

Say Yes to Arranged Marriages - 11/6/2011

Greg Boyd, Christena Cleveland

Greg: Good morning, Woodland Hills!

Christena: Good morning!

Greg: Good to see you all this morning. Dating is rough stuff. Would you agree to that? Ah, man, I never was any good at it. We're in this series on relationships and relatives and things of that sort, so today we're going to be talking about dating and marriage. We're going to see that the principles for good, kingdom dating also make for good, kingdom marriages. So, whether you're single or married, I want you to be listening in on this and tuning in on what's going to be happening here.

So, the title of this message this morning is "Say Yes to Arranged Marriages." They think we're kidding. No. Okay. So, hang in, you'll find out what we're about on this.

And I have with me this morning the lovely and highly esteemed, world-renowned social psychologist, Dr. Christena Cleveland. Give her a hand! For a lot of reasons, one of which is that I haven't been single for a very, very long time, thirty-two years, last I recall, so we thought it would be good to have somebody on stage who actually knows what they're talking about as opposed to what sermons usually are like here at Woodland Hills Church where they have me doing this.

So, it may be good as just sort of a little introductory thing to find out, Christena, what is a memorable experience you've had recently? You are single, right?

Christena: I am single.

Greg: But you are dating.

Christena: I am happily dating, yes.

Greg: So you're single but not available. That's probably good to get out there, otherwise, there'd be a long line of... And so, yeah, any experience you'd like to share with us, or would not like to share but I'm forcing you to share?

Christena: Sure. Not too long ago before I started dating my boyfriend now, I went on a date with this guy, and he had recently read a book that talked a lot about how women needed to be rescued and the point of being a man is "rescuing" a woman from, I don't know what, from lack of a Y chromosome or something? I'm not sure.

Greg: Lack of a Y, I'll save you!

Christena: Yeah! So, anyway, on our first date he started telling me that he felt like he was supposed to rescue me and that's what he was going to do, and I was the woman that he was going to rescue, and he kept saying it over and over and over again. I got tired of him telling me that he was going to rescue me, and so I said, "If you do not stop talking about this, I am going to go on the offensive and someone's going to need to rescue you from me."

Greg: "Sssss, like fire, smokin'!

Christena: And then he didn't ask me out again. Can you believe it?

Greg: Can you believe that?!

Christena: I know!

Greg: You intimidated him a little bit! All right. I was never any good at dating. I would, you know, most people here know that I've had, from age five on, this obsession with death. And I always wanted to talk about death and just...

Christena: It's deep.

Greg: And so, and I never was good at small talk. So the way I would avoid small talk on dates is I'd take them to a grave yard, and that was like my way of getting to know people. On a lot of first dates...

Christena: Would you put the moves on them, in the dark?

Greg: Yeah, yeah. The monster mash. Probably before your time; but, yeah, so I had a lot of first dates, not too many second dates. It's amazing that I ever got married, when I look back on it.

So, we're looking at dating and marriage in a kingdom framework. We want to be looking at all of this from a distinctly kingdom perspective, because it changes everything. If you weren't here for the first three of these messages, I encourage you to go back and listen to them because it lays a foundation for...it's kind of a...each message builds on the other. So the paradigm we're looking at is this: in the first century, we, by way of review, we saw that the father defined the family. The father had complete authority over the family. Everyone's allegiance was to the father and the family; that was the primary allegiance, the foundation to the whole social structure in the ancient world. And the job of kids was to live in a way that brought honor to the father, to carry out the father's will, and then to expand the father's family by getting married and having children. Everyone just sort of understood that's how it worked. And because the father had total authority over the family, marriages were always

arranged by the father. Marriages were for the purpose of bringing honor to the father and carrying out the father's will and expanding the father's family. And so, he would arrange them. Sometimes sons had veto power, saying, "Dad, no way!" It depends on the relationship they had with the father. Sometimes they could say no to something that the father was arranging, but daughters never did, not in first century Judaism.

And so, the marriages were arranged for several purposes. Usually, there was an economic factor involved. As in many traditional cultures, the daughter was sold, and so the father would sell the daughter to the highest bidder. That's called a dowry or a "bride price." And so, it was to further the economic status of the family. Sometimes the marriages were arranged to kind of further the social status of the family. If you had a daughter and somebody who's wealthier or had a family, a higher social stratum, wanted to marry her, well, then it would be arranged for that reason. So there were sociological, financial, political factors involved in this, but the bottom line is that the father arranged the marriages. The father brokered the deal.

Now, things have changed a little bit, I think, and so to get a perspective on more recent times, I turn it over to my esteemed colleague.

