

When I mention shopping, what kinds of images go through your head? Shopping malls, fun times with friends, new clothes, new toys, fun things, hunting for bargains... we love to shop! We are a consumer culture. We are smart shoppers, thrifty, frugal, big spenders, deal-finders, shop for things we need, shop for things we want, birthday presents, anniversary presents, valentine's day, Christmas, President's Day... you name it, we are shopping for it! I forget what the exact statistics are, but I've seen that the bulk of our country's economy runs on consumer spending. Boy, can we shop!

And to an extent, that's totally cool! God gave us a desire for new things. A desire for fun. For decorative things for our homes, for practical things for our homes. A desire to get good things for our friends and family on days where we honor their existence (... birthdays.) :-) But do you notice the trend there? We are talking about... things.

That's where the good has to stop. But, unfortunately, Satan has gotten us to carry the idea of shopping and the "consumer mentality" over into the realm of people and relationships.

My father-in-law was a preacher for over 40 years. Still is, in fact, but just retired recently after 31 years serving with a church in the Buffalo, NY area. When he would preach, there would inevitably come a time in his sermon where he would invite everyone to "play suppose" with him. I would like to do the same here...

Let's play suppose... :-)

Suppose you need to go shopping. You need some new clothes. Let's say, a new shirt. You have worn and washed your favorite shirt one too many times. (At your mother's prodding, no doubt...) What used to be your pride and joy is now little more than a beat up old rag. Several holes are forming in the seams, some stains from different spills through the years... that slight pink hue from the time you washed it with your sister's bright red cheer-leading uniform... It has definitely seen its better days.

So, you've got enough cash on hand for a new shirt and you head to your favorite store to pick out a new winner. You start searching through the racks, pulling out the occasional one that catches your eye, so you can take a little closer look. Some you put right back as you notice something you didn't see was there at first glance. Some get a longer glance. Some make it to your "try that one on" pile. When you finally are satisfied that you've looked through the ones available, you head on over to the fitting rooms to try them out. One by one you try them on to see how they fit you.

First one, a little snug around the collar...

Second, "Oh, I don't really like that color on me..."

Third, "Whoa! That one looked WAY bigger out on the rack..."

Fourth, "Pretty close, but, not exactly what I'm looking for"

"Too big under the arms... too small... a little funny looking..."

And on, and on, and on, and on. Until... finally... "This is the one!!!" You put the others down and decide first you're going to find a store with a better selection, and then you head to the cashier to make your purchase!

On your way home you're psyched to share your new purchase with your friends and family. Yeah, it's just a shirt, but you're pumped! It's perfect! You like everything about it! The color, the fit, the style... this is the best shirt you've EVER owned! You get home and pull it out and show it off to everyone within reach. Then you put it on and wear it all around. It's one of those shirts you wear as often as it's available. It's perfect for you. It's YOUR shirt.

But, then what happens? Once the new has worn off... the same thing that happened to the other shirt starts to happen. Either it starts to get so old and worn out that it has kind of out-lived its usefulness to you. Or, maybe it's quickly gone out of fashion, so you feel kinda funny being seen in it anymore... Or, maybe you have put on a little weight? :-) Or, maybe plain and simple, you just don't like it anymore. So what do you do then? You go out shopping again!

Things are disposable. For any of the reasons above, we can, and in most cases, should, go out and replace the old with a newer and better version. Happens with more than shirts, it's anything. Cars, computers, appliances, all kinds of things get old and tossed out or upgraded. But people are not disposable. Relationships should not be like that.

Have you ever seen anyone treat a person, or a relationship they were in with that same "shoppers mentality"? (Go ahead, you can be honest... I can't see you raise your hand) I have. All the time. It's an easy thing to do. I think that we are actually *taught* to do it. Isn't that sad? But it's true. From our early childhood we see things portrayed on TV, in books, all kinds of stories of love and romance, and they are all stories of chasing after or looking for the "right guy" or the "right girl". Looking for just the right fit for you. Just like that shirt.

