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RELATIONSHIPS IN A

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CONFUSED CULTURE

LOVE »

SEAN McDOWELL

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SEAN McDOWELL

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I dedicate this book to my beautiful wife, Stephanie. You are not only my high school sweetheart, but you are still the love of my life and will be forever.

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PART 1



CHAPTER 1

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The Invitation

The Matrix is one of my all-time favorite films. Even though I am a huge superhero fan and have watched many of the Marvel and DC movies over and over again, *The Matrix* is the only movie I have seen four times in the theater. That's right, *four times*.

You might be thinking, *this guy is crazy*. But as a young man fresh out of college, there was something about *The Matrix* that captured my imagination. Maybe you can think of a movie that has similarly captured yours.

In case you haven't seen it, the main character of the movie, Neo (played by Keanu Reeves), is a computer hacker who discovers that reality is not what he thinks it is. The world he believes is real is actually a computer simulation—the Matrix—that has been devised by artificially intelligent beings to distract humans as they use their bodies as an energy source. Neo discovers the truth, escapes from the Matrix, and joins a small band of humans in rebellion against the machines.

There are a lot of reasons to enjoy *The Matrix* as a movie. It's full of action and suspense, has a twist of romance, and has stunning visual effects (well, at least for its time!). Yet these are not

Chasing Love

the core reasons the movie captured me. Rather, it was because the movie raised *bigger* questions that made me reflect upon the trajectory of my own life, and in particular, my Christian faith. It made me consider what I was living *for*.

In the movie, Neo has a difficult choice to make: Will he choose the pleasures of the artificial world of the Matrix (the blue pill), or will he commit his life to truth, as costly and difficult as that may be (the red pill)? *The Matrix*, of course, is a movie, but in real life, each one of us faces a similar decision: *Will we choose a pleasure-centered life focused on self-fulfillment, or will we give our lives away for a greater cause?*

Jesus invites us to wrestle deeply with this question. In fact, He invites us to ask what we are *really* chasing in life. Good grades? Work? Success in sports? Marriage? Drama? Video games? You may care about some of these, or maybe all of them. But do they capture the depth of what you're *really* seeking? As good as these things can be, my suspicion is that, like Neo, you want your life to be about something *bigger*. You want your life to matter.

Jesus invites us to reorient the focus of our lives, to live for His kingdom instead of our own. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). Jesus invites us to embrace a higher calling, living not for our own pleasures and goals but seeking *first* the things of God. Even though this road can be tough, and requires sacrifice, it is the most meaningful life we can live. According to Jesus, the God-focused life is the one that matters most. Through following Jesus, we experience God's "living water" rather than settling for a substitute (John 4:1–15).

The Invitation

So, what does it mean to seek first God's kingdom? In response to the question about the greatest commandment in the law, Jesus said to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:28–31). Simply put, the greatest commandment is to love God and love other people. Thus, if you want to seek God's kingdom first, you have to learn how to love God *and* love other people.

Thankfully, we can look to Jesus in this: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (1 John 3:16). The way of love involves humbling ourselves in obedience to what God has called us to do. But Jesus isn't just our *model* of love. His death on the cross for our sins *enables* us to love. He makes us new creations—new people—who by the power of the Holy Spirit can give up things the world says we need for the sake of that which is truly life-giving—loving God and others. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

This is the great task God has for each one of us, and the Holy Spirit is ready to help us do it.

As a young college student, I remember being paralyzed with uncertainty about my career choice. I read a book by a former U.S. president, and he essentially said, “If you don't know what to do with your career, focus on how you can best love God and love other people.” Simple, but profound.

Yet the contrast between the invitation of Jesus and the invitation of the world could not be starker. The world tells you to live for yourself; Jesus says to die for yourself. The world says to do whatever you want; Jesus says to cultivate the right wants. The world says to love yourself; Jesus says to love others as you love yourself.

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The world disregards truth; Jesus claims that truth is found only through knowing and following Him.

Like Neo, you have a choice about the direction of your life. This isn't a choice you can put off until later. You're already making a choice whether you know it or not. We are all seeking some kingdom *now*, which is reflected in the ways we treat others *daily*. Here is the critical question Jesus is inviting you to consider: Will you view your whole life as a heroic adventure of walking faithfully in obedience to Him?

At this point, you might be wondering about the kind of book that you picked up. Isn't this a book about finding true love? After all, isn't the point of *chasing* something to *find* it? And doesn't happiness come from finding "real love"? Maybe you were expecting me to address LGBTQ issues and to answer popular questions like, "How far is too far?"