Christena: So, yes, things are a little bit different nowadays. We live in a Western, individualistic culture and so our dads don't arrange our marriages. We arrange them ourselves. We get to broker our own deals and, in general, that sounds like a good idea, but we also live in a really consumeristic society, and so we're all about getting what we want when we want it, how we want it. And so this sort of feeds off of what Greg talked about last week, this idea that without the father being in our lives, our Father God being in our lives, we're kind of operating out of a vacuum or out of a void, and so we're just trying to consume anything. We kind of see the world with hungry eyes looking for things that might fulfill us. And then we apply this to the whole dating scenario, too, so we might look at people and think, "What can they do to fill the void in my life? What can they do to make me feel complete? How can they make my life awesome? How can they be exactly the person that I want them to be when I need them to be that person for me?" And so, as a result of that, men and women are often treated like property, so it's kind of similar to the more historical, ancient times because people are reduced to things that we can sort of move around in order to make our lives better.

So, some of the questions that people that I've heard or I've asked myself as I've dated people are like, how much money does he make? Or, will she be able to maintain that figure for the rest of her life? Maybe we should go see what her mom looks like so we can get a sense of what she's going to look like thirty years from now. Does his last name go well with my first name?

Greg: Deep stuff like that [sarcastically].

Christena: Deep, very deep. “Does she satisfy my sexual needs, even the weird ones? Is he educated enough? Does she have a good sense of humor, which I think is code for does she laugh at my jokes?” And so, you know, often times we’re out there consuming as we’re dating. I know when I was more of a consumer dater, not too long ago, I was really trying to...I was operating out of the vacuum in my soul. I felt like I wasn’t beautiful. I needed some guy, didn’t really matter who it was, any guy would do, to tell me that I was beautiful over and over and over again. And it was a little bit unrealistic because I was expecting a guy on a first date to express his sort of irrational, undying love for me and tell me that he needed my beauty in his life to survive. And if I didn’t get that on the first date, then I was kind of like, “Eh, he doesn’t really meet my needs.” Next. You know, I’m going to move on.

And so, I’ve been a consumer dater. I’ve also been a target or prey of consumer dating, and that’s not really fun either. I can think of a time when this one guy said that he heard from God that we were supposed to start dating and maybe start moving towards marriage, and so he called me up and I thought he was going to ask me out on a date, but what he actually did was kind of interview me as sort of, I guess he was pre-screening me before he actually took me out on a date. And so, he kind of spent the first twenty minutes of our phone conversation outlining his five to ten-year plan and then he asked me to specifically address the ways that I saw myself fitting into and sort of enhancing his plan and helping him move along towards this plan.

Greg: A real romantic, this one.

Christena: Yeah. Then he asked me whether...what I thought about gender roles, and I wasn’t sure what he meant until he started talking about how he wanted me to home school his children. His children. Like these hypothetical children that we were supposed to have, but they would be his. And then he asked me if I would move into this commune with him and his friends and sort of, like, be his servant and concubine. I mean, he didn’t use those terms, but that sort of seemed to be the gist of it. And this whole time I was working on my dissertation, I was busy doing my life, and he never once asked me at all, “Hey, what do you care about in life,” or “Who are you,” you know, “What’s interesting to you?” So it’s interesting because that’s sort of like Christian consumer dating. You know, we kind of have an agenda, and we want someone to fulfill our agenda, to sort of add to whatever it is that we’re doing in life. And it might look a little more spiritual, but it’s still just consumer dating in the end.

So this consumeristic model really feeds off the idea, the myth of romantic completeness that Greg talked a lot about last week. If I just find the right person who acts the way that I want them to and does what I need them to do, then I will feel complete. So, if I think that sexual intimacy is going to make me feel complete, then I might cross tons of physical boundaries, I might plow through as many sexual partners in order to fill that, in order to sense that

fulfillment even if it's just for a fleeting moment. Or, if I think that emotional intimacy is going to make me feel complete, I might try to have what I call emotional one-night stands where you kind of go really deep with one guy for, like, one night and you bear your soul and maybe he bears his soul and you talk about your deepest desires and it seems like just for that moment you're the only two in the universe, the only two people in the universe, and the next day it's kind of awkward because you're like, "I don't know his last name, but I know like his greatest fears..." and it's just weird. Right? So, I think of those as emotional one-night stands. But that can sort of make us think, "Oh, I'm fulfilling this need." It doesn't matter whether I'm crossing emotional boundaries. I'm getting what I need, it doesn't matter what's happening with that other person. Or I might think that maybe I need some affirmation and some attention, that's going to fulfill me. And so, if I can find a trophy boyfriend or if I can find a trophy girlfriend who looks awesome and is hot and everyone says, "Whoa, look at that person. I can't believe you're with him," they can draw attention to me, and even if just for a moment I can find fulfillment in that, I'm going to do that.

