

Introduction

We all love happily-ever-after stories. That's why Disney movies and chick flicks are so popular. Despite our past experiences and current realities, and whether we are comfortable admitting it, I believe there is something inside all of us that hopes happily ever after will happen to us too. It's the forever kind of love we want. It's the reason we see Nicholas Sparks movies on opening night. It's the reason we were Team Jacob or Team Edward. It's the reason we throw parties just to watch *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*. And it's the reason there is an entire reality show culture about happily ever after. These series were created to help people find that kind of love too. Unfortunately, the track record of success on such shows is less than ideal. But they keep trying. And I keep watching.

Enter dating apps. You no longer need a reality show to live vicariously through someone else's quest for love. You can access it all on your smartphone. You know where the dating scene is: online. It's the one-stop shop to finding the love of your life. Not only can you find a connection based on geography, common interests, and age requirements, you also get to view a half dozen of their selfies to decide whether you want to swipe right. Well, let's be honest: his profile pic is the deciding factor. Everything else is a bonus. Just kidding. Sort of.

Moment of Truth

I'll stop joking. If you're reading this book, there is a high probability you're on a dating app. Or a few. Or a dozen. You probably

have enough stories from your personal experiences to fill your own book. Some are good, some are funny, and some just flat-out make you want to curl into a ball under your covers with a bowl of ice cream. And never come out. Because it can feel hopeless.

If you think I'm about to make an argument for or against dating apps, I'm not. That's not this book. The reason that's not this book is because dating apps are today's normal, and that's not changing anytime soon. It's the way many single people ages eighteen to thirty-nine are dating. In fact, in 2013 there were an estimated twenty-five hundred dating sites in the United States alone, with a thousand more coming online each year between 2014 and 2016.¹ That's a lot. You want to find a truck-driving, country-music listener who lives in the Midwest? There's an app for that. What about a church-going East Coast CEO of a software company by the time he was twenty-four years old kind of guy? Yep. An app for that. Okay, well, maybe not for those specific examples. However, I feel pretty confident they're coming. Then there is Bumble. I mean, it's the Sadie Hawkins dance of dating apps.

All these different dating apps can be exhilarating, exhausting, and confusing—all at the same time—but the truth is that the fabric of culture and our relational lives are interwoven. What do I mean by that? I mean that more often than we care to admit (and by “we” I mean Christians), culture exerts a lot of input into how we interact with each other. Specifically, culture has a lot of influence on how we date.

Now, let me be clear. We still have responsibility. We are responsible for how we respond and how we don't respond. We are responsible for acting and living with integrity, making wise choices, and being kind. But culture can certainly provide the framework for our relationships, and that's exactly what it has done. It has changed the dating scene, and now we have to live in it. That's because technology has changed. What was normal for me in learning to interact with boys as a teenager will never be normal for teenagers today—mainly because they'll never know what a landline is, but that's beside the point. Thanks to mobile devices and location-sensing apps, the whole

You are worth
fighting for.
And the right guy
will do that.



world has an opportunity for a date. Smartphones have brought dating to our fingertips. Literally to our fingertips.

So instead of fighting culture, I want to give you hope that you can navigate culture well. In particular, you can be a Christian and navigate dating apps well. You can honor God, respect yourself, and still believe God's best is possible for you in dating. Yes, dating can be hard enough, and dating apps can add a whole new level of confusion to situations where our emotions are already operating on high. Your self-esteem can feel like it's on a roller coaster, leaving you both hopeful and defeated in a matter of swipes. We're going to talk about all of that. And text messaging. Profile pics. Awkward first dates. Being stood up. We're going to talk about how these apps affect the way men interact with us, which has a domino effect on our self-image. We are going to talk about communication, commitment, and boundaries. We're going to talk about God. My hope is to convince you that, in light of all these things, you are worth fighting for. And the right guy will do that.

I'm going to encourage you to believe that you deserve the absolute best in dating and challenge you to settle for nothing less. We are going to talk about how to recognize the man who will honor and respect you. You will be equipped to wait for the man who will make you his priority and to walk away from the man who only treats you as an option. Happily ever after is still possible. It just may look different than in the movies.

