

TRUE LOVE DATES

SMALL GROUP FOUR-WEEK CURRICULUM

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True Love Dates Small Group 4-Week Curriculum

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CURRICULUM OVERVIEW AND LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Hello there!

Thank you so much for choosing to work through the *True Love Dates* Small Group Curriculum.

I'm excited to bring it to you and look forward to the work that God will do in your life and in the lives of your group members over the next four weeks.

Allow me to briefly introduce myself. My name is Debra Fileta, professional counselor and author of *True Love Dates: Your Indispensable Guide to Finding the Love of Your Life* (Zondervan, 2013).

Over the past few years, God has been moving my life and career to the topic of love and relationships. As a professional counselor, one theme that continues to come up in my sessions and in my personal relationships is the reality of our deep need to love and be loved. We were created, by the author of love, to experience the give and take of love. But this broken world and our sinful hearts can create great obstacles that keep us from experiencing love as God meant it to be experienced. My prayer for this curriculum is that it will challenge, heal, and refine our view of love and romantic relationships.

The next four weeks will be focused on learning and understanding the three components of finding true love: dating inward, dating outward, and dating upward. We will be taking a look at how to experience God's love, recognize romantic love, as well as cultivate a love for ourselves.

Thank you for choosing to take this journey. I pray that you will be greatly blessed.

Because of his love,

Debra Fileta, M.A., LPC

UNDERSTANDING THE CURRICULUM

This curriculum is divided into two sections: the leader's guide and the participant's guide. The following is an explanation of the components in the leader's guide.

Opener: Each week there will be an opening activity or conversation starter. The goal of this activity is to “break the ice” by having the members of the group discuss a topic or perform an activity to jump-start discussion.

Introduction: This section is a brief explanation of the week's topic and is to be read aloud by the leader at the start of the discussion.

Leader Discussion: This section delves into the topic of the week and is to be read aloud by the leader.

Questions: Each week includes several discussion questions that are to be read and discussed by the group throughout different portions of the study.

Learning Activity: Week 2 includes a Learning Activity, which adds an experiential component to the lesson.

Next Steps: This portion of the curriculum encourages participants to complete the suggested journaling activity during the week as a way to bring the study into their real-life experience.

Prayer Focus: The prayer focus offers suggestions and direction for prayer that go with the weekly lesson.

Suggested Reading: This curriculum is based on concepts and principles from the book *True Love Dates*, but it can also be used as stand-alone material. The Suggested Reading section recommends the corresponding chapters from *True Love Dates* that expand on the curriculum for those looking to go deeper with the material.

USING THE CURRICULUM

The leader of the group receives the entire curriculum, which includes both the leader's guide and the participant's guide.

Step 1: Each week, the leader prepares by looking through the weekly discussion and obtaining any required materials for the **Opener** or the **Learning Activity**.

Step 2: The leader prints out copies of that week's participant's guide for each member of the group.

Step 3: At the start of the meeting, the leader guides the participants through the **Opener**.

Step 4: The leader then reads aloud the **Introduction** and moves into the **Discussion**, reading aloud anything marked in *italics*, and noting the underlined words that need to be filled in by the members in their participant's guides.

Step 5: For the **Questions**, the leader may choose someone to read the question out loud. (Questions are also in the participant's guide.) This is an important part of the curriculum because it promotes discussion and openness. Leaders should give participants the freedom to speak and be in tune to what God is teaching through the conversation.

Step 6: In closing, the leader briefly explains the **Next Steps** journaling activity for the week.

Step 7: The leader reads the **Prayer Focus**, takes prayer requests, and ends the meeting with prayer.



TRUE LOVE DATES

Leader's Guide

HOW TO FIND TRUE LOVE

can slowly pull us away from God's definition of love and leave us feeling confused about what it really means to find love. This week we will be focusing on redefining love and discussing how to find it in the context of romantic relationships.