Greg: That's probably why Shelley married me, I'm thinking.

Christena: Oh, definitely, definitely.

Greg: Trophy husband.

Christena: For sure, you are trophy material.

Greg: Who can blame her? I mean, really.

Christena: So, anyway, the old, historical approach to relationship building was really consumer driven; women were sold off. But the current approach is pretty consumer driven, too. So we don't really want to go back to the old model where women were de-humanized. That wasn't a good thing. We don't want to go back to that, but the current model is not exactly great, either, because, in the end, we're consumers, and we're kind of stuck in this bottomless pit. The myth of romantic completion is, in fact, a myth. We're just going to keep sinking deeper and deeper into this pit because it doesn't satisfy.

Greg: You know, that's true, I think, even after you're married. In marriages, if people have their core needs not met, and they're looking at the world through hungry eyes, well, they just continue to use their spouses in different ways. And maybe it's not quite as overt as it is in the market place when you're shopping for the best product, but it is still true after you've got the product. And that's why there's sometimes continual conflict in marriages because people keep trying to make each other something that they're not to fill this hole in their soul.

The thing that's distinct about the kingdom, and everything is founded upon this, and we talked about this in previous weeks, as well, but the most distinctive thing the kingdom does, and the first thing that coming into the kingdom does is it fills that hole in the soul. When we come into a relationship with Jesus Christ, that vacuum that is there, it's a God-given vacuum that we all need to feel loved, unsurpassably loved and have unsurpassable worth and have unsurpassable significance. That's why no human being can possibly meet that need. It's there as a homing device to drive us to God and to become dependent on God. And, when we come to him, there's a fullness we find that nothing in this world can give, that no relationship in this world can give, that no achievement in this world can give. It says in Colossians that in Christ the fullness of the God-head dwelt in bodily form and that in Christ we have been brought to fullness.

"For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to the fullness. He is the head over every power and authority."

Colossians 2:9-10

And the idea there is that the fullness of all that makes God *God* is in Jesus Christ and when we come into the kingdom we're incorporated into Jesus Christ, which means we participate in that fullness, God shares his life with us. And so as we come, in the same way that father's give and mothers give biological life to their children, so also we come into the kingdom we are given the life of the Father. Abba pours his life into us, his spirit into us, and his fullness into us. And so there is within us, if we'll tap into it, which we often don't, but if we'll tap into it and not be caught in the lies in our head about what we're not, we tap into that there is, Jesus says there is a river of living water, praise God, that flows out of us, it just gushes out of us. And so that means you don't need to be doing life with this desperation where you're looking at the world through hungry eyes and you're dating through hungry eyes and you're being married through hungry eyes. No, no. Now we can live life out of a center of celebration rather than out of a center of desperation, and it changes everything.

Now, it's also true that even though our core needs can only be met in a relationship with Christ, our core identity and significance and security, all of that can only be given through a relationship with Christ. But it still is the case that we're made in the image of the triune God and so we're made for relationships. We talked about this last week. We only reflect the way God made us when we are in deep committed loving relationships with others. That's why it says in Genesis that it's not good for a man to be alone.

Christena: Or a woman.

Greg: What?

Christena: It's not good for a woman to be alone.

Greg: Oh, man or woman, you're right. It's not good for any human being to be alone. I'm going with the TNIV translation here.

"It is not good for a man to be alone." Genesis 2:18

But, you see, you don't need to be married to do that. We all need deep, committed, loving, fulfilling relationships, but not all are called to be married. We talked about that last week. But if a person isn't given the gift of being single, then it's going to be natural for them to want to reflect the image of God by entering into a marriage relationship. So it's okay to want to be married, but we shouldn't need to be married to be fully alive and to feel full and to feel complete. Our life is only found in Jesus Christ, which really changes the purpose for dating and also the purpose for marriage. Because, if the purpose isn't to meet the innermost needs, well, then what is the purpose? And, from a kingdom perspective, the purpose is not to meet those innermost needs; but rather, the purpose is to carry out Abba's will. It's to reflect the beauty of God, the image of God by carrying out Abba's will.

And so, just like in the 1st Century, the earthly father would arrange the marriages to further his purposes, so also in the kingdom we're to be seeking to have our Abba father arrange our marriages so that we can carry out his purpose in our relationships and in our dating and in our marriages. So that leads to the question, then, what is the purpose of marriage according to Abba Father? And Christena and I put our heads together and boiled it down to three basic things.