Even if, at the end of this book, you decide to swear off dating apps until the end of time, I will say, "Good for you." This book can equip you to date well in whatever context. Now granted, the context of this particular book is dating apps, but the principles are universal. And some of you won't swear off dating apps. You will continue to swipe right and left. And I will equally applaud you for it because I'm not trying to get you to delete them from your phone. In fact, I hope you keep them. My goal is to help you.

Disclaimer

I realize that with every new app, there is an increasing number of ways to interact with potential matches. Swiping left and right intro-

duced us to the game, but they're no longer our only options. You can swipe up, swipe down, single tap, double tap, and even shake your phone to backtrack on a regrettable impulse swipe. But wait, there's more. To keep up with our ever-changing technological culture, dating-app companies have decided to jump on the GIF bandwagon. Now GIFs are also an option to express approval for a suggested match.

So, yes, I do realize there are more ways to interact with apps. However, in an already complicated situation, let's just make things simple and use the basic right and left functions. These developers were smart. Left for "no" and right for "yes" are now universal signs in dating. We will all know what I'm talking about.

I should also mention here that I wrote this book with all your friends in mind too. What makes a movie or book even more fun is if you get to talk about it with other people, right? Even though the target audience is women, my bet is that men will also have a lot to say about apps and dating. So grab some girls and guys (if you want)—maybe five or six of each—and talk. Discussions will happen best if you each read the chapter beforehand. I hope you have fun learning from one another.

Hope for the Future

I don't have all the answers, and I can't tell you if you'll get married or who you'll marry. If that's the book you were hoping to read, let me know when you find it, because I'd be interested in reading that book too. But here is what I *can* tell you. There is hope. God cares deeply about you. How you date matters. How men treat you is a big deal, and that should matter to you. And culture doesn't have to be bad.

So if you are interested in reading about those things, let's get started.

Everybody's Doing It

Everyone who's a fan of gymnastics remembers the 2016 Summer Olympics. They generated such widespread media coverage and notoriety it was hard to miss the news coverage, even if you don't like sports.

One event that didn't generate cheering and tear-filled eyes during gold-medal ceremonies, yet attracted plenty of attention: the surge in swipes among athletes during the Rio games. It's unfortunate that at a time when the country's Olympic celebrations should have centered around athletic performances and achievements, the media, instead, hyped the number of "hookups" happening among the athletes. Tinder reported a 129 percent increase in matches in the Olympic Village alone after the first weekend of the games.² At the risk of making an unfair assumption, the intent of the majority of those matches likely didn't extend beyond a few hours. That's one unfortunate reality of dating apps.

Yet, dating apps aren't going anywhere. Well, let me rephrase that. Dating apps *are* going somewhere: up. By 2015, the mobile dating industry was generating more than \$2.2 billion in annual revenue, with one in ten adults averaging over an hour daily on a dating site or app—numbers expected to continue increasing.³ Single men and women want to share their lives with someone. It's that simple. The result? We are willing to seize just about any opportunity that will help us find love.

When you think about it, our drive for this forever kind of love isn't that surprising. God created all humans for companionship, to

do life with our friends and family (or framily), and ultimately, to do life intimately with just one person. In the Old Testament, Moses penned the following from God: “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Gen. 2:18).

You and I were created by a relational God. In the very beginning, God hardwired us for relational intimacy. Because we were created in the image of God, to be a reflection and representative of God’s nature and character, it makes sense that we would also reflect the way he is in relationship with himself, with us, and with the world. Even if you’ve had past experiences that have clouded your view of marriage, I still believe that somewhere inside of you, you think it’s possible to fall in love and stay in love. Forever. And you want it to be possible for you. I believe God designed you like that.

It’s no wonder numerous little girls dream of growing up and becoming wives and mothers. Maybe that was you too. Maybe it wasn’t. For me, that was never my sole focus. It was *a* dream, but not my *only* dream. I have always been highly ambitious, and I hope my career is the platform where I can best steward my influence. That said, I also have an equal longing to meet a man who will partner with me, and I with him. The point in telling you that is this: wherever you fall on the spectrum of desire for marriage and companionship, it’s okay. There is no right and wrong way to view your longing. It’s okay, and it’s normal.

