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Dating Done Right

Guest: Marshall Segal
From the series: Not Yet Married (Day 3 of 3)
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Bob: Marshall Segal remembers thinking that the girl he was getting to know might be the one for him. That's when he decided it was time for the DTR—the Define the Relationship—conversation.

Marshall: We sat down. It was the two of us having coffee, and I laid out my feelings for her. I was feeling confident about it. Things were going well. We were talking on the phone once a week or so for 30 minutes. It was going super well. The date went great.

So, I thought, "She's going to say, 'Yes, I would like to be pursued by you.'" I said, "I'm really enjoying getting to know you. I like you. I'd like to pursue you toward marriage." She said, "I've also been enjoying getting to know you. I've really enjoyed our conversations." And she said, "You're a very nice human being." I'm like—"What does that mean?"

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson, and I'm Bob Lepine. So, what do you do as a single, young man attempting to define the relationship only to find out that it's not going where you thought it ought to be going? We'll hear more from Marshall Segal today. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. So, you know what the path is today from meet and fall in love to marriage. Here's the path.

Dave: I want to hear this.

Bob: You meet; you date; you have sex; you think, "This might be the one"; you have kids; you move in together; you get married.

Ann: I think you missed one of those.

Bob: What did I miss?

Dave: I know what she's going to say.

Ann: You meet; you have sex; you determine if you want to date.

Bob: Oh, wow.

Ann: I think that's very true today.

Bob: And here is the thing. There are people who grow up today in the church and think, "That is how it is supposed to work." We're here to say, "That's not the path God has outlined." Marshall Segal is joining us again this week to talk about this. Marshall, welcome back.

Marshall: Thanks for having me again.

Bob: Marshall's written a book called *Not Yet Married*. We've already explained why that's an acceptable title for his book, and he is a writer and managing editor at DesiringGod.org. So, let's say we're talking today to somebody who has just gone out last night on a date with somebody; and they had a nice time. They are thinking, "You know I—it would be nice to go out again; and, maybe"—just in the back of their mind—"maybe, there's something here. I'd kind of like there to be something here. I think, but I don't know well them well enough"—

So, you're coaching them to get from where they are to where they'd like to go. So, coach, what's the next play you're going to call for this couple?

Marshall: Yes, I have questions about how they met in the first place. [Laughter] My main questions would be around—"How much do you know of this person already before you enter a relationship?"

Ann: Is that important to know before you go out?

Marshall: I think so. I mean I would say I would want to *way* slow down any seriousness in terms of a romantic relationship until you've had an opportunity to get to know this person. If it were me counseling a particular person in my life or in my church, I would want them to be as creative and intentional as possible to try to fold that person into community.

So, it's not just—"We went out on a date. We had a good time. We're going to do a second one"; "The second one went well. We're going to do a third one"—all of this is in the context of a one-on-one totally isolated from any other meaningful relationship.

I want to encourage them—"Find ways, as awkward as it might feel today—find ways to fold them into some meaningful community within your life or in their life." If they are believers and they have a solid family and church community and friend group, find ways to be able to get to know each other in less pressured situations than one-on-one dates.

Bob: And to start to do activities together but in a bigger group setting?

Marshall: Yes—or I would just say, “At least with other people.” I know this can be tricky. So, I’m not pretending this is—I mean I’ve been through this kind of process in the past in relationships. It’s not easy. It can be awkward.

But hopefully, the kind of person you are dating—and maybe, one day will marry—will respect the fact that you are saying, “I don’t know you very well yet. I think the most important step here, in terms, of determining whether God might be doing something here is for us to get to know each other a little bit. I want to get to know you.” That’s an honor—to have someone want to get to know you—“I want to do it in ways that honor you.”

So, I did this with Faye. We’re 28 / 29. She’s from California. So, nothing is more awkward than trying to fold somebody in long-distance; but we prioritized every single trip. We spent as much time as possible with the most important people in each other’s lives. So, we planned it out beforehand: “We’re going to spend time with my best friend, with my parents, with those people that I’m doing ministry with. She’s going to come to small group”—but just thinking intentionally and talking intentionally about how to fold other people into the community.