Did you make the connection with some of the things we say about a shirt? We start off looking for "what catches our eye". We are taught that is the cool thing to do. Check out people of the opposite sex. I think the stereotype is that this is more for the guys, that they are more interested in the outside appearance, but I don't think this is only true for guys. In fact, I think girls actually start talking about who's cute and who's not far before the guys even know what's going on. :-) And, the funny part is, that is encouraged. Even by our parents! We are encouraged to be emphatuated by the appearance of someone of the opposite sex, to talk about it with our girlfriends and buddies. Then we get into the banter about who likes who and all the games we play there. We want to spend lots more time on the whole idea of "the game" and also more on the "innocent" puppy love in the chapter on Porneia. There is a lot more there than meets the eye. But for now, suffice it to say we are definitely encouraged to look.

And, subsequently we are encouraged to rank and rate what we are looking at. Again, placing people and relationships in a category that should only be for inanimate things. We said about the shirt we were shopping for that we look through the rack, and something that at first may have caught our eye, upon closer examination has some feature that wasn't what we expected, so we put it back. A lot of people go into a relationship looking for something specific. We go in with a list of wants and needs and things we want our girlfriend or boyfriend to be. Deep down we may actually know that it is not really possible to find someone who meets all those requirements... but we still try. And, often, we end up getting hurt because we find out our boyfriend who matches most of them, really doesn't match three or four... and so, we "put him back".

The real problem here is that we are out looking to meet our needs. We are looking for what someone has to offer us. That is not the way God designed us. Jesus was asked, "How would you sum up the law and the Prophets" (that is God's Word in Jesus' time) And he replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind. This is the greatest commandment. And the second one is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. All of the law and prophets hang on these principles. You will do well to keep them." What are God's instructions for us if we want to live the life our Creator designed for us? Love others. God first, then all his people. Doesn't say, and don't forget yourself! It doesn't have to, because we never do forget ourselves. We are very selfish, self-centered people. But, it doesn't say it. God's instructions for us to have a good life are to think about and love other people instead of ourselves.

That simply does not match looking for someone to meet my needs. If I'm putting together a list of attributes, it needs to be for *me*. How can *I* meet the needs of my future spouse? How can *I* be the best I can be for the person I will live my life with? We have it all backwards, and again, we are taught to do that, and encouraged to do that by our culture, our friends, even our parents and churches.

Not only is it backwards to look for someone to meet our needs, instead of trying to meet the needs of someone else, but we already talked about God being the "Need Meeter". God has set up life so that we need Him. There are lots of places that we need him, that we rely on Him to provide for us. God wants us to trust Him to do that. Put Him first and he'll take care of us. This is all contrary to the shopping idea of, "I'm gonna go out and find what fits me best!" It is the

absolute opposite of waiting for God to provide what actually DOES fit us best. God knows us and wants to give us that. We need to remember that.

So, instead, as a culture, we compulsively go after the ideal match for us. We search the racks for the ones that catch our eyes, examine some closer, putting back the ones with blemishes, and finally we take our selections to the fitting room.

We are encouraged to head to the fitting room to try out that relationship to see if it is a good fit. Not necessarily just in the physical sense (sexual intimacy), but just moving into a new relational status which we call "dating".

Dating is in effect the fitting room of relationships. It is where from the crowd, from the main rack of available options, we have selected the items we want and are ready to try them out to see how they fit us. We step in and give them a shot at pleasing us, meeting our needs, and then we give them the thumbs up, or down. Then, once we have what we want, we leave the fitting room and head out with our new item until it no longer meets our needs. And, sadly, that is even true with relationships.

I have seen it many times. We break off or end relationships sometimes even on a whim or a feeling. "I just don't feel the spark anymore..." or... "I really don't think we're right for each other"... or, "I think we need some space to explore other options". That is all fine and dandy, the problem arises when we have already entered into that relationship other than friends. When we have made that person to be something more special to us than any of our other friends. When we have shared our hearts and lives with that person, and they with us... that is where the hurt comes from. God does not intend for the intimate relationship between a man and a woman - what he instituted as marriage, and what we imitate in dating - to end for any reason. His original intent, that we see in the Creation picture is one man with one woman for life. Dating, shopping for just the right person, trying out lots of different "marriages" just does not fit that picture.

