoned husband of nearly 50 years, but also a seasoned pastor, careful thinker, and faithful theologian.

This is a short book. Our vision for it is humble. Our hope is that a few couples—whether dating and considering marriage, or engaged and preparing for marriage—would find some benefit here, getting to know each other better in some of life's most significant matters, and becoming more fit to discern God's leading for their lives.

But John has more to offer than just the pre-marriage questions. We have six short chapters we think you will find helpful together on the road to marriage. Chapter 1 includes John's counsel about engagement, chapter 2 about wedding planning (and finances). Chapter 3 provides invaluable instruction about the beautiful, complementary dynamic the Bible teaches between husband and wife.

Sexual relations in marriage is the topic of chapter 4. (We know some of you may be flipping straight to that one, now that you know it's there. That's okay. Do read the rest of the book when you can!) Here there is so much potential for pleasure, and so much potential for pain. Don't shy away from giving the topic of sex good consideration and honest discussion during your engagement.

Then, in chapter 5, John helps us ponder how we can guard our marriages in a day in which they are under

assault from every side. Finally, chapter 6 is based on perhaps John Piper's single most important message on marriage. There he goes more macro than many of us have ever dared to go in thinking about what marriage is, and what God designed it for. This is a glorious, true, life-changing vision.

After John's long list of pre-marriage questions to discuss, the second appendix is about mission together. Marriage is for mission, too. In particular, the focus here is on hospitality. It's a lightly edited sermon from the series that became the book *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Permanence*, which is where we'd send you to learn more about marriage following this book. (We'd also want to point you to a 30-day devotional for young married couples called *Happily Ever After: Finding Grace in the Messes of Marriage*, by John Piper and other contributors to [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org).) For Christians, talking about ministry together, including hospitality (literally, in the New Testament, "love for strangers") is essential preparation.

Marriage is big. What you're considering or preparing for here is no trifle. Don't imagine you can just add marriage as another layer to an already busy life. Marriage demands a full restart. Reevaluate your commitments, check your priorities, rethink your normal. This book and other resources like it can help. It will be well worth your time to ask difficult questions and think hard about the answers. For your joy, the good of others, and the glory of the church's Groom.

David Mathis  
Executive Editor  
[desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org)



# 1

# Don't Waste Your Engagement

This chapter has been adapted from Episode 987 of *Ask Pastor John*, a daily audio program in which John Piper answers tough theological and pastoral questions.

*“Pastor John, I’m getting married in exactly 100 days. I’m 21 years old, and my bride-to-be is 18. I’m excited to take on the role of loving a woman like Christ did the church, but as the day draws nearer and nearer I am made more and more aware of my need for wisdom and help to become a husband capable of loving a wife well. I’ll be re-listening to all the episodes on marriage. But with all that being said, what advice do you have for me? What are the most important questions we need to ask—and likely are not—due to the rushing excitement of the engagement phase?”*

## Discuss the Hard Things Now

The more issues you can talk about together before marriage, the better. It is far more frustrating and threatening to think of something after you are married that you should have talked about beforehand. So don't shy away from any issue or conversation with your fiancée because you think this is a good time to try to avoid conflict. Now is the time to have every conflict you *can* have that might come up later. If you think that you can dodge conflicts now so that there will be a more opportune time later, you are mistaken. If you think you *should* avoid conflicts now because a blissful engagement is the path to a blissful marriage, you are badly mistaken. Instead, this is what engagement or courtship is designed for: maximum exposure to what each of you thinks, believes, feels, and does, whether habitually or occasionally. No secrets, nothing held back. You don't want marriage to be based on ignorance, but on trust, in the face of all truth.