So, the principle that I came to in writing the book is—I want to encourage someone, generally—pursue clarity and postpone intimacy. That’s the main principle I want to talk about. I talk about how intimacy is safest in the context of marriage. Marriage is going to be safest in the context of clarity. So, if you are wanting to pursue intimacy with this person, the best thing you can do is pursue clarity about whether God is calling you to marry this person.

I think a lot of people—myself included—pursued clarity by diving into intimacy. Let’s try it and see how it feels. I talk about thinking that it’s like a bicycle. So, you just pick up a bicycle, and you don’t know how to ride it. No one is going to coach you through this. So, you just keep getting on the bike until—“Oh, I stayed up! So, now, I can get married.” I describe in the book—more like flying an airplane—which I don’t have any experience with. [Laughter]

But if you look through the process of what becoming a pilot is, you do so much before you ever actually sit in the seat. I want people to think about dating and the pursuit of marriage that way more—that there are intentional steps. This pile of notes—I want to fly a plan. Like, I’m not doing any of these classes or this training for something else. It’s not preparing me for anything else. It’s preparing me for marriage; but thinking about small steps to pursue clarity to get to know each other and to postpone intimacy as much as possible.

So, I think folding other people into community and, then, being aware of how much time we spend together, what kinds of things we talk about, being sensitive to, like—

“Oh, that’s intimate.” I don’t think you should be talking about what marriage might be like on your second or third date.

Bob: Right.

Marshall: I just think that’s inappropriate.

Ann: Can you talk about—“This is what I’m looking for?” Do you go into that kind of conversation?

Marshall: I think you can have that conversation. I’m not sure how helpful it is on a first or second or third date. I would be a lot more focused on—“Who are you?”

Ann: Right.

Marshall: “What do you love? What do you spend your time doing? Who are the most important people in your life?” I can think of a thousand questions that I would ask before—

Ann: Yes.

Marshall: —“What are you looking for, and do I”—

Bob: —“measure up?”

Marshall: —“measure up?”

Ann: Right.

Bob: Well, would you declare as a guy on a second or third day—would you say to somebody, “I just want you to know, from an intentionality standpoint, I’m not recreationally dating. I am dating with marriage as a potentiality and not an inevitability but—this—I’d like to pursue this seriously rather than casually?”

Marshall: Absolutely. I say first date, and I would say it doesn’t have to be this major declaration of independence. I’d just say, “I’d like to get to know you better. Any dating I do is for the purpose of discovering who God might call me to marry. That doesn’t mean we have to get married because we go on a date. It just means that I want you to know from the outset, I’m pursuing clarity toward whether God will call me to marry you or not.”

We dated for 19 months. So, it’s not like that process happens in four weeks or six weeks or two months. In fact, I think some people need to take more time because they rush into engagement and marriage before they’ve really had a chance to get to know each other.

Ann: I do like this idea because you are really becoming friends, and so much of marriage is about friendship and being together and liking each other's company and having fun together. That's not always the case when you're dating. It's so romantic, and it feels a little delusional in some ways.

Marshall: Right.

Ann: Yet, I think about Dave and I—he is my best friend.

Dave: We had the perfect dating relationship.

Ann: We sure didn't. [Laughter]

Marshall: You should write a book.

Dave: There's nobody better than me—right here. I'm the best—no. But I did want to ask you this because you're talking about the community / friend thing. Then, everything you are talking about now—you're sort of alone. What is the balance? Because I know me, I would be pulling her away.

Although I know that if I'm with Ann with a group, I'd get to see all those things you are looking for. I'd see that probably better in community; but then it requires some real time where I'm not with my friends; we're looking eye-to-eye; and I'm saying, "I want to get to know your heart. I want to know your passion for Christ." How do you balance that?

Marshall: Yes, if I had a daughter—I don't have a daughter—if you were talking that way on a second date to my daughter, I would say, "Brother, slow down. [Laughter] You don't need to look at her that way"—

Ann: My dad was saying that too.