Leader Discussion: When it comes to finding a life partner, everyone's looking for answers. But we are barraged by mixed messages coming from all around us. There's a chasm between the church and the world. On one hand, we're told that dating is the enemy. We're told to "kiss dating goodbye" and trust God to bring us to "the right one." On the other hand, there's the message of the "hookup" generation. Love is relative, sex is casual, and relationships revolve around momentary pleasure. The thought of dating for marriage seems old-fashioned and confining.

QUESTION 1: What messages have you received from society about what it means to find true love? What messages have you heard from the church?

As Christians, it's hard to make sense of these two extremes. It's difficult to find our place and learn to navigate these starkly different perspectives and sort through mixed messages. Though God's Word doesn't give us a detailed outline of how to navigate the modern-day world of dating, it gives us a set of important principles to guide our decisions regarding love and relationships. The secret to finding true love is wrapped up in the two greatest commandments, as explained by Jesus.

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' (Matt. 22:36–39 NIV).

The answer to finding true love is learning to invest ourselves in all the right places. According to this passage, we're encouraged to love in three ways. First and foremost, we're called to focus on our relationship with God; learning to love

Opener: Mixed Messages (Allow 15 minutes)

Supplies: One pad of paper per person in the group and drawing utensils.

Instructions: Have everyone in the group sit in a circle. Give each person a pad of paper. Instruct them to write down one short phrase that comes to mind about love. (Example: "He's a heartthrob"; "Love at first sight.")



When everyone has written their phrase, pass the pad of paper to the right with the phrase showing. Instruct each person to read the phrase to themselves and then draw their interpretation of that phrase on the next blank page. (Allow one to two minutes.)

Pass the pad of paper to the right once again with the drawing showing. This time, instruct each person to look at the picture and then write their interpretation of that drawing on the next blank page. Repeat this process until each pad of paper is back to its owner.

Have each person go through the pad of paper from their original phrase to the final page. Observe and discuss the changes to the original message that have taken place.

Introduction: Love is universal. As we just experienced in this exercise, everyone has different things come to mind when we're talking about love, and our interpretations of love can be drastically different from one person to the next. But love gets to the heart of who we are as human beings because we were made in the image of a relational God whose very nature is love. But throughout life we're bombarded by mixed messages from our culture. These messages

him as we align our emotions, thoughts, and spirits with his. Second, we're asked to love others, valuing them as much as ourselves. And third, implicit in our ability to love others is the need to love ourselves.

QUESTION 2: Have you thought of the importance of loving yourself as a factor in loving others? What do you think it means to love yourself?

True Love Dates proposes that in order to find true love, a person must experience these three stages of dating: inward as we learn to love ourselves, outward as we discover how to love others, and upward as we commit to loving God.

QUESTION 3: In your experience, of the three stages of dating (inward, outward, and upward), which tends to be the most neglected in the search for love? Why?

Next Steps: Keep a journal as you work through this curriculum for the next four weeks. Begin by writing down the three stages of dating (dating inward, dating outward, dating upward) and briefly journaling what your experiences have been with each one. Consider the following questions: What has been my typical approach to finding true love? What is my reaction to the concept of “loving yourself”? What are my beliefs about finding love? What are some fears I have about engaging in relationships? What do I believe about God’s role in my journey of finding love?

Prayer Focus: This week ask God to reveal to you what it means to love inward, outward, and upward. Pray Matthew 22:36–39 and ask God to show you opportunities to increase your love for yourself, for others, and, most important, for him.

Suggested Reading: Introduction of *True Love Dates*

WEEK TWO

DATING INWARD—THE PERSON YOU NEVER THOUGHT YOU’D DATE

Introduction: *This week we are focusing on the first component of establishing healthy relationships—dating inward. The search for relationships tends to come with a very “outward” approach. We spend countless hours, emotions, and energy getting to know this other person whom we hope to enter a relationship with, forgetting that healthy relationships are made up of two people and that we are 50 percent of the equation. It’s easy to focus on who we’re with and neglect who we are.*

Opener: Who am I? Go around the group and have each member say their name and one word that describes them using the first letter of their name. Have them explain why they chose that word. “Tell us your name, and then using the first letter of your name, share a word that describes you, and why.”