*While the topics covered in the six chapters of this book could prompt hours of fruitful conversation (and possibly some constructive conflict along the way), don't miss Appendix I, either. There you will find more than fifty short, specific questions, in eleven categories, that many couples have found helpful.*

## Spiritual Leadership

The next thing I would say is that these are golden months in which to set patterns of spiritual leadership. Take the

initiative to read the Bible with your bride-to-be, to pray and think and study and talk together with her about all kinds of biblical and spiritual realities. Make sure the two of you are sufficiently on the same theological page. That is not an artificial or secondary expectation. If the two of you are going to pull together shoulder-to-shoulder in marriage for some great purpose—which is what marriage is for—you must be pulling in the same direction. That is, you must be seeing God in the same way and seeing Christ and seeing the Holy Spirit and seeing faith and seeing love and salvation and heaven and hell and Satan and sin and holiness and obedience—seeing all these things in essentially the same way. Otherwise, pulling together in harness will start to become very painful as you jerk each other around in different directions spiritually. What's more likely, though, is something even worse: that in your marriage you gradually just stop talking about spiritual things. So take the initiative and go deep into every dimension of spiritual life that you can in these days.

## Individual Godward Fellowship

And for both of you, you must be aware that your own personal fellowship of faith and joy and hope and obedience toward Jesus is foundational for the survival and flourishing of your marriage. The marriages that I have seen unravel, unravel in tandem with the unraveling of spiritual reality. One or both of the members of these couples falls away from Jesus to one degree or another. When that happens, their spiritual resources for handling normal, everyday conflicts start to evaporate.

Don't just think that what you do *together* strengthens

the marriage. Far more important—and this may sound like an overstatement, but I’ve thought about it and I am going to stick by it—far more important is what you do *apart* from each other as each of you meets Jesus and consecrates yourself afresh, over and over, so that your devotion to Christ is absolutely unshakable, and your experience of him is profoundly satisfying. I mean separately, personally, as individuals before Christ. When two people operate out of that individual profundity, the marriage will endure. And not only endure, but flourish with joy and fruitfulness.

## Expressions of Love and Care

Finally, of all the hundreds of things that need to be said and could be said, here is one last thing that must be said—to both of you, but with special emphasis to you as the man in this relationship: don’t assume that your affection for your bride-to-be is known and felt by her. Instead, put it on your lips over and over again, every day. Commit to doing that, from today until the end of your life together. Find fresh ways to say it—not just show it, but say it.

Lots of married men think, *Well, I show it. I earn a living. I guard her. I protect her...* Yes, that’s all well and good. Show it. Do the kinds of deeds she loves for you to do. But don’t just do things. Say things. Lavish her (and in some different ways when you’re married!) with expressions of delight and appreciation and admiration and affection and enjoyment. In your wedding vows, I hope you are going to promise to cherish her above all others and forsake everyone else, cleaving to her alone. Put that cherishing and that cleaving into words every day. This will

pay dividends of great joy and deep bonding of soul at a wonderfully profound and happy level.

That said, one caveat: remember that there is a warning in the Bible not to stir up love until it satisfies (see Song 2:7). I think that means, among other things, you can immerse yourself in the Song of Solomon in a premature and inappropriate way, because the language can turn you on in premature ways. But—I am going to risk it anyway and say this—go to that book and learn what I am talking about here. Learn how to put into words, to her face, the cherishing that you feel for her. May God bless you in this season of engagement.



## 2

# Weddings: Don't Break the Bank

This chapter has been adapted from Episode 875  
of *Ask Pastor John*.

*“Dear Pastor John, in a recent article, you wrote: ‘Pastors should lead the way in cultivating a church ethos where expensive funerals (and weddings!) are not the norm.’ This is something I hadn’t given much thought to before, and really appreciated. Thank you! I was hoping you could speak more directly on the topic of expensive weddings. How can we design a ‘Christ-exalting, simple wedding’?”*

## Word to Pastors

I will make a plea to couples in a minute for courage to be counter-cultural in this regard—because that is what it’s going to take—but in that article I am mainly pleading with pastors. I want to see pastors take the initiative to

teach and preach and help to build a culture of simplicity in the church that makes the focus of marriage celebrations the Lord Jesus; the Christ-exalting meaning of marriage; the awesome importance of the vows; and the preciousness of the people, the lovers—*not* the clothing, the flowers, the location, the music, and the whole production that can make the actual act of God in marriage seem like an incidental prelude to the big, fancy party afterwards. That is sad, I think.