I will address both these topics, and many more. At the end of each chapter, I briefly address one tough, practical question like the following:

- *When am I ready to say, "I love you"?*
- *What should I do if someone is pressuring me for nude pictures of myself?*
- *Is masturbation okay?*
- *What should I do if a friend comes out to me?*
- *I am hurting from a past relationship. How long should I wait for another?*

But this is not primarily a how-to book on sex, love, and relationships. If that is the book you're looking for, you may need to look elsewhere. The point of this book is to motivate you to chase

The Invitation

a bigger question, namely, “How do I seek God and His kingdom in my relationships with other people?” In other words, what does it mean to truly love God and love other people? If the question is framed this way, I think you will discover that you have the tools to work through the myriad of practical questions that arise in a romantic relationship, or as a single person aiming to honor God in your life and relationships.

Whether you get married someday or remain single, Jesus is inviting you to the great task of loving God and loving other people just as He loved us first. There are many ways to do this. In this book, we are going to focus on what it means to love God and others with our sexuality and in our relationships in the unique cultural moment that we find ourselves.

Are you ready? Let’s go.

»—————> QUESTION <—————«

How do I stay sexually pure?

Begin by asking God for strength. Rely upon God for His strength rather than your own. Second, build convictions about *why* you are waiting. If necessary, go back through this book and discuss it with others. Third, find a good friend who shares your convictions about sex. Your friends will deeply shape your beliefs and behavior about sex. Fourth, be wise about media consumption. Protect your eyes and be careful about the movies, music, and social media you absorb. Fifth, avoid alcohol and drugs. Alcohol impairs judgment and makes decision-making tougher, which is why it often accompanies sexual activity.

CHAPTER 2



Who Will You Trust?

My first memory of my wife is in third grade (yes, I have *that* kind of story). We have now been married more than two decades and have three kids who are currently in high school, junior high, *and* elementary school. As you can imagine, our lives are busy and stressful at times, but they are also joy-filled and rich.

This past school year, my oldest son played varsity basketball as a freshman, and his team won the District 3 Championship. Watching him play this season was one of the great joys of my life. I was a gym-rat growing up and had the chance to play college basketball at Biola University, but I can truly say I have more fun watching my son play than I ever had playing basketball myself. While I can hardly believe that I'm writing this, it's true.

Why am I telling you this? The reason is that I love my kids dearly, and I try to demonstrate this to them through both my words and actions. As a result, they know they can trust me. They may not choose to always listen to me (after all, they're still growing up!), but they know I have their best interest at heart. Deep down, I know they believe I want the best for them, and as a result, they

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are willing to listen to me and to accept my discipline and instruction—although begrudgingly at times.

As a member of Generation Z, you have grown up with more voices speaking into your life than any previous generation. And the reason is simple—smartphones. You have *far* more people speaking into your life than your parents or grandparents ever had at your age. This raises a number of issues, but none more vital than the question: *Who will you trust?*

Who will you listen to? Politicians? The news? Social media influencers? Teachers? Friends? Religious leaders? Who are the voices you trust to help you navigate reality?

How you answer this question influences *every* decision you make. And this is especially true in the area of sexuality and relationships. Quite obviously, our world is filled with messages contrary to Scripture. Music. Movies. Social media. And so on. Digital technology is a wonderful tool for learning and connecting with others (I love my smartphone!), but it also allows endless voices, some subtle and others more overt, to persistently speak messages into our lives about sex, love, and relationships. Again, who will you trust?

As I mentioned earlier, my kids trust me because I am older, wiser, but more significantly, they know I love them. If they couldn't trust that I had their best interests in mind, my age and wisdom would mean nothing to them.

Yet even as much as they trust me, I am still an *imperfect* father. I try to honor God as a husband and father, but I fall short all the time.

In contrast, God is a *perfect* heavenly Father. He not only knows everything and has unlimited power, but He loves us more deeply than we can even grasp.

Who Will You Trust?

The greatest act of love God has shown us was the death of Jesus. Jesus said the greatest act of love is to lay down your life for another (John 15:13). Sacrificing your life is the highest act of love because your life is the most valuable thing you have to give. I love my kids, and thus would gladly lay down my life for them.

Would I die for an enemy? That's a tougher question. Yet that's exactly what Jesus did for us.

Paul writes, "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

Jesus did not have the precondition that we repent *before* He laid down His life. He did not die for good people. He died for sinners. God loves us not because of anything we did, but because of who He is. God paid the ultimate price, through the death of His Son, so we could have eternal life.

Will you trust *this* God?