Discussion: *You can’t even begin to know what you want in a relationship until you know who you are. We live in a society that tells us the lie that the value of an individual is determined by who they are with, rather than who they are. At times, even Christians have bought this lie and perpetuated it with well-meaning comments or advice. Often, this outward focus leaves singles feeling lost in their search for significance, believing that their significance is found in a relationship. Sadly, this outward focus can be carried into marriage, resulting in insecurity, tension, and disappointment because of unrealistic expectations.*

QUESTION 1: What are some ways that our society sends the message that our value comes from having a relationship? Within the Christian culture, what are some comments, attitudes, or words of well-intentioned advice that have perpetuated this lie?

As we wrestle with our value and significance, the first thing we must do is step back and look in. The truth about who we are is determined by a God who calls us wonderful, marvelous, and loved long before we're even aware of our need for others (Psalm 139). We are good because he has declared us to be good from the beginning of time (Genesis 2). But as we go through life, our identity and value are quickly covered up by the labels that are put upon us by the people we engage with, the sin that we allow into our lives, and the expectations we place on ourselves.

As you reflect on the word you used to describe yourself in the opening activity, realize that your identity begins to take shape from the moment you are born. "Forming identity is a lifelong process of sorting through and applying information we receive about ourselves" (True Love Dates, pg. 41). Every interaction from that day forward provides you with a label that has the power to lift you up or tear you down. Many of us carry these labels around without even recognizing them. But each label has a significant impact on who we are and on how we live our lives.

The process of dating inward means first and foremost that we take the time to know, to love, and to value who we are in God's eyes. It means recognizing the false labels that have been placed on us by understanding and accepting who God has made us to be.

QUESTION 2: Take a moment to quietly reflect on the following question: What are some of the negative labels that have been placed on you (whether in childhood or adulthood) by family, friends, acquaintances, and even yourself?

Learning Activity Part 1: The Labels We Wear

Materials: Posterboard, package of "Hello, my name is" labels, and pens.

Instructions: After a few moments of reflecting on question 2, distribute one label per person, as well as pens. Prompt group members to write down one negative label that they have been wearing throughout their lives. After

a few moments, encourage group members to place their labels on the posterboard, which should be positioned in a place for all to see.

Note to the leader: Depending on the comfort level of the group, these labels may be intensely personal or more superficial. Whatever the label may be, it's important to be sensitive to what members are sharing and to maintain a respectful and loving environment.

God is longing to rip off all of the false labels that have filled our lives with shame and replace them with his deep and ferocious love. God's Word is full of truths that declare who we are and who he has called us to be. Let's work through the following verses listed in True Love Dates (pgs. 42–43) and discuss the truth about our identity in Christ.



Have each member of the group take one verse or passage to read and discuss the truth it is stating about our identity. (Example: "I am Loved"; "I am Accepted.")

What Does God's Truth Say about Me?

1 Peter 2:9

2 Corinthians 5:17

Psalm 139:13–16

Hebrews 13:5

Ephesians 2:10

Galatians 3:13

Psalm 139:1–4

Colossians 2:13–14

John 1:12–13

1 John 3:1

Learning Activity Part 2: After discussing God’s truth, have each member go up to the board and write over their label, using a positive word to replace their negative label, as a symbolic act of accepting God’s truth.

Next Steps: Take some time this week to date inward by completing the following journaling activity. Keep track of your thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about yourself as well as your actions and reactions to the world around you. Spend some time reflecting on your observations.

Journaling Starter Questions (From *True Love Dates*, pg. 47)

1. *Interactions and Reactions:* What kind of people do I spend most of my time with? How do my interactions with them impact me? Are most of my interactions positive or negative?
2. *Behaviors:* What habits or hangups am I dealing with right now? Am I engaging in any addictive behavior? What are some negative patterns I need to change?
3. *Feelings:* What is my overall mood throughout the day? What makes me sad? Angry? Irritated? How do I cope with negative feelings when they arise? Is this strategy healthy or unhealthy?
4. *Thoughts and Beliefs:* What do I think about most? Do my thoughts reflect a positive or negative attitude toward myself? Are there thought patterns that I need to change? What do I believe about myself? Where did these beliefs come from? How do these beliefs line up with God’s Word?