But, of course, this is not an attack on joy. Just the opposite. It is a plea for drinking from the deepest pools of joy, not the peripheral puddles of happiness. Godly poor people regularly have more joy than rich people. There is no correlation between expensive and joyful—none. Unless it is this: more expensive means more hassle, more stress, more distraction—less joyful. This is a plea to leaders to cultivate an expectation of simplicity so that no one with modest means—and that is a lot of people—feels as though a simple wedding with a mints-and-nuts reception—no meal, no dance, just joy—is somehow less honoring to the Lord and the couple. It is tragic if we have cultivated a situation like that.

## Revolution in Resources

Here is the underlying worldview. A decisive turn happened in redemptive history when Jesus came into the world. The Old Testament was, by and large, a come-and-see religion, while the New Testament is largely a go-and-tell religion. That is why there is lavish expenditure in the Old Testament on the temple. *Come see, from Egypt and from Ethiopia and from the ends of the earth! Come see*

*this expensive temple that we have built!* That's why wealth was seen so regularly as a sign of God's blessing. But that has all radically changed with the coming of the Son of Man, who had no place to lay his head and told us to go risk our lives to disciple the nations (see Matthew 8:20; 28:19). We are not living in Old Testament times. This is not a come-and-see religion, and Christianity doesn't even have a geographic center. This is a go-and-tell religion.

The coming of the new covenant has brought a revolution in the use of our resources. What governs our lifestyle now is the effort to show that our treasure is in heaven and not on the earth. What governs us is the effort to maximize our giving to finish the Great Commission and to love the hurting of the world. The New Testament is relentless in pushing us toward simplicity and economy for the kingdom and away from luxury and away from affluence and away from finery, including luxurious weddings.

Just to give you a taste of what I mean when I say it is relentless, consider a few Bible verses.

- Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God... Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. (Luke 6:20, 24)
- They are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life. (Luke 8:14)
- The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. (Luke 9:58)
- Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy. (Matthew 6:19)
- I tell you, do not be anxious about your life... Life [is] more than food... and clothing. (Matthew 6:25)

- Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with...a treasure in the heavens. (Luke 12:33)
- Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:33)
- How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! (Luke 18:24)
- Paul was “poor, yet making many rich.” He had “nothing, yet [possessed] everything.” (2 Corinthians 6:10)
- We brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. (1 Timothy 6:7–8)
- You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. (Hebrews 10:34)

When Noël and I were married, she wore her mother’s wedding dress. There were some small alterations made, but the cost was minimal. I wore my best and only Sunday suit, and my best man wore his. Noël’s matron of honor wore a nice Sunday dress. We had an open Bible and a cross on the platform, just to show our values. Someone played the church organ. My father preached. The church provided a reception in the fellowship hall: no meal, no refreshments, just a cake. For the honeymoon, I borrowed my father’s car and we made the seven-hour drive to St. Petersburg, Florida, where we stayed in a single-story motel on the beach.

It was all simple. It was all full of joy. It was explosive with happy expectation. Nobody borrowed any money.

The Lord, the word of God, the vows, and the lovers were in the foreground, and God was honored. And all these decades later we are just as married as anybody. I think that is a good idea.

## Truth and Beauty, in Humility

Now, let me stress again that there *is* a place for special: special dress, special expenditures, special beauty in the simplicity of the Christian life. There *is* a place for beauty expressed in that way. But what is happening in the evangelical church today, it seems to me, is that things are careening out of control, and somebody needs to put the brakes on. So I am pleading with pastors, especially. Let the service and the word and the vows and the Lord and the love be the main thing. There does not have to be a meal after the wedding—believe me, there doesn't. There doesn't have to be a dance. The reception doesn't have to be at an expensive hotel. There doesn't have to be a paid quintet. Really, it doesn't have to be.