The first one is that marriage reflects the image of God, the tri-unity of God, the love of God in a unique way. All relationships reflect the tri-unity of God, but God by his own design made it so that marriage does it in a distinct way. Not in a superior way but just in a different way and some are called to enter into this. There's something about the one-flesh relationship and the sexual intimacy that goes with the one-flesh relationship that uniquely puts on display the unity of God and the love of God. A sexual union is a sign of the covenant, and that's only allowed, in God's will, in the context of marriage. And so, when two couples come together out of fullness, it doesn't work if you come out of emptiness, but if you come out of fullness and come together and share that fullness and share that intimacy and share that sexual union, you're putting on display the beauty of the triune God, and that is an end in and of itself. It's one of his purposes for marriage.

Christena: Another thing that's really cool about marriage is that it can often lead to character refinement. Life in Christ...

Greg: It always leads to character refinement.

Christena: That's the goal, yeah [laughing]. You know, life with Christ is all about character refinement and becoming more conformed to Christ. And so, sometimes life isn't easy because the point is for us to be more like Christ and that's not always pleasant. So, if you feel called to marriage, then God's going to use marriage, too, to conform you to himself, which might mean that marriage is not always going to be pleasant. I think that's hard to kind of get your mind around if you're stuck in the consumer mindset of dating because you're just thinking, "Well, I'm only going to get married if it makes me happier. If it doesn't make me happier, then forget about it!" That's the more consumer mindset. But if we have more of a kingdom mindset towards marriage and dating, we can think, "Well, I'm going to get married because this is what Abba's calling me to do and that's going to make me more like him."

So, I think this really changes the way that we date. If I'm a consumer dater and I'm in a relationship and there's some sort of incompatibility that arises, some sort of conflict, I might be really tempted to bail on the relationship because it's not fun, it's not adding more awesomeness to my life in that moment. But if I have more of a kingdom mindset as I'm approaching dating, I can think, "Well, maybe God's trying to do something to my heart and my character in the midst of this conflict or this incompatibility." So, case in point, my dad often says that he's really glad that he married my mom before he got a chance to know her because if he had gotten to know her better, he never would have married her. And the reason why he says that is because he now understands that she's the best thing that ever happened to him but they got married young and they got married fast and he didn't realize that they were incompatible in some really significant ways; that she has a different perspective than him, she has some idiosyncrasies, that she's imperfect in ways that he would, maybe, want her to be perfect. It's because he was kind of looking at her from a consumer standpoint, you know, "I need someone to be exactly what I want them to be all the time." When he found himself married to her, he was sort of stuck in it and he was just like, "Okay, well, I'm going to go with it," and it turns out that God was able to refine his character and he now realizes that her perspective has actually made him better. Her idiosyncrasies, her imperfections have, actually, helped him to see the world in a different way and to become like Christ. So now, thirty-three years later, they're happily married. He's way more awesome than he ever was before, and I give a lot of credit to my mom for that because she...you know, it says in scripture "iron sharpens iron." So I give credit to my mom and give some credit to God. It's great.

Greg: Hmm. Iron sharpens iron, husbands sharpen wives, wives sharpen husbands.

Christena: Strong ones.

Greg: Yeah, there you go. But you might want to think about not, married couples here, on your anniversary or something, it's not really a good line to say, "You know, I just thank God

that if I had known you, I never would have married you.” Keep that part to yourself. Not the best romantic line ever.

Christena: I think my dad told me that, but he’s never told her that.

Greg: Yeah, I don’t know if it’s a good idea. I’m just saying.

Christena: Yeah, he knows what to say.

Greg: But it’s true, it’s true. And in marriages, as well, I mean, marriage is one of God’s great ideas for character refinement. I’ve often told people, you know, we often go into marriages thinking it’s going to make us happier and I think in the long run it will, but God’s plan is to say, “I can use this to refine character and bring them into conformity with Christ.” And so, again, in a consumer model, people often bail on marriages, “This isn’t making me happy!” But, in a kingdom perspective, that’s not the point. It may not be making you happy right now, but it is building your character and so stay in there, with the rare exception where there’s abuse going on or unfaithfulness; but, otherwise, you stay in there and let God do his refining work.

Okay. A third purpose that Abba Father has for marriage is that he wants a couple to sort of function as a dynamic duo for the kingdom. When Abba Father sees that there are two individuals who aren’t called to be single and when he sees that they could do more for the kingdom to further his reign together than they could do individually, then God will start to work to arrange that marriage and bring these two together. It’s like an explosive dynamite thing. You get together and the sum is more than the parts. It may be that the duo is there to just further Abba’s family by having children or by adopting children, that’s one of the purposes. It may be that the duo is there to further Abba’s family through evangelism and by building bridges with unbelievers and inviting them into their homes. It certainly is the case that the dynamic duo is there for some kinds of ministry, to work together in ministry that furthers the kingdom, whatever that ministry may be. Shelley and I, I think, make a very good dynamic duo. Shelley is my wife. The truth of the matter is that I could not at all be doing what I do if I was not in partnership with her.