It’s also okay if you’re looking into dating apps to find a genuine relationship with the hope of marriage. That’s why you’re reading this book, right? But before we go any further, there are a few things I want you to know in this chapter. First, you’re not alone. Maybe you’re embarrassed by the idea of going on Bumble. You may wonder if people will think you’re desperate, or if they’ll make assumptions about your intentions. If no one else is telling you this, then I want you to hear it from me: there are plenty of people on dating apps who, like you, are trying to live like Jesus and are also looking for forever love. It’s also no secret that apps have changed the way people date, in ways that some of the generations before us have never experienced. This is okay too. Dating apps have brought both positive and negative changes to the dating scene. It’s important to understand

*God hardwired
us for relational
intimacy.*



this if you're going to honor God in your relationships, respect yourself, and know what to look for in a match.

The Reputation of Dating Apps

I believe that the intent behind dating apps is good. What single girl wouldn't want as many options as possible if it will increase her chances of meeting the guy she's going to marry? However, the word *dating* can be applied rather loosely to certain situations.

But it doesn't have to be like that.

I do believe, though, that some of these less-than-ideal reputations of dating apps have caused Christians and non-Christians alike to be hesitant to disclose their use of them. In particular, I've spoken with very few twentysomething single girls who feel comfortable acknowledging they have a dating app on their phone. More specifically, they certainly don't want to confess their current boyfriend is the result of a swipe. At least not initially. One girl who met her boyfriend through an app told me, "After meeting my boyfriend, I was embarrassed when people asked how we met. I always darted around the question. I thought people were going to judge me."

Listen, I get it. People can be overly generous with their judgmental opinions. In turn, this causes us to exercise more caution than normal around topics that feel deeply personal and vulnerable. I've known plenty of girls who've begun a relationship with a guy they've met on an app. And of course, when you're in a new relationship, everyone wants to know, "How did you meet?" That's on the list of top five questions others ask when you start dating someone. More than one girl I've known has answered the question with a straight-up lie. For her, it felt like less of a risk to make up a story than to tell the truth. Because deep down, there is a fear for some women that being on a dating app means you're desperate.

What's Your Story?

I'm guessing you can relate to that fear—or at least know someone who can. I've worked with thousands of young single Christian women over nearly two decades. As a result, I've heard hundreds of

stories about dating, relationships, and dating apps. Everyone has a story about how a dating app ended up on their phone. After all, apps just don't appear on smartphones. They are not preloaded when you purchase your phone from the store. You actually have to make a conscious decision to go to the app store, choose what you want, and download it. Maybe it was that time you swore you'd never get on an app—but you did. Or the time you said you'd never go out with anyone you met that way—and you did. For some of you, it was your New Year's resolution to date more. Or to date period.

The contexts are different, but the bottom line is the same: "Dating apps were not for me, but I decided to try it because [fill in the blank]." After all, it's hard to meet new people. You can only change your traffic pattern so many times before you run out of options. Let's face it. Even Waze is only going to give you so many new routes before you have to face reality: you're going to sit in traffic. There is nothing wrong with wanting to meet and date new people in hopes that maybe, just maybe, he will be your *happily ever after*.

So, you go for it. You download the app. You swipe right. So does he. It's been a long time since you were this excited about a first date. Or maybe this is your first date and your stomach is filled with butterflies and nervous anticipation thinking about the what-ifs? The date goes well. You float through your front door on a pillow of clouds. The next day . . . nothing. The day after . . . nothing. And, just like that, you feel more defeated than before you got on the app.

So you open up your phone and start swiping. But this time there is added pressure. Even though you both swipe right, you are now aware that there are still hundreds, if not thousands, of other options—all within a finger's reach. *Maybe I should change my picture, change my interests, or rewrite my profile. Is this really the best photo of me? I look pretty, right? Will someone else think so?* Within seconds, all these thoughts flash through your mind. You rotate a few pictures to the front and keep going. Because deep down, you are hopeful that *happily ever after* might still exist for you. But some days, it feels like it might not. I get it.