Marshall: —"or talk to her that way."

Dave: You know what her dad said to me?

Marshall: "I know you're eager. I can see that you love the Lord, and I'm thankful. I see all kinds of grace on you." [Laughter]

Bob: What did her dad say to you?

Dave: Her dad didn't say it to me.

Bob: What did he say?

Dave: He said it to Ann about me.

Ann: He said—

Dave: “You will not date that boy. He is barred from the house.” He was my coach.

Bob: So, he knew your reputation.

Dave: He knew my before-Christ life. If I’m that dad, I say the same thing: “Stay away from Dave Wilson.” Obviously, Christ had changed me, but I can remember early in the relationship feeling like—“I’m falling in love with her”—and starting to think about marriage. I said to her—in her parents’ driveway as I’m dropping her off at night, I said, “I think I’m falling in love with you. I don’t know what to do with these feelings. I want to talk about marriage. I’d like to kiss you. I’m not going to, but I’m just being honest.”

The 19-year-old says, “Hey, why don’t we just give it to God and trust Him and be friends? Let’s not put anything on it beside—let’s pursue Christ together as a friendship.” I’m like there’s the maturity that I didn’t have, and we prayed and offered it to Him. All the stress went away. It was like—“Okay, let’s be friends. Let’s get to know each other. Let’s get to know our relationship with God together and see where it goes.”

Bob: That’s what I call the Tommy Nelson Principle. You’ve heard this quote before. The first person I heard it from was a pastor in Denton, Texas, Tommy Nelson, who said, “If you’re single, your job is to run as hard and as fast toward Jesus as you can. If while you’re running you see someone out of the corner of your eye running in the same direction at the same speed, take a second look.” That’s just great advice for—

Dave: Yes.

Bob: —singles who are in this process. But if you have moved along in the process to where you’re starting to think, “Okay, this could be the one,” I talk to one young man who said, “The girl I was dating thought I must not like her because I was trying to maintain physical purity. I was not putting moves on her, and she was feeling insecure and feeling unloved because she’d never been out with a guy who didn’t do that.” Should a guy, again, verbalize—“Here are my boundaries and standards. Here’s how I am going to try and handle that with you” to put her mind at ease.

Marshall: Oh, absolutely. The problem with that situation is communication. It’s not the boundary. It’s not the self-control. You cannot be too self-controlled in dating. [Laughter] I have yet to meet a couple where I thought, “You know what? You could go a little further.” It just doesn’t happen.

Dave: Yes.

Marshall: And you won't regret—I've said a lot of times—you won't regret anything you didn't do before you go married—anything.

Ann: Good.

Marshall: I just want to encourage guys, in particular, be the primary initiator of communication. I don't think—generally speaking, I don't think girls should ever wonder what a guy is thinking or feeling or doing in a relationship. Now, when you had the impulse to say—

Bob: “I love you.”

Marshall: —“I'm falling in love with you”—

Bob: Yes.

Marshall: —on whatever date—“and I want to kiss you,” my counsel to you would be—there is a way to communicate that that's not making her so vulnerable; but to express where you were in some way, shape, or form to say, “I like you”—that's where Faye and I were for a long time where I'm saying, “I like you. I want to pursue you”; and she's saying, “No, thank you,” over and over and over again.

Ann: Did she?

Marshall: Yes, over and over; yes. Six months of pursuit where I was very interested, and she was cool. I talk about it in the book. We got to a point where we sat down, and it was our first official date. She won't call it a date, but it was the two of us having coffee. I laid out my feelings for her, and I was feeling confident about it. Things were going well. We were talking on the phone once a week or so for 30 minutes. It was going super well. The date went great.

So, I thought, “She's going to say, ‘Yes, I would like to be pursued by you.’” I said, “I'm really enjoying getting to know you. I like you. I'd like to pursue you toward marriage.” She said, “I've also been enjoying getting to know you. I've really enjoyed our conversations.” I'm like—“This is good.”

Ann: Yes, it's good.

Marshall: She said, “You're a very nice human being.”

Bob: Oh.

Marshall: —“human being.”