Christena: I second that.

Greg: You second that, yeah, you’ve kind of seen it in operation. I mean, for example...

Christena: She’s the brains behind the operation.

Greg: She’s the total brains behind the operation. I can’t organize a drawer. I am just frazzled. My head’s always in the clouds. Yesterday I made an appointment, we made a time where Christena and I were going to get together at 3:30 here in the office to go over our material, and I forgot that I had already booked that time because I didn’t go through Shelley. See, even

friends have to go through Shelley to make appointments because I will forget them or double book or whatever. I'm an organizational train-wreck! But she's there and we complement each other like this. She runs my life and I appreciate that. I love that. We have very different gifts and different personalities and that's the iron-sharpening-iron thing sometimes, because it's very different, but if you can work through that there is a 'complementarity' that is there. And she's always been a constant source of encouragement and spiritual insight. She sees stuff that I would never see and so God uses her to grow me and God uses me to grow her. It's a team thing. We work together with Providence Ministries to help kids in Haiti, and we work together to help disabled people in a housing complex. So there's just a lot of ways that God uses us, and I think we wouldn't be able to do individually for the kingdom what we do together. It's a dynamic duo.

And, for married folks who are here, you know, it may be the case that when you were not married the last thing you were thinking about was the kingdom. Probably most people who get married do so with a consumer model. And so you're saying to yourself, "Gosh, I wish I would have known then what I know now." But, see, it doesn't matter. You are married and so it's Abba's will that you're married and so now you say, "Abba, how would you arrange our marriage now that it's here?" And you let him bring a purpose to it. So there is a purpose for every kingdom marriage that goes beyond just the family, just this nuclear family idea that we have. It goes beyond just you and your kids. It's a purpose about furthering the kingdom in some way. And so I really encourage married couples to sit down and say, "What is God calling us to do together," and further his kingdom in that way. Amen.

Okay. Now let's get really practical. Christena, what practical difference does this kingdom paradigm make on how people go about entering into marriages and then applying that to marriages? What practical difference does it make?

Christena: Well, I think the big, huge difference is that rather than just going out looking for someone based on the criteria that you've set for yourself, you ask God, "Hey, who do you want me to date? Who do you think I should consider marrying?" So, I mean, I think it's important to think about issues of compatibility, whether you're attracted to that person, of course. I mean, those issues are important, but I think our biggest question, our biggest issue should be, "Abba Father, who do you want me to marry? Do you want me to marry this person or that person?"

Greg: We talked to a person last night who said that issues of compatibility and attraction play a part in this. We have to be willing to let Abba Father call us to people we're not attracted to, initially. She talked about how, it was really interesting, she had no attraction for the guy whatsoever, but she had a distinct impression that God was saying marry that person. It wasn't

until she was walking down the aisle when all of a sudden she started feeling love with this person, which was a very, very good thing.

Okay. So how do you go about knowing Abba Father's will?

Christena: Well, one thing I think is hard is that it's hard to know whether it's possible that God is calling you into a missional marriage relationship if you don't have a personal sense of mission. So I think the first thing to do if you're dating or you're single, "Gosh, God, what do you want me to do? What is your plan for me separate from everybody else, any other relationship? What are you calling me to do?" I think that oftentimes, especially Christian women, think their mission for life is going to come when a guy comes into their life and tells them what their mission's going to be or they just sort of co-op his mission. But I think that God wants to give us each a personal mission and the person that he brings into our life will complement that mission but they certainly aren't going to entirely define the mission. So I encourage people, seek God's will for your life. Ask him, "What do you want me to do now? How do you want me to impact the kingdom now?" And that might evolve over time, but as soon as you get any sense of that mission or his will for your life, I would say jump right in! Start serving, start moving in that direction, apply to grad school. Do whatever it is you think God's calling you to do and move in that direction. So don't wait until you get married to start making big impacts in the kingdom and taking it really seriously.

Greg: Excellent.

