



Christians dating non-Christians... what's the problem?



Perhaps you have asked this question before! I have put this article together because I believe this is an important issue for Christians today to think through. We are wise if we think about this and work out our principles *before* we are faced with a situation or relationship that may affect our judgment or make it harder to make the right decisions. This is a short look at what the Bible has to say on this subject, and some practical observations.



The Bible doesn't really talk about "boyfriend-girlfriend" relationships as we know them, but it has lots to say about marriage, and this is helpful for us to look at. "Going out" relationships usually have a view to possible future marriage - this is right for Christians, since we know that God designed marriage as the ultimate physical & emotional expression of human love. We shouldn't "play around" with people's feelings/bodies in the meantime. (If you are dating someone but know you won't marry this person, then what are you doing with them?)

Old testament

God's people in the Old Testament are commanded not to inter-marry with people who worship other gods. This is because God's people are holy, as God is holy, and intermarriage will lead them away from God. One of the big turning points of the Old Testament (the split of God's people Israel into two kingdoms) was caused by King Solomon's disobedience to God in marrying foreign women who turned his heart away from God.

Deuteronomy 7:1-6, 1 Kings 11:1-11, Nehemiah 13:23-27, Malachi 2:11

One of God's purposes for marriage (and a reason why God forbids his people marrying followers of other gods) is that he seeks "godly offspring (children)".

Malachi 2:10-16

New testament

Christians are now God's people, and we are called to be holy and live in obedience to God by the Holy Spirit. Our bodies and souls belong to Christ. We now live for Jesus, not for ourselves. Obedience to God's word is an essential part of Christian discipleship.

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Since Christians are new creations in Christ, our identity is fundamentally different to unbelievers. Our citizenship is in heaven. Perhaps the clearest teaching on Christians marrying non-Christians comes from 2 *Corinthians* 6:

“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and the devil? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.’ ‘Therefore come out from them and be separate’, says the Lord. ‘Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters,’ says the Lord Almighty. Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”*

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

(* A “yoke” is literally a wooden frame by which two animals (eg. oxen) are joined at the heads or necks for working together. Animals which are harnessed together to pull a cart have to go in the same direction, and it helps if they are the same size and weight.) This passage can be applied to things other than marriage, but it certainly includes marriage – Marriage is one very obvious way of being “yoked together” with someone.

In 1 *Corinthians* 7 (read the whole chapter!), Paul addresses lots of issues to do with marriage. Some things to note:

- If a Christian is *already* married to a non-Christian, they should stay married for the sake of their spouse (1 *Corinthians* 7:12-16, 1 *Peter* 3:1-2).
- But for unmarried people (e.g. widows) who have a choice about who (or whether) to marry, they are free to marry anyone, “*but he must belong to the Lord*” (1 *Corinthians* 7:39) – in other words, he must be a Christian. (In 1 *Corinthians* 6:19-20, Paul describes Christians as people who “*are not your own; you were bought at a price.*”) Elsewhere, Paul assumes that if the apostles are married, it will be to a “*believing wife*” – 1 *Corinthians* 9:5.

God designed marriage as a reflection of the relationship between Christ and the Church, as the wife submits to her husband and the husband loves and serves his wife. If one partner is an unbeliever, the marriage may not be able to point as clearly to Christ.

Ephesians 5:22-33



Some practical concerns

Apart from the teaching we find in the Bible, there are lots of practical reasons why it seems foolish for a Christian to marry (or go out with) a non-Christian.

- If you marry a non-Christian, you will miss out on the wonderful gift of Christian marriage! The closest relationship you have will not share the most important thing in your life. Here is the person who knows you best, who knows your likes, dislikes, dreams, desires, failings and struggles – and that person isn’t praying for you. You’ll miss out on the joy of being united in the gospel with your husband/wife, encouraging each other and serving Jesus together with them.
- As a Christian, your first priority and loyalty is to God. An unbelieving marriage partner will not share this priority, and this will inevitably cause conflict at different times within the marriage. (E.g. think of all the different decisions involved in bringing up children.) The gospel gives us different goals and a different authority, which a non-Christian will not share. Why willingly put yourself into a situation where you have to choose between pleasing your wife/husband and pleasing God? – this situation is far from ideal, yet a daily reality for many Christians married to non-Christians.