But, we need to look deeper at all of this before we make any conclusions in this matter.

In his book, Choosing God's Best,¹ Don Raunika quotes a study that lists the reasons that couples broke up. Here are some of those reasons...

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

You'll notice that these reasons are exactly the reasons that couples get divorced. That's because they are. The above reasons, and all [] on that list are exactly the reasons that couples will choose to "break up", or end the new way of relating they began when they began "dating". But, the study was asking couples who were about to, or had just gone through a divorce. It is quite a shocking, but completely understandable thing when you think about it.

Lots of people tell us, and not at all intending malice of any kind, that dating is a necessary trial for marriage. Practicing being with that person to see if it would work in a marriage setting. "You wouldn't buy a car before you test drive it, would you?" (That logic has also been used by people outside of the church who condone sexual relations before marriage.) "How else would you get to know your future marriage partner?"

We will get into lots of practical ways that you can do that in some later chapters in this book. For now, I want to focus on the idea of "practice for marriage".

According to the list above, it appears that dating is not as much practice for marriage as it is practice for divorce. All of the reasons given by people going through divorces are reasons commonly given for breaking up a dating relationship. In dating, the intention is not the unconditional commitment of marriage to the other person, it is the entering into the marriage

¹ Raunika, Don. Choosing God's Best. ??? Publishers. Copyright © ??? ...

relationship with the easy avenue out if it “doesn’t work”. The intention is not at all to stick with it, but rather to try it until it doesn’t work, and then move on to the next option.

This creates a mindset for the marriage relationship. If all you’ve ever known of the “marriage” relationship has come from dating, you know nothing of marriage. Marriage does not allow you to have an out at the end if it gets hard. Marriage is not temporary. Marriage is not about me (like shopping, finding what is best for you). In dating, you can just go back to “your life” at the end of the day. In marriage, “your life” is where you are at the end of the day... with your spouse! You can’t ever get away! (Hopefully, it’s not as bad as that sentence makes it sound!) :-) In dating it is less like the one life from two that you have in marriage, where you share everything (bed, house, dishes, food, kids, bills, chores, toothpaste, *everything!*) and more like a “marriage” on your schedule. You can be “one” whenever it’s convenient... sometimes even when it’s not, but that’s only because you know that “your time” is coming. The time when you can get back to “your life” at the end of the day. It is still very much two separate lives, living the illusion of a joint life.

Then what happens when you actually get married? You find out that it’s NOTHING like when you were dating! Your boyfriend was always so nice! Your girlfriend would never say anything like that! But, in marriage, we really see the ugliness of the other person. The stuff that Jesus died for. And, in the dating world, when we see ugliness, we’re taught to say, “I guess he/she is not the right one for me.” When something doesn’t mesh, or when we are hurt one too many times, or when we just don’t feel the love anymore... it’s time to move on. Thankfully as a culture we still take marriage a little more seriously, but not much.

You are probably thinking, these folks are WAY off the deep end here! Just because some one has dated and broken up doesn’t mean that they are going to do that same thing in a marriage relationship. Oh really? We have seen it first hand in some good friends of ours who got married after a series of breaking up and getting back together in their couple years of dating prior to marriage. Once they were married, and the masks and blinders came off, the cycle they started in their dating relationship began again, and has finally ended in their separation and will most likely end in their divorce. Having been a close confidant of one of them, I have seen up close the devastation that this causes in someone’s life. I am sure it is present in both of them, though I have only been close to one side. The complete feeling of inadequacy. “What did I do wrong?” The betrayal. A promise was broken. A solemn vow. But, it is not seen that way, because the importance of the relationship has been dulled by the ever present option of a way out... of breaking up... of divorce.

God created a relationship that would not end. Nothing could get in the way of it, and so it need not end. Sin has entered the picture, and there are lots of things that can get in the way now. Satan has entered the picture and tried to get us to start shopping. Shopping leads to temporary, trial relationships. Trial relationships lead to disposable relationships. Disposable relationships leads to a society of people who can not trust, who can not love. It is a dangerous cycle.

All because of a little shopping trip.