Or maybe you were just curious. Your friends were using the apps

and they seemed to be having fun. They were meeting guys outside of their normal traffic patterns and friend groups. Dinner conversation among your friends increasingly revolved around whatever guy someone was messaging or going out with. It may have felt like hype to you, but you still wanted to know what it was all about. In fact, I'd bet that you know someone who met their husband through a dating app. And if you were being completely honest, a part of you felt like you might be missing out on something. So you thought, "Why not give this a shot?"

It seemed as though you had met every single guy within a fifty-mile radius. You were seeing the same faces, it was the same scene, and you thought, "Is this all there is?" Or maybe no one was asking you out. Ever. In fact, dating wasn't something you were comfortable with because you'd never done it. It was embarrassing. Family gatherings were all the same: "Are you dating anyone?" No. Still no. Just like the last time you asked. You spent Friday nights (and many Saturdays) on the couch with a chick flick. You prayed, you hoped, and you waited. Nothing. You thought, "God, am I doing something wrong?" As a single person, it can feel like a lot of pressure to try and put yourself out there.

For some of you, you never imagined being single at whatever age you are. Others of you love being single right now and dating is part of the fun. I remember, when I was nine years old, sitting in the bed of my dad's old pickup truck with my best friend. My dad had a camper shell that went over the bed of the truck, with a few shag carpet benches to sit on. It was the eighties; what can I say?

For whatever reason, my best friend and I loved to hang out in his truck on Saturday afternoons. We'd listen to Madonna on cassette tapes on our mini boom box and dream about the future. I distinctly remember saying that I would be married with two kids by the time I was twenty-five. That would give me plenty of time to get one or maybe two degrees and start my perfect career. That's how my nine-year-old brain worked. It never once crossed my mind that life would not work like that. Spoiler alert: it didn't.

I could go on with lists of reasons for downloading dating apps, but

you get the point. We are motivated to do things because we have an expectation of a certain result. The same rule applies to how we date and who we date.

It's Not the Same Anymore

However you found yourself on dating apps, with more than twenty-five hundred apps to choose from, dating can still be challenging. As a culture we're constantly learning how dating apps are changing the way we date. Ironically, in attempting to simplify our world through technology, we've unintentionally added new layers of complication. For example, most of us have had the experience of meeting a guy we were not initially attracted to, but as we got to know him, he became incredibly attractive. Likewise, a lot of us have had the opposite experience. When you decide to take your dating life online, getting to know someone first feels like a luxury of the past that is no longer afforded to you. Instead, you get one profile pic to communicate everything you want to communicate about yourself. Choose wisely.

To make complicated matters worse, everything on the internet seems to live forever, including my Turkey Trot race time from 1998. When you create your online dating profile, you're also making a decision to allow your personal life to be permanently searchable for the rest of recorded human history. If you are hearing that idea for the first time, let me repeat myself: dating online means you are now publicly and forever documenting your private life. Be careful. (Ah, the things we do for love.)

I've spoken with many married men and women about dating apps. They typically listen with wide eyes and open mouths, since they have a hard time wrapping their heads around our style of dating. This is real, folks. Welcome to our world. But here's the good news: dating app stories are some of the funniest stories out there. With just one good dating tale, you can have an entire room in stitches. But when sides stop aching and the jokes wind down, a common response goes something like this: "I am so glad I don't have to deal with that." An even more interesting, yet equally common,

response is: “Had I been given the option of hand-selecting all of the qualities I was looking for in my future spouse, I would not have ended up with the person I did.” That’s when the single people get wide-eyed.

Before dating apps, there was no option to prescreen your potential match for your most ideal qualities in a mate. This essentially means you’re looking for a match based on unrealistic perfection. But technology never disappoints, so now we have that option. Insert the high-ten emoji. (Which Christians like to call the “praise hands.”) But nope, I’m still arguing for the high ten. Look it up.) The point is, as women, we know that we’ve only been matched with the men who are interested in the qualities we’ve listed.

In addition, as men are scrolling through their phones, our picture needs to be attractive enough to cause them to pause long enough to swipe right. There is no opportunity for the subtle glance or smile from across the room. The only opportunity is a quick decision on a screen. Women most certainly feel the pressure of this. Plus, we know that everyone to some degree is going to misrepresent themselves. I mean, really, are you actually planning on posting a picture of your “bad side” with “that face” in “that outfit”? It’s doubtful. On the flip side, women are also forced to make a snap judgment based on a picture and highly edited information.