Christena: But I'd also say, too, that when you do start getting into a relationship, to bring that person alongside you in your missions and try to figure out ways that God wants you to serve together for the kingdom. So, I would say don't wait to get married to be the dynamic duo. Even in a dating relationship you can be a dynamic duo, even if that dating relationship doesn't last forever. I know my boyfriend and I spend a lot of time asking God, praying, "God, how do you want us to impact the kingdom, our church, our world now?" And so we're really involved in ministry together, and it's really fun. It's great because I think sometimes dating can be really artificial. It's not as much like marriage as we like to think it is because you're usually like, you usually smell good and usually putting forth your best foot and your best effort.

Greg: Totally artificial.

Christena: Yeah, you know, and you're always in a good mood when you're around each other and that kind of stuff.

Greg: You brush your teeth.

Christena: Exactly. It's really different than marriage where everything's just gross all the time. So, I think the more that you can serve together and see each other when maybe you're tired or you're stressed out or when you're tired of giving and serving, but you're still doing it anyway, then that can give you insight into whether God's bringing you together or not.

Greg: I think that's so important. The way we've set up dating in a culture is based on a consumer model. You go out and you try the product; really that's what they're doing. It's like testing the product. And it's a total, artificial kind of situation. You're all dressed up, you look good, you smell good, and hair's done just right. But, so start serving together, I think this is brilliant. And that's the best way, I think, to discern, "Okay. Are we a dynamic duo?" Because maybe you go to movies really nice, or whatever, but when you get together and start serving, maybe you start rubbing each other wrong and now you're discerning that maybe we're not a dynamic duo, so we'll just be friends and move on. That's good.

Several months ago I did a series on discerning God's will, and one of the things I talked about there in discerning God's will, which I think is foundational, is for folks to, it's rooted in Psalms 37, where the Psalm says:

"Take delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart."

What I take that to mean is, if our delight is in the Lord, our sense of fullness of life, our completeness is found in the Lord, then the desires that are on our heart will be the ones that he put there. He'll give us the desires of our heart. And so what we need to do is get in touch with those desires, our core desires.

So I encourage people in a time of prayer to just sort of envision a future with regard to whatever possibilities are before them. When there's any major decision, in dating, it's whether I should date this person or not, and it's really interesting that Christena said to be doing this before you even go out on a date. Like, "Should I be dating this person?" Because you shouldn't be doing that unless there's, at least, the possibility that Abba Father is calling you to enter into a marriage with them. So, you consider that, should I marry them or not? But it can apply to anything, about a purchase you're going to make or other friendships that you're going to be involved in or ministries you're going to be involved in. And so, I encourage people to offer up their imagination to the Lord in a state of prayer and just ask the Holy Spirit to play out a future. If you say yes to this option, what would that look like? And if you say yes to that option, what would it look like? And, as you do that over a period of time, just look at which one of those options gives you a sense of congruity or peace or rightness on the inside, and all other things being equal, that's the one that, most likely, is Abba Father's will. He's saying yes to that.

Christena: Yes. I agree. I think it's so great to ask God to take over our imagination and give us some insight into what he's calling us to do. I also think that it's good to keep in mind that God is relational and pretty much everything that he does is through community, and so he can speak to us through community, too. So I think, you know, seek his will individually and, also, call some people and ask them to seek God with you, alongside you and discern God's will for you and your relationship. So I would say involve a community of people and also involve them just so that they can track with you and see if you're still getting your fullness from Christ or if you're starting to get your fullness from the relationship. Because, I think that's an easy temptation when you're dating. I know I meet with some women who I trust, and they kind of know what questions to ask me and things that are just kind of going on in my life and then they can kind of make sure that I'm focused on the right things at the time.

So that's something I think is huge, community, accountability through that. I also think it's good to keep everything open. I have a covenant about openness. I have a couple of rules that I just use to help me sort of stay accountable and just out of darkness. So, one is that I always leave my boyfriend's house by midnight, at the latest. And we kind of jokingly talk about how nothing good happens after midnight because the Holy Spirit goes to sleep, which, of course, we know the Holy Spirit doesn't really go to sleep. But, you know, it's just this idea that it's probably good to go our separate ways at midnight.

Greg: You probably don't know this song.

Christena: I probably won't know it.

Greg: But there are a few people. [Singing] After midnight, let it all hang out...after midnight. [Audience laughs].

Christena: No, I don't know that song.

Greg: That song was in the '60s or '70s.

Christena: Does your band sing that song?

Greg: We don't, but we probably should! No, we probably shouldn't. We'll turn the lyrics to reflect your truth. [Singing] After midnight, nothing good happens...

Christena: [Singing] because the Holy Spirit goes to sleep.

Greg: Okay. Let's move on.

Christena: So, that's one thing. Another thing is we are really big on bringing everything into the light; "we," meaning my boyfriend and me. So, Satan is the prince of darkness...

Greg: Absolutely.