Prayer Focus: This week pray that God will continue to reveal any other negative labels that you have been wearing. Pray through the list of Scripture verses and ask God to bring healing and give you a new perspective on your true identity in Christ.

Suggested Reading: Section 1 of *True Love Dates*—Dating Inward (Chapters 1–4)

WEEK THREE

DATING OUTWARD—THE SEASONS OF DATING

Introduction: *This week the focus will turn outward as we examine the art of establishing healthy interpersonal relationships with the opposite sex. We’ll be taking a look at the seasons of dating, starting with friendship and moving through spring, summer, fall, and winter.*

Opener: Seasons. Go around the group and ask each person to share their favorite of the four seasons of nature (spring, summer, winter, and fall) as well as a special memory they have from that particular season.

Discussion: *Last week we discussed the importance of dating inward and the process of getting to know yourself. It’s an important first step in establishing a healthy relationship because when you know who you are, you’ll have a clear understanding of what you want and need in a relationship.*

*Dating relationships can appear to be unpredictable, but they all tend to pass through predictable seasons. Ecclesiastes 3:1 reminds us that “there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.” So how does that apply to dating relationships? Chapter 6 of *True Love Dates* delves into this idea of seasons.*

“Each season of dating offers a spectrum of discoveries that will lead you either one step closer to true love, or two steps back. Each season illuminates potential risk factors and provides the opportunity to water and nurture the seeds of a relationship to see if they will grow and mature into a flourishing lifelong commitment” (pg. 71).

As we prepare to take a look at the seasons of dating, let’s consider each season as a purposeful experience in the pursuit of true love. Each season gives us an opportunity to work through emotions, boundaries, conflict, and communication. While they may not come in this exact order in every

relationship, each season is crucial to pass through by applying these principles to the dating relationship.

Friendship: It's important to be friends for a season. "One of the benefits of being in a friendship first is that you can learn many important things about a person before romantic feelings cloud your judgment. As tempting as it might be to skip this phase and jump straight into a romantic relationship, it's important to take the time to form a solid friendship—because that's what a good marriage is built upon" (True Love Dates, pg. 71).

QUESTION 1: What are some benefits of having a true friendship before a relationship? Have you ever regretted skipping this stage?

Spring: Spring is in the air! Flowers are budding and blossoming. The air is fresh and the sunshine is warm. There is new life growing all around. This first season of dating has so many parallels to the season of spring.

"At the start of any healthy relationship, both people experience feelings so strong ... New love, new feelings, new experiences. The heart stretches and grows. The mind, body, and spirit wake from hibernation, preparing for something new, something fresh, something good" (True Love Dates, pg. 75).

"While strong feelings don't always lead to a healthy relationship and certainly aren't guaranteed to lead to marriage ... the absence of [spring] means that something is missing" (pg. 75).

QUESTION 2: Describe what your feelings might be like during the season of spring. While feelings aren't everything, they do matter in the season of spring. What could a lack of "spring" feelings signify about the relationship?

Summer: This is the season when things get hot.

"By [summer], a couple is spending a lot more time together. It is a season of shedding your layers and exposing your true self to the person you are dating and requires transparency. But it's also risky. It leaves you vulnerable. It forces you to trust, and to give at the risk of getting nothing in return" (True Love Dates, pg.77).

The season of summer brings the potential of a stronger commitment, stronger connection (emotionally), and stronger desire (physically). But it also brings with it the potential of "getting burned." There are two risks of getting burned in the season of summer:

1. Emotionally: When you give of your heart, mind, and time (too much, too soon) and receive little to nothing in return.
2. Physically: When physical affection takes center stage and your relationship becomes fixated on physical intimacy.

QUESTION 3: Discuss the risks involved in the summer season of dating. How can you protect yourself from going too deep too fast both emotionally and physically in the season of summer?