Besides pastors who lead on this, the church needs young people with backbone and radical Christian courage to stand against a culture and show in all humility what truth and beauty and joy can look like at one fourth the cost and one fourth the anxieties and one fourth the stress—and double the focus on the glory of Christ and the advancement of his kingdom. I pray that you two might be among them.

## **EPHESIANS 5:21-33**

[Submit] to one another out of reverence for Christ. <sup>22</sup> Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. <sup>24</sup> Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. <sup>25</sup> Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, <sup>26</sup> that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, <sup>27</sup> so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. <sup>28</sup> In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup> For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, <sup>30</sup> because we are members of his body. <sup>31</sup> "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." <sup>32</sup> This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. <sup>33</sup> However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

## **1 PETER 3:1-7**

Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, <sup>2</sup> when they see your respectful and pure conduct. <sup>3</sup> Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—<sup>4</sup> but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. <sup>5</sup> For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, <sup>6</sup> as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening. <sup>7</sup> Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

### 3

# Husbands Who Love Like Christ and the Wives Who Submit to Them

The sections of Ephesians and 1 Peter on the preceding page are essential passages for engaged or newly married Christian couples to become familiar with and to discuss, honestly and in detail. My goal in this chapter is to encourage that conversation by giving you plenty to talk about.

Let's start by jumping into the Ephesians passage at verse 31. It's a quote from Genesis 2:24, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." In the next verse, Paul looks back on this quote and says, "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church."

## **Mystery of Marriage**

Why is the coming together of a man and woman to form one flesh in marriage a mystery? Paul's answer is this: the

marriage union is a mystery because its deepest meaning has been partially concealed, but is now being openly revealed by the apostle: “it refers to Christ and the church” (v. 32).

So marriage is like a metaphor or an image or a picture or a parable that stands for something *more* than a man and a woman becoming one flesh. It stands for the relationship between Christ and the church. That’s the deepest meaning of marriage. It’s meant to be a living drama of how Christ and the church relate to each other.

Notice how verses 28–30 describe the parallel between Christ and the church being one body, and the husband and wife being one flesh. “In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.” In other words, the one-flesh union between man and wife means that in a sense they are now one body, so that the care a husband has for his wife, he has for himself. They are one. What he does to her, he does to himself. Then Paul compares this to Christ’s care for the church. Picking up near the end of verse 29, he says the husband nourishes and cherishes his own flesh, “as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.”

Just as the husband is one flesh with his wife, so the church is one body with Christ. When the husband cherishes and nourishes his wife, he cherishes and nourishes himself; and when Christ cherishes and nourishes the church, he cherishes and nourishes himself.

If you want to understand God’s meaning for marriage, you have to grasp that we are dealing with an

original and a copy; a reality and a metaphor; a truth and a parable. The *original*—the reality, the truth—is God’s marriage to his people, or Christ’s marriage to the church. And the *copy*—the metaphor, the parable—is a husband’s marriage to his wife. Geoffrey Bromiley says, “As God made man in his own image, so he made earthly marriage in the image of his own eternal marriage with his people” (*God and Marriage*, p. 43).

## Roles of Husbands and Wives

One thing to learn from this mystery is the roles of husband and wife in marriage. One of Paul’s points in this passage is that these roles are not arbitrarily assigned, and they are not reversible without obscuring God’s purpose for marriage. The roles of husband and wife are rooted in the distinctive roles of Christ and his church. God means for marriage to say something, about his Son and his church, in the way husbands and wives relate to each other.

We see this in verses 23–25. Verse 24 speaks to the wife about her half of the metaphor, and verses 23 and 25 speak about the husband’s half of the metaphor. Wives, find your distinctive role as a wife in keying off the way the church relates to Christ. “Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands” (v. 24). Then to husbands: find your distinctive role as a husband in keying off the way Christ relates to the church. “For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior” (v. 23). “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (v. 25).