Bob: I hear where this is going.

Marshall: I'm like—"What does that mean?"

Bob: Yes.

Marshall: "You're a nice human being?" So, she said, "But when I think about a relationship, my heart is cold."

Ann: Oh! How did you just not turn away?

Dave: Really?

Marshall: So, it was an awkward pause—long, awkward pause. My wife is very honest. Let's say it that way.

Dave: I guess.

Marshall: She's very honest, and I love it about her. Long, awkward pause—and I say, "Are we talking ice cold or"—[Laughter]

Ann: So, you're saying there is a chance.

Marshall: —"lukewarm?" She said, "Cold."

Ann: Whoa.

Bob: Wow.

Marshall: That was essentially the end of that conversation. It was still friendly. She was visiting a family member in Minnesota. So, we ended up spending a little bit of time together the next day. She largely acted normal. So, I just figured that's the end. Two weeks go by, I don't call; and then she reaches out to me and says, "Hey, you haven't called." I said, "Yes, you've"—

Ann: Your heart is cold.

Dave: You said the phone—

Marshall: —"you made it very clear where you were."

Dave: I can't pick the phone up when it's ice. It's too cold.

Marshall: She said, "Oh, I just wanted to let you know I wasn't ready to be in a relationship right now. Like, I would still love to be friends. If that means you don't want

to call anymore, I totally understand.” So, I went back and prayed about that, and I just thought, “I’m not in a hurry to rush off anywhere else. I really admire this woman.”

So, I did. I called, and we talked for 30 to 40 minutes once a week for months. I mean never more than that, and that was the purpose. I said from the beginning, “Unless we’re going to get in a relationship, it’s not going to be more than this; but we’re going to limit it to 30 to 40 minutes.” We largely just talked about ways we could pray for each other. Each conversation started with checking in on things that we prayed for last time or that we asked for prayer for last time. We never prayed together on the phone at that time.

Then it ended with—“How can I pray for you this week?” We just talked about a lot of things going on in our lives, and the Lord just knit our hearts together as friends in that time. So, I love it. I mean I look back, and that moment was awkward. I was really surprised; but when I look back on it now, it preserved a period of six months for us to be friends. We put boundaries in place to make sure it wasn’t more than that, and I knew along the way that if my heart was saying, “If this doesn’t become a relationship, then it’s a stumbling block for me. I need to get out of that relationship.” She knew that.

Bob: So, I want to ask you about scenario—

Marshall: Yes.

Bob: —and just get your take on this. I was talking to a couple—married couple. I said, “How did you meet? How did you get engaged?” In hearing their story, I heard that on the second or the third date the wife had said—the future wife had said—to the guy she was dating—she said, “You’ve got six months. You’ve got six months to either pop the question or move along.”

She was 29. He was 30. And she said, “I’m at a point in life where I don’t want to be in a long term relationship that’s not heading somewhere. So, it seems reasonable to me that in six months, you should be able to figure out whether we’re a match or not; and I should be able to figure it out.” So, she put the date on the calendar: “You know August 19th will be the date, and it’s either fish or cut bait at that point.” What’s your thought on that?

Marshall: Did they get married?

Bob: They did.

Marshall: Okay. That’s great. That’s a good story. [Laughter]

Bob: By the way, he said to me, “It’s the best thing she could have done because I would have just drifted along as a guy in a two year going no-where relationship, happy

to be just friends and to have the benefits of a girlfriend without having the commitment of marriage.

Marshall: Yes, so, I wonder how well she knew him going into it.

Bob: Yes.

Marshall: But I would say there would be certain guys that need a kick in the pants probably to be intentional and clear and keep the relationship moving forward. That makes me real nervous—the six month thing—because it just applies—already, there is so much pressure in these situations. Applying an external pressure like that, that could manipulate somebody, I think could go badly—

Bob: Yes.

Marshall: —with certain people; but I think doing that in community—so, I think, for me, I would ask—if I was asked—talking to her about the wisdom of that, I would say, “What do people in your life think about that and people in his life think about that? Does that feel like a healthy way to think about this?”