In the garden of Eden, Satan tempted Adam and Eve, the first humans, by trying to undermine their confidence in the character of God. He wanted to sow seeds of doubt in their minds and hearts about God. Did God *really* have their best interests in mind, or was He keeping them from something better? After all, the fruit they weren't supposed to eat looked tasty to the senses, striking to the eyes, and appealing to the mind (Gen. 3:6). If God were good, would He *really* keep something so attractive from them?

Adam and Eve listened to the crafty prompting of Satan. They ultimately lost confidence in the goodness of God, and thus ate the fruit. Sadly, they came to doubt the character of God, and while they may have *believed* their choice was wise, their disobedience brought immeasurable suffering into the world.

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Aren't we faced with the same kind of choice today? The world offers "fruit" that looks pleasurable, fun, and satisfying. It is as if Satan were saying, "Did God *really* say sexual activity was only for marriage? Is sexual activity *really* that big of a deal? Does porn *really* hurt anyone? As long as sex is consensual, there's nothing wrong with it, right? Are you really going to judge someone else for how they love? Why embrace a view of sex, love, and gender that seems so closed-minded? Isn't the Christian sexual ethic unrealistic today anyway? *Isn't God holding out on you?*"

These voices can be powerful and convincing, especially since we hear them incessantly through social media, school, television, celebrities, and so on. As a result, we are tempted to stop taking God at His Word and wonder, "Did God *really* say . . . ?"

Yet Jesus invites us to something greater. He invites you to reject the counterfeit pleasures of this world, and to focus your life on loving God and loving other people. While the reward is far greater, it comes as a sacrifice in the present.

I would be dishonest if I didn't ask you to count the cost up front, so here it goes: Are you prepared to sacrifice certain worldly



Are you willing to give up some things our culture says are *good* in order to do what God says is *best*?



pleasures for the sake of faithfulness to Christ? Are you willing to give up some things our culture says are *good* in order to do what God says is *best*? As Jesus said, "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:39).

Personally, I believe we can and should trust God, because I am convinced God is good—for

Who Will You Trust?

a number of reasons. I'll mention just two here. First, Scripture teaches it. King David wrote, "Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!" (Ps. 107:1). God doesn't merely *do* good things; He *is* good.

Second, Jesus reveals the good character of God through His miraculous healings, profound teachings, death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus demonstrate that God is truly good and that He has not abandoned this world to chaos or wickedness. God is in control and working all things together for the good, and the "good" He's working toward in our lives is to make us like Christ (Rom. 8:28–29).

Why is this so important? Think about it: How you understand the character of God shapes how you evaluate His commands. If you don't truly believe God is good, you'll tend to view His commands as oppressive and controlling. You'll be tempted to consider God a "cosmic killjoy," intent upon stealing your fun. On the other hand, believing God is good sets you free to trust Him and His plan as the best path to both giving and receiving genuine love. Loving this good God motivates obedience to Him.

Still, I can't promise you the journey will be easy. In fact, it will likely be harder than following the ways of the world—at least in the short run. After all, isn't it easier to give in to sin than to resist it? Wouldn't it be easier to adopt the cultural understanding of sex and gender than to stand in patient and loving biblical *opposition*? Yes, of course it would. Yet in this book, I want to encourage you to consider the value of doing things that are difficult. Difficult things are meaningful. Nothing worth having comes easy.

If you follow Jesus, there will inevitably be times you wonder whether the sacrifice is worth it. In his letter *Saved in Hope*,

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Pope Benedict XVI said that “the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads toward a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if the goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey.”¹ Living for God is the greatest goal we can embrace. He is the only goal worth giving our entire lives to. While the road is not easy, we do know where it leads in the end—to eternal life. Our present sufferings pale in comparison to the glory that awaits us (see Rom. 8:18–25).

Regardless of what our culture proclaims, if you are a follower of Jesus, you are *always* on the right side of history.

Even though I am an *imperfect* father, my kids trust me, because I am older, wiser, and love them deeply. How much more should we trust our *perfect* heavenly Father who not only knows everything, and has unlimited power, but loves us more profoundly than we can ever fully comprehend?

Our journey toward loving people begins by trusting that God is good, and by committing to Him and following *His* plan for our sexuality, rather than embracing everything our culture tells us.

Let’s dive in.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 1 (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2007).

»—————» **QUESTION** «—————«

When is the right age to date?

First, obey your parents. Whether you agree with them or not, your primary job is to honor your parents by respecting their standards. To me, the right age to date is *when you are mature enough to handle the emotional (and sexual) pressures that can accompany a date*. This might be at seventeen or twenty-two. Although I personally think sixteen should be the earliest, the key issue is the level of maturity. Start with these questions: Can you set and keep healthy sexual standards? Can you treat a date with respect? Do adults in your life think you are ready?