Christena: ...when things are secret, when things are hidden, that's when you're just inviting him to come in and wreak havoc in your life and make temptation way harder than it needs to be. So we're really big on just bringing everything into the light. We talk very candidly with our parents, with our pastors and spiritual parents, with accountability partners. We kind of have this understanding that anything that happens in our relationship is fair game to be told to anyone that we trust.

Greg: Perfect.

Christena: So, that's really helpful.

Greg: That's so good. That principle applies to marriage. With couples, I would encourage you to have this rule that you never keep any secrets from one another, unless it's a good secret that you're going to surprise the person with for an anniversary or something. The minute we do anything in secret, it's like cupping our hands over our eyes. There's darkness there. And, like Christena said, the Prince of Darkness is the Prince of Darkness because he's the Prince of Darkness!! He needs darkness to operate; darkness fuels him, secrecy, and hidden-ness. Nothing good comes after midnight. That's because you're closing the doors and you're keeping things in secret. So, I encourage you to have a commitment to one another to speak truth to one another. If there's stuff that's going on in your lives that you can't tell your spouse, then that probably is stuff that shouldn't be going on, all other things being equal. Keep an open policy on this.

It's also true for married couples that they need to be embedded in broader communities. What's true for the individual is true for married couples. We need people that we are committed to that we speak truth to that speak truth to us. There are, unlike in a dating relationship, there are certain things in a marriage that don't need to be shared with anybody else. That's the privilege of the marriage covenant. But, outside of that, we need to have people who...we need extra eyes looking into our life. If we're going to be a dynamic duo, that means you're going to have to swim upstream in the culture, because we manifest that values of the kingdom, which fundamentally contradict the values of the world. And the thing is, we are such creatures of conformity that if we don't have people around us, a broader community that is speaking into our life, we will be conforming in ways we don't even notice! Our lives are just going to be looking like standard America, for you Americans with a little bit of Christian cleaving on it, but they're not going to be fundamentally kingdom. We need other people around us who can notice when we're starting to go astray, who notice when we're starting to conform to the culture, who notice when our spending doesn't line up with our values, when we're maybe not spending enough time with our kids or our spouse or a million other things.

So, we all need community. This idea of the nuclear family, kind of isolated from everybody else is simply an extrapolation of the individualism that runs rampant in our culture. It's just like the individual family, it's all self-contained. That is just not Biblical, and it's a prescription for disaster. We're meant to be part of a broader community.

I want to start heading down the runway here, bringing this to a close by addressing one other issue, and it's this. We've been saying say yes to arranged marriages. In other words, let God arrange your marriage. I know that there are going to be people hearing this, maybe a lot of people that are going to be saying, "Look, I've been asking God to arrange a marriage for me for ten years and nothing has happened," maybe twenty years, maybe thirty years, and maybe there's even a little bit of anger around that because you don't feel called to being single. A part of you wants to be married and yet you've been praying and nothing has happened. And then, you know, folks will come around you and give you these clichés about how, "Well, God's timing is always the right timing" or "It must not be God's will for you to be married" or "Maybe you're not praying enough or not fasting enough" or "Maybe God's just trying to teach you something." And none of those are of any help. And then there are folks who have, maybe, felt led, they felt like God was saying yes to a relationship, and they get into that relationship and then it turns out to be terrible, whether it's a dating relationship or maybe they actually got married and it turned out to be terrible, there's unfaithfulness and abuse and other things, and these folks get mad at God saying, "Thanks a lot! Nice job arranging things! You were setting me up for this?! This is the best you could do?" There's going to be a lot of anger and a lot of hurt around that. And to that I just say this: It's always important to remember that people have free will. People have free will. And so, to say that God arranges things, it does not mean, at least, we don't mean that God's controlling everything or going to manipulate people to bring them into a relationship. I don't think God ever does that. People are free and God wants them to be free because, without the potential of freedom, they don't have the capacity to love or the capacity not to love. When we say God arranged things, what we mean is this: That if we're listening to him and seeking his will, he will lead us in certain directions that will be conducive to having a kingdom marriage, and he'll be influencing things. He influences, he just never coerces. He'll be influencing to try to bring together a couple that will be a dynamic duo for the kingdom. But because the world's populated with free agents, it means that you can be seeking God to arrange your marriage, it doesn't mean it's going to happen. And, even if it does happen, it doesn't mean...there's no guarantee it's going to go right because people change of their own free will. And so, to those who are frustrated because you've been praying to find a spouse and it hasn't happened or you're hurt because of a relationship that backfired or maybe you're now in a marriage that you feel is just completely "sucky" and it's not at all what you had planned on, I just encourage you, whatever else you do, don't blame God. Don't blame God. It's so sad that when we're in situations where we need God the most, when life is at its suckiest, we need God the most, but many people get mad at God for the sucky-ness,