Fall: Fall is the season of change. The vibrant colors of fall signify a change that is making way for new life. It's a time of preparing for winter by developing maturity and inviting growth. So it is with the season of fall in dating.

"The fall season of dating is the most difficult season a couple goes through. Though the relationship may look beautiful to the distant observer, it is going through much change. True feelings, thoughts, ideas, and opinions are being exposed. Two very different people are learning how to interact with one another; the deeper they get into their relationship, the more they learn that they are not entirely the same" (True Love Dates, pg. 80).

When the excitement of spring has subsided and the heat of summer has passed, a couple must learn to navigate their differences, learning how to manage their conflict, enhance their communication, and work through their differences. The way a couple navigates fall will either push them closer together or move them away from one another. When it comes to handling conflict and differences, there are three types of communicators:

1. **Avoidant:** Avoidant communicators fear confrontation and conflict and suppress their needs.
2. **Aggressive:** Aggressive communicators bulldoze anyone and everyone to get their way.
3. **Assertive:** Assertive communicators can express their needs while maintaining respect for others.

QUESTION 4: When it comes to conflict in relationships, what type of communicator are you?

Winter: Winter is the season where we settle down and settle in. “In this season, your relationship slows into the normalcy of the day-to-day. The sparks of new beginnings have become a strong and steady flame, and the nervous energy of first dates has been replaced by the joys and struggles of life. Emotions have steadied, but they are still strong” (True Love Dates, pg. 89).

For many couples, winter is the time in which you get a glimpse of what marriage will be like. You’ve seen each other at your highs and lows and have witnessed the realities of everyday life. Some couples find that when faced with the realities of their relationship, their love for one another freezes over through the mundane, and they choose to part ways.

But couples who have stayed strong and connected through winter will come out with an even stronger relationship that will move them to the greater commitment of engagement and marriage.

QUESTION 5: Have any of your relationships gone through the four seasons of dating? If you are in a relationship, which season are you in now?

Next Steps: Journaling Activity. As you review your journal entry from last week, observe your actions, interactions, feelings, and behaviors. Do you resemble an avoidant, aggressive, or assertive communicator? How was communication modeled to you by your parents and those closest to you? Write down three things you would like to do this week that will move you toward assertive communication, and then journal about your experience in attempting to communicate more effectively this week.

Bonus Journaling Activity: Read through chapter 5 of *True Love Dates* and create a “Red, Yellow, and Green List” as you consider what you need in a dating relationship.

Prayer Focus: This week, ask God to give you the courage and grace to be “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1:19). Ask him to give you insight to understand the different seasons and wisdom to appreciate his lessons through each one.

Suggested Reading: Section 2 of *True Love Dates*—Dating Outward (Chapters 5–8)

DATING UPWARD—THE TRIANGLE THEORY

Introduction: *As believers, we often talk about “making God the center” of our relationships. While many would agree with this concept, it’s hard to know how to apply this principle to our real-life relationships. This week we will be discussing the concept of dating upward and learning some practical ways to keep focused on our relationship with God, as well as the how-to’s of inviting him to be a part of our relationships.*

Opener: Triangulation. Have everyone stand up and spread around the room. Ask each group member to mentally choose two other people in the room as person 1 and person 2. After you say go, group members take one step toward their person 1 or person 2 every five seconds (participants should not use words or gestures to identify who is in their triangle) in an attempt to make an equilateral triangle (meaning the same distance between each of the three people). Allow five minutes for this activity. After everyone takes their seats, discuss: *What were some of the difficulties you faced in making a triangle?*

Discussion: *It’s not always easy trying to keep up with others, is it? Did you find that other people got in the way? Did you end up in someone else’s triangle? When we attempt to navigate life with others as our goal, we often hit roadblocks or find ourselves spinning in circles. The ironic thing is that oftentimes in dating, that is exactly what happens. We live our lives with a horizontal approach, focusing on the people that we hope to end up with. Finding someone to love becomes our consuming goal, and we can end up feeling lost along the way.*

In chapter 9 of True Love Dates, Debra explains the struggle she experienced as a result of fixating on finding someone to love:

“I got distracted and put all my energy into horizontal relationships with

possible boyfriends or mates, investing very little in my relationship with God. ... I attended ministry events and church meetings, and did a lot of volunteering. These things were all great in and of themselves, but I was doing them for the wrong reasons. I was driven by my need to connect horizontally, rather than to connect vertically. ... I was trying to get to a spouse by way of my relationship with God ... rather than [wanting] to serve and love him.”