- I believe the Bible teaches that the husband is responsible for certain leadership (including spiritual leadership) in marriage and family. Being a wife involves putting yourself under the care and influence of your husband to some extent. Therefore we women should think wisely about what sort of husband we choose!

- The fact is, it will be much harder for you to live as a Christian if you are married to a non-Christian. We are warned against this for good reasons. It is harder to keep going as a Christian when you don't have the support of the person closest to you. I have seen too many Christians who have married or been in a serious relationship with a non-Christian and ended up drifting away from Christ. Years later they are not Christians at all – not because of any one big decision to reject their faith, but just through a lifestyle & influences that gradually draw them away from God. We are naive if we think that marrying a non-Christian won't have consequences for our spiritual health.

- Sometimes Christians are tempted to go out with non-Christians because they think this will be a good way of helping the non-Christian to become a believer (this is called "missionary dating"!). The problem is, this does not often work. Far more often, it is the Christian who is influenced by the non-Christian to give up their faith. I don't think it is a very effective witness either – what it really says is that you are prepared to compromise your faith for the sake of this person. God does not ask us to do this. (One Christian minister tells how he first became a believer: He liked a girl who was a Christian, but she would not go out with him because he was not a Christian. He was so impressed by this – he saw that this girl was serious about her faith, and God was more important to her than he was – that he decided to investigate God and ended up giving his life to Christ. This girl's witness was so effective because she would not compromise her obedience to God.) The best way of helping our friends who are not Christian is to pray for them, speak God's words of truth to them (and

introduce them to other Christians who will do this too) and lead lives of holiness that confirm what we're saying. Our friend's most important relationship is with God, not with us. (Besides, we can't "make" anyone become a Christian – it is only God who can shine his light into our hearts and miraculously create belief. *2 Corinthians 4:4-6*)

- We should also think about the effect our actions have on other Christians. Part of loving our brothers and sisters is making sure we don't do anything that will tempt them to sin. Our example has the power to affect others and make it either easier or harder for them to do the right thing. How might another Christian be influenced if they see you in a romantic relationship with an unbeliever?

- Of course, it is possible to fall deeply in love with someone who is not a Christian – the person may have lots of wonderful qualities and our feelings may tell us it is right for us to be with them. The non-Christian world around us tells us we can't deny feelings and they must always be acted on... But Christians have a higher authority than feelings, which is God's word. Feelings are not our god (or even our guide) in the Christian life – God calls us to submit even our feelings to his Lordship and his word. If our feelings tell us something different to God's word, we must obey God's word. We may face other strong pressures too (e.g. expectations of family, society, etc) but as Christians we must put all these things second to God's word.

- Deciding to put God first in this way may mean making painful decisions. Ending a relationship always leaves scars, but it is better to finish the relationship sooner rather than later if you know it is not right. The more serious you get with someone, the more it will hurt to break it off.

- If doing the right thing is hard, remember that suffering is something that we should expect as part of the Christian life. Jesus said: *"Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more*

than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37-38). But Jesus does not leave us in misery. There is a saying: "God is no man's debtor" – meaning that whenever God asks us to give up something for him, he provides for us and gives us even more valuable blessings. "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39). "I tell you the truth... No one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life." (Luke 18:29-30)

God loves us and has given up so much for us – the life of his only Son – so surely anything we are asked to give up for him is small in comparison to what he gives us.

- Finally, a note about singleness. For some Christians, God may never provide a suitable Christian to marry (e.g. in parts of the world where the Christian church has more women than men). But even this is not necessarily a reason to settle for "second best": ultimately, losing your faith is far worse than being single. The Bible has lots of positive things to say about singleness (e.g. *1 Corinthians 7:25-38*) and we should take them more seriously!



We are responsible before God for our decisions. He has given us teaching and warnings because he wants what is best for us. None of us is perfect; may God help us to think wisely and heed what his word has to say about our earthly relationships, until that day when we meet our heavenly bridegroom face to face.

For reflection...

- What is the most important goal or priority in your life?
(Martin Luther said: "Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your god.")

- Do you think of yourself as a citizen of heaven? (*Philippians 3:20*)

- What do you think are the important things for a husband and wife to agree on, for a successful marriage?