For me, if I’m counseling somebody, I just want to see month-to-month—“Are we making progress?” I don’t—and by progress, I don’t mean big revelations; but I ought to be able to sit down with a guy and say, “What have you learned about her?” or sit down with a girl and say, “What have you learned about him? What’s drawing you to him as you stay in the relationship?”

I think if they are being intentional, and this isn’t just—“We’re spending time together, watching movies, touching each other, expressing how much we like each other, and talking about our relationship all the time.” If this is really meaningful, moving some where toward clarity, they’re going to have meaningful things to share at those kinds of check-ins.

So, for us, I think an important thing to say—in terms of being clear / the man being clear—that doesn’t mean a state of the union every time you get together which I think is another ditch on the other side to fall into where the guy is always saying, “We are at 11-percent” / “We’re at 27-percent.” I think that’s an unhealthy way to relate to each other.

So, that would be my—as I’m looking in at a couple. I just want to see trajectory: “Are we still aiming toward marriage? Are we moving that way? Are we making progress?” “Or does this feel like we’re kind of in a holding pattern, and we’re not really making progress; or maybe, we’re even moving backward?”

Bob: Can we just say here that we are talking about something that’s really hard? The single years are hard. The trying to figure out—“Is this the right one?”—is hard. The

pursuit of the right one is hard. I mean this is a stage of life that if you are taking your cues from the culture / if you're source material for how to do this is old episodes of *Friends*, you're not going to wind up in a place that you're going to be happy with.

Dave: Right.

Bob: This is where you've got to have godly counsel. It's where you've got to have a book like *Not Yet Married*. It's where you've got to have the Scriptures be pouring into that / pouring that into your life. Otherwise, you're going to find yourself in a place as a single person where you're lonely, you're depressed, or you're shipwrecked because you took your cues from the wrong source.

Dave: And Marshall says—and he brought such wisdom to us—and your book says—and it's so good—"The best book on dating is the Word of God."

Bob: That's right.

Dave: I mean it's so clear for a single person and for parents walking beside our kids. It's like—"We need Jesus. We need the Word of God, and we all need community." I don't know what else you need, but you need those in your life to get to where God wants to take you in this area of your life.

Bob: One of the things Marshall talked about today is the importance of mentors in our lives. We shouldn't be trying to navigate relationships on our own, and David Robbins who is the President of FamilyLife is here thinking about that subject today; right?

David: Yes. I just reflect back, and I'm so grateful. I started thinking of individuals and couples who mentored and spoke into my life in high school and especially in college when I started dating more seriously. I just think of people who took the risk to really move closer to me, and I think I probably tried to play it cool and didn't show any ounce of, really, appreciating or valuing it; but I was hanging on to every word and applying so much of what they were sharing.

Bob, you mentioned one of the things that I remember learning and actually watching in a small group with a mentor who was leading us. It was that Tommy Nelson story. We were watching a Tommy Nelson Bible study where he says, "Run as hard as you can after God, and look to this side." I remember that changing everything for me.

It was six months later in pursuing God with everything that I had and fixing my eye on Jesus and really surrendering every area of my life to Him that I looked to the side. Sure enough, there was this young lady named Meg running a very similar pace. I pursued her totally differently than any other girl I have ever pursued because of mentors and their input into my life at that moment in my life.

So, I hear the conversation today, and I just ask all of us to—“God, open our eyes to who are the young people around us and see how we—God, help us to take steps of faith to move closer to them and invite them into our homes, model for them what healthy relationships look like, and encourage them in how to pursue relationships”—because these are the families of the next generation, and we get to be a part of their story.

Bob: Take what’s been poured into you and pour it into others; right?

David: Absolutely.

Bob: Yes, that’s great. Thank you, David.

We hope you can be back with us again tomorrow. We’re going to hear an interesting conversation as Kim Anthony talks with Meg Miller. Meg is a wife and a mom who found her husband was looking at pornography; and ultimately, came to the point where she recognized that that revelation was used by God to save their marriage. We’ll hear that conversation tomorrow. I hope you can join us for that.

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