Dating apps have also opened up a whole new strategy to dating. There is a strategy to choosing your profile pics, your complementing pictures, writing your profile, choosing your interests . . . and don’t get me started about the initial messaging. (We’ll talk about all these in coming chapters.) I know a few people who change their location radius to one mile or less when they go to church on Sundays. This increases their chances of being matched with someone who attends the same church. When my senior pastor and employer, Andy Stanley, first learned about strategies in dating, his response was, “When I was growing up, it never dawned on me that I needed one of those. There’s a strategy? In *dating?*”⁴ Oh yes, Andy, yes. There most certainly is a strategy. That is the gift dating apps have given us.

Change Can Be Good

Dating apps have definitely changed the game. There is no question about that. For many, the changes have been helpful, but not without cost. The most common benefit of dating apps, as said by single girls who use them, is that they have taken the pressure off. One girl told me, “It’s not that I had an overly serious view of dating to begin with, but I definitely have a more casual view of it now. Before, I felt a lot of pressure on dates. I think I’m now a little more willing to go out with people just to get to know someone different, even if I don’t initially think I’m compatible with them.”

The attention you get when you’re on the app also feels good. A lot of girls are not getting attention from men in their day-to-day lives, and they want it. I’m not talking about the unhealthy, I-can’t-live-without-it kind of attention. I’m talking about the normal, everyday compliments. (I will address in a future chapter how to recognize when your desire for attention goes bad.) But it does numbers for your self-esteem when you swipe right on an attractive guy and he swipes right too. Most girls struggle with feeling attractive. This looks different for everyone, but I’ve yet to meet a single girl who has not, at some point in her life, wondered if someone would find her beautiful. Particularly for the girl who is new to the dating scene, it’s a confidence booster when you open the app to find three connections waiting for you. Actually, it’s a confidence booster for anyone. Every girl needs to be reminded she is pretty. Every girl deserves that. Every girl. That can certainly be a benefit of dating apps.

Here’s another thing I like about dating apps. Because apps have encouraged a more casual approach to dating, this allows girls who never would have been asked out the opportunity to practice interacting with the opposite sex. For example, I have a friend who ended a multiple-year relationship and realized she didn’t know how to date. She decided to simultaneously download two separate dating apps for the sole purpose of learning how to date again. She wanted to feel comfortable having conversations with strangers, and being open to new people. She was also looking for an outlet to practice basic conversational skills within personal boundaries. I don’t know about

you, but to me this is a great idea. I appreciate the fact that dating apps give you the opportunity to practice healthy relational skills. If you need permission to *practice* dating, consider this permission granted.



Dating apps give you the opportunity to practice healthy relational skills.

I know of a girl who genuinely loves dating and dating apps. She doesn't take herself or the dates too seriously. In fact, she has regularly gone on a Tinder date on her way to a Tinder date. If it's a Saturday, she will oftentimes schedule breakfast, lunch, and dinner dates—with three different guys. To me, that sounds painfully exhausting, but more power to her. She's having fun, and there is nothing wrong with that. For her, it's a way to spend time with people she may not otherwise have the chance to meet. It's also worth it to squeeze as many dates in as possible to ensure that happens.

Rejection Is Still Rejection

The unfortunate reality is that while there may be thousands of apps to give you hope that your *forever love* is out there, there is equal opportunity for those same apps to tell you that he's not. As good as it feels when an attractive guy swipes right, it feels just as bad—if not worse—when he doesn't. I know plenty of girls who have deleted apps from their phones because the virtual rejection was getting to be too much. Then months would go by and the everyday scene proved equally depressing, and the apps returned. It's a vicious cycle.

Piled on top of that is the rejection after a few dates. For a girl, there is a reason the rejection feels so heavy. When a guy rejects us, it's not just an immediate death of the relationship (or potential relationship), it also feels like the death of a dream. Even though the only thing ending is that relationship, in our emotion-laden hearts and minds, it feels as though all hope has been lost for finding someone to spend forever with. Remember, God has designed us for a forever

kind of love, so it's normal that we desire it. Regardless of what our past and current experiences have or have not taught us, that kind of love is *in us*.