thinking that he was the one arranging it, and so we push God away. Now, I encourage you to just...when you're in a state of frustration and pain like that, don't blame God; rather, go to God. Go to God, lean on God. He's always on your side! He's always good! God is good all the time, all the time God is good! Life is not, dating often isn't, marriage often isn't, but God is! And so, use the pain of your situation to drive you closer to Christ, to get all your life from Christ. So, even though you may be frustrated because you're not married, at least, don't be operating out of a center of desperation. You want to be married, yeah. There's a pain in that, but be operating out of a center of fullness. Be a complete human being whether you ever get married or not.

Then, I encourage folks to be cultivating loving friendships, whether you're married or not. Romance is nice, but you don't need it to have fulfilling, wonderful friendships that meet other human needs in our life. So, be seeking God. Don't push him away, embrace him.

Christena: Also, because there are lots of other variables influencing things besides God's will, I think it's good for single people to be okay with putting effort into looking for a potential spouse. I think we often think, "Oh, well, I'm going to let Abba Father arrange things," and so we just sit on our butts and hope that God plops someone in our laps, which doesn't really make sense because Abba Father wants to partner with us in some of the cool things that he's doing in our lives and in the kingdom, and I think it's important for single people to be seeking his will. "What do you want me to do," and "What part do you want me to play in bringing this potential spouse into my life or drawing closer to that person?" So I think just asking God, "Hey, what do you want me to do? Do you want me to start volunteering somewhere? Do you want me to move somewhere else? Do you want me to start looking online?" Just start asking God and be willing to participate in the process, it's really important.

Greg: I think that's right.

Christena: Cool! So...

Greg: Like the marriage stork, you know? The marriage stork. Some people are like, "Oh, God, I just trust you to bring me a spouse," like the giant marriage stork is going to come along, like the stork with babies. You getting the connection there? And just drop the spouse in the lap. "There's Mr. and Mrs. Right, right there!"

Christena: Not "Mrs. Right."

Greg: Right. If it's a "Mrs.," then that's not right.

Christena: Yeah. Miss Right.

Greg: Miss Right, yeah. Yeah, it doesn't work like that!

Christena: Okay. So, in summary, we came up with four points that we think would be...

Greg: Four points, here we go!

Christena: Okay. So, number one, whether you're single or married ...

Both: ...get all your life from Christ.

Christena: Number two, whether you're single or married, seek first the kingdom of God. So, if you're single and you're dating, date in order to further Abba's purposes. If you're married, commit to being married in order to further Abba's purposes. Be the dynamic duo.

Number three, whether you're single or married, do it...

Both: in community with other people....

Christena: And number four...

Greg: I've heard her say this before, so I'm...

Christena: [Laughs] Whether you're married or single...

Greg: We're the dynamic duo in a different way...

Christena: ...don't blame God for the sucky-ness of life.

Greg: Yes, don't blame God.

Christena: So, God is always good, he's always working things for our good. Work with God to bring the "suck" out of life and transform it with good things.

Greg: Yes! Amen! Last night she said...or maybe...

Christena: You said...

Greg: Suck the 'suck' out of the sucky-ness.

Christena: Yeah.

Greg: Let God suck the "suck" out of sucky-ness and transform the sucky-ness into something less sucky. There you go!

Christena: God is good.

Greg: We're very poetic, you know! Wonderful. Amen. Amen. Good job. Praise God!

All right. I'm going to close in prayer and, as I do, I want to invite the prayer teams to come forward. And, if you're here and have any need whatsoever that you would like to have prayed for, whether it's about dating or marriage or something completely different, I encourage you to come and get prayer, and everything you share up here will be held in complete confidence.

Lord, we just thank you for being our Abba Father. We thank you God for being a God who fills us with fullness of life. Help us, God, to always be tapping into that infinite reservoir of life and living out of that fullness rather than emptiness. And, Father, we pray for those who are in dating relationships that you would, God, be working in their hearts and lives to make them a kingdom thing and protect them from the evil one who always would try to use something beautiful for evil purposes. And, God, just help them bring that relationship, that potential relationship, in line with you. And we pray for the marriages here, God, I pray that your spirit will be working in each couple to give them a complete openness towards one another and to be imbedded in a community with whom they can be open and to be building those marriages to be kingdom marriage so that they can, wherever they're at now, they're moving in the direction to become a dynamic duo for the kingdom of God. In Jesus' name we pray, and all of God's children said...Amen. God bless you guys, go out and build the kingdom!