Dating upward and keeping God at the center of our relationships means that we live our lives with a vertical approach: lifting our eyes upward and realizing that when our relationship with God is our priority, we will always be moving in the right direction. The triangle theory is based on the idea that the closer you move toward God, the closer you move toward your significant other. For some, this will be a short journey; for others, it can be lifelong; but if you’re seeking God, you’ll never regret the direction you’re moving.

Matthew 6:31–33 (The Message) says it best:

“What I’m trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God’s giving. People who don’t know God and the way He works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how He works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don’t worry about missing out. You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.”

“When your heart is focused on the eternal, the temporal world takes on new shape and meaning. It loses its power in your life, freeing you to live fully. Your relationship status and your desire to be married may never disappear, but they stop controlling your life. And you can trust in God’s promise that ‘You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met’” (True Love Dates, pg. 128).

QUESTION 1: What does it mean to focus on the eternal? What are some practical ways to bring your focus upward?

The problem happens when we go into relationships hoping that they will be

the source of our fulfillment and happiness. Because as wonderful as it is to experience the blessing of a good marriage, there are still some things that relationships can't do. Engaging in healthy relationships means that we first have realistic expectations of our relationships.

1. Relationships can't erase your insecurities.
2. Relationships can't give you purpose.
3. Relationships can't bring you healing.

Dating upward means that we take the time to connect with God by understanding our deepest needs for security, purpose, and healing—and look to our relationship with Jesus as the source of fulfillment for those needs. We were made for relationships, but there is no relationship that can fill us to overflowing like our upward relationship.

The second part of dating upward is a reminder of our need to connect with others. We long for relationships because we were made for relationships. Channel your deepest feelings of discontent in singleness by challenging yourself to be connecting with the body of believers that God has placed in your life. Get plugged in to a community of people and be deliberate about nurturing that community, because a passive life will always lead to an isolated life.

QUESTION 2: How have you engaged in living a life of community? What are some things you've done well? What are some ways in which you could better connect? What are some things we can do as a group to foster community?

Living a connected life requires you to immerse yourself in God's love, because the healthiest of romantic relationships are made up of two people, each filled up and overflowing love into one another's lives. The overflowing love of God is the only kind of love that will lead you inward, outward, and upward on your journey of finding love.

QUESTION 3: Have you experienced the overflowing love of God? If not, what is keeping you from it? How would our relationships look different if each person were overflowing with God's love?

Next Steps: Journaling Question. Where are you on your journey of dating inward, outward, and upward? What are some goals you have for each of these three stages?

Suggested Reading: Section 3 of *True Love Dates*—Dating Upward (Chapters 9–12)



TRUE LOVE DATES

Participant's Guide

HOW TO FIND TRUE LOVE

Love is _____, because we were made in the image of a _____ God whose very nature is love.

When it comes to finding love, there's a chasm between the _____ and the _____.

How the church approaches finding love:

How the world approaches finding love:

QUESTION 1: What messages have you received from society about what it means to find true love? What messages have you heard from the church?

The secret to finding true love is wrapped up in the _____:

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ (Matt. 22:36–39 NIV).

Love _____.

Love _____.

Love _____.

QUESTION 2: Have you thought of the importance of loving yourself as a factor in loving others? What do you think it means to love yourself?

True Love Dates proposes that in order to find true love, a person must experience three stages of dating:

Dating _____.

Dating _____.

Dating _____.

QUESTION 3: In your experience, of the three stages of dating (inward, outward, and upward), which tends to be the most neglected in the search for love? Why?