If you have ever watched an exit interview from *The Bachelor*, it's the reason that nine times out of ten the ones who've been rejected say something along the lines of, "I knew I wasn't lovable. No good thing ever happens to me. No one ever chooses me." And, wait for it: "What's wrong with me?" To the viewer, the reaction never quite seems to match the circumstance. But to the girl, I believe it's her subconscious attempt at trying to sort through the pain she's feeling. Let's face it, ladies, our irrational thoughts feel perfectly rational when our hearts have been broken.

Still, I always have some key questions running through my mind when I watch those interviews, starting with: "Are you listening to yourself?" C'mon, girls, this is only a no for that one person, not a no to your forever. Have you forgotten that there are still seven billion other people in the world? I don't know about you, but to me, that's a lot of people—and a lot of opportunity for a great match. Besides, don't these contestants know most of those people are on dating apps? They should try it. But, whatever, you're right, no one will ever want you.

Girls believe that rejection extends far beyond the end of that one relationship. When rejection comes, even in the form of a left swipe, it's not always easy to see that another great guy will come along. But, I get it. When it's your life, it's hard to see clearly. I've done it too. The fact is, getting rejected on an app still hurts like getting rejected face-to-face. The difference is apps have merely given us more ways to face rejection.

Another negative side effect of dating apps is poor interactions between men and women. When I say poor, here is what I mean. Because there are so many options available to men through an app, women can be reduced to a number—or an object—instead of a person. You may go out with a guy and have a great time because the connection is real and obvious. You both feel it. But instead of him calling (or texting) you for another date, he wants to give a few more

girls a try first, before he makes any decisions about his second date. One girl told me, “Because the norm is around texting and not calling, making last-minute plans instead of planning ahead, it’s changed the definition of dating for me. When I go out with a guy, I know that I’m potentially just one of two or three girls that he is going out with that week. Instead of feeling special, I’m just his next date.”

If you wanted to be reduced to a number, you would have signed up for *The Bachelor*. As a girl, that doesn’t feel good. When women are reduced to a number time and time again, matches become less and less meaningful. And when women become just a number, they feel devalued and less respected. But dating is not supposed to be like that. Relationships are not supposed to be like that.

There’s an interesting thing that’s happening though: women are feeling the effect of this. You may be one of them. Some of you are sharing these sentiments and struggles within your friend circles, but most of you are not going around making public statements about your feelings. Instead, you continue the cycle, keeping your thoughts to yourself but feeling like there is no other alternative.

The problem is that when *some* people participate in poor dating, it impacts everybody’s prospects and experience. Not everyone has to be dating well, only a critical mass. Women, we must strive to become the critical mass to make a positive change. I am confident that it’s possible. Just as one critical mass can ruin it for the rest of us, we are going to be the critical mass that makes it better. Right now. Us.

That’s why I don’t want you to give up. I know dating is hard, and sometimes it can feel like all hope is lost. But there is also more opportunity for things to go really, really well. With that comes hope, and hope trumps all. My encouragement to you is to not lose heart. Trust me, I know it can be hard. I know what it’s like to face rejection from left swipes, from guys I’ve only dated for a few weeks, and from a guy that I gave years of my life to. All of it hurts just the same.

Letting go of one thing allows you to make room for something better.

However, what I have found to be true in my own life is that letting go of one thing allows you to make room for something better. Remember what I said earlier about God creating us as relational beings? The God who knows you best knows the future. Even when you can't see what he's doing, he is at work. So, trust that God has not forgotten about you and move forward with confidence.

Questions for Reflection

1. Have you ever lost hope or been tempted to give up on dating? Why?
2. What is the reputation of dating apps among your friends and in your social circles? Has that reputation affected your use of dating apps?
3. Assuming you use dating apps, have you developed a personal strategy? What have been the results so far? Are there ways you need to adjust your strategy to get different results?
4. In what ways might you need to change the way you interact with men through dating apps, via texting, and in person? If you are happy with your interactions, as you read through this book, think through ways you can encourage or challenge other women in their interactions with men.