Next Steps: Keep a journal as you work through this curriculum for the next four weeks. Begin by writing down the three stages of dating (dating inward, dating outward, dating upward) and briefly journaling what your experiences have been with each one. Consider the following questions: What has been my typical approach to finding true love? What is my reaction to the concept of “loving yourself”? What are my beliefs about finding love? What are some fears I have about engaging in relationships? What do I believe about God’s role in my journey of finding love?

Prayer Focus: This week ask God to reveal to you what it means to love inward, outward, and upward. Pray Matthew 22:36–39 and ask God to show you opportunities to increase your love for yourself, for others, and, most important, for him.

Suggested Reading: Introduction of *True Love Dates*

WEEK TWO

DATING INWARD—THE PERSON YOU NEVER
THOUGHT YOU’D DATE

Healthy relationships are made up of _____. We are _____ of the equation.

You can’t even begin to know _____ until you know _____.

Our society fools us into believing that the value of an individual is determined by _____, rather than _____.

QUESTION 1: What are some ways that our society sends the message that our value comes from having a relationship? Within the Christian culture, what are some comments, attitudes, or words of well-intentioned advice that have perpetuated this lie?

As we go through life, our _____ and _____ are quickly covered up by the _____ that are put upon us by the people we engage with, the sin that we allow into our lives, and the expectations we place on ourselves.

The process of _____ means first and foremost that we take the time to know, to love, and to value who we are in God's eyes.

QUESTION 2: Take a moment to quietly reflect on the following question: What are some of the negative labels that have been placed on you (whether in childhood or adulthood) by family, friends, acquaintances, and even yourself?

God's Word is full of _____ that declare who we are and who he has called us to be. Take some time to read through the following list of verses listed in *True Love Dates* (pgs. 42–43) and discuss the truth about your identity in Christ:

What Does God's Truth Say about Me?

- | | |
|--------------------|-------------|
| 1 Peter 2:9 | I am _____. |
| Psalms 139:13–16 | I am _____. |
| Ephesians 2:10 | I am _____. |
| Psalms 139:1–4 | I am _____. |
| Colossians 2:13–14 | I am _____. |
| John 1:12–13 | I am _____. |
| 1 John 3:1 | I am _____. |
| 2 Corinthians 5:17 | I am _____. |
| Hebrews 13:5 | I am _____. |
| Galatians 3:13 | I am _____. |

Next Steps: Take some time this week to date inward by completing the following journaling activity. Keep track of your thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about yourself as well as your actions and reactions to the world around you. Spend some time reflecting on your observations.

Journaling Starter Questions (From *True Love Dates*, pg. 47)

1. *Interactions and Reactions:* What kind of people do I spend most of my time with? How do my interactions with them impact me? Are most of my interactions positive or negative?
2. *Behaviors:* What habits or hangups am I dealing with right now? Am I engaging in any addictive behavior? What are some negative patterns I need to change?
3. *Feelings:* What is my overall mood throughout the day? What makes me sad? Angry? Irritated? How do I cope with negative feelings when they arise? Is this strategy healthy or unhealthy?
4. *Thoughts and Beliefs:* What do I think about most? Do my thoughts reflect a positive or negative attitude toward myself? Are there thought patterns that I need to change? What do I believe about myself? Where did these beliefs come from? How do these beliefs line up with God's Word?

Prayer Focus: This week pray that God will continue to reveal any other negative labels that you have been wearing. Pray through the list of Scripture verses and ask God to bring healing and give you a new perspective on your true identity in Christ.

Suggested Reading: Section 1 of *True Love Dates*—Dating Inward (Chapters 1–4)

DATING OUTWARD—THE SEASONS OF DATING

Dating relationships can appear to be unpredictable, but they all tend to pass through _____.

Ecclesiastes 3:1: “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.”

“Each season of dating offers a spectrum of discoveries that will lead you either one step closer to true love, or two steps back. Each season illuminates potential risk factors and provides the opportunity to water and nurture the seeds of a relationship to see if they will grow and mature into a flourishing lifelong commitment” (True Love Dates, pg. 71).

Friendship: “One of the benefits of being in a friendship first is that you can _____ many important things about a person before _____ cloud your judgment. As tempting as it might be to skip this phase and jump straight into a romantic relationship, it’s important to take the time to form a solid friendship—because that’s what a good marriage is built upon” (*True Love Dates*, pg. 71).

QUESTION 1: What are some benefits of having a true friendship before a relationship? Have you ever regretted skipping this stage?

Spring: “At the start of any healthy relationship, both people experience _____ so strong ... New love, new feelings, new experiences. The heart stretches and grows. The mind, body, and spirit wake from hibernation, preparing for something new, something fresh, something good” (*True Love Dates*, pg. 75).

The absence of spring means that something is _____.

QUESTION 2: Describe what your feelings might be like during the season of spring. While feelings aren’t everything, they do matter in the season of spring. What could a lack of “spring” feelings signify about the relationship?

Summer: This is the season when things get hot.

“By [summer], a couple is spending a lot more time together. It is a season of shedding your layers and exposing your true self to the person you are dating and requires transparency. But it’s also risky” (*True Love Dates*, pg. 77).

There are two risks of getting burned in the season of summer:

1. _____: When you give of your heart, mind, and time (too much, too soon) and receive little to nothing in return.
2. _____: When physical affection takes center stage and your relationship becomes fixated on physical intimacy.

QUESTION 3: Discuss the risks involved in the summer season of dating. How can you protect yourself from going too deep too fast both emotionally and physically in the season of summer?

Fall: Fall is the season of _____.

“The fall season of dating is the most _____ season a couple goes through. Though the relationship may look beautiful to the distant observer, it is going through much change. True feelings, thoughts, ideas and opinions are being exposed. Two very different people are learning how to interact with one another; the deeper they get into their relationship, the more they learn that they are not entirely the same” (*True Love Dates*, pg. 80).

It’s a time of learning how to manage their _____, enhance their _____, and work through their _____.

There are three kinds of communicators:

QUESTION 4: When it comes to conflict in relationships, what type of communicator are you?

Winter: Winter is the season where we _____.
“In this season, your relationship slows into the normalcy of the _____. The sparks of new beginnings have become a strong and steady flame, and the nervous energy of first dates has been replaced by the joys and struggles of life. Emotions have steadied, but they are still strong” (*True Love Dates*, pg. 89).

For many couples, winter is the time in which you get a glimpse of what marriage will be like. At the end of winter, either you will choose to _____, or you will move into _____.

QUESTION 5: Have any of your relationships gone through the four seasons of dating? If you are in a relationship, which season are you in now?

Next Steps: Journaling Activity. As you review your journal entry from last week, observe your actions, interactions, feelings, and behaviors. Do you resemble an avoidant, aggressive, or assertive communicator? How was communication modeled to you by your parents and those closest to you? Write down three things you would like to do this week that will move you toward assertive communication, and then journal about your experience in attempting to communicate more effectively this week.

Bonus Journaling Activity: Read through chapter 5 of *True Love Dates* and create a “Red, Yellow, and Green List” as you consider what you need in a dating relationship.

Prayer Focus: This week, ask God to give you the courage and grace to be “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1:19). Ask him to give you insight to understand the different seasons and wisdom to appreciate his lessons through each one.

Suggested Reading: Section 2 of *True Love Dates*—Dating Outward (Chapters 5–8)

WEEK FOUR

DATING UPWARD—THE TRIANGLE THEORY

As believers, we often talk about “making God the center” of our relationships, but it’s hard to know how to apply that principle to our real-life relationships.

Oftentimes in dating, we live our lives with a _____ approach, focusing on the people that we hope to end up with.

Dating upward means that we live our lives with a _____ approach: lifting our eyes upward and realizing that when our relationship with God is our priority, we will always be moving in the right direction.

Matthew 6:31–33 (The Message) says it best:

“What I’m trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God’s giving. People who don’t know God and the way He works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how He works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don’t worry about missing out. You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.”

“When your heart is focused on the _____, the

_____ world takes on new shape and meaning. It loses its power in your life, freeing you to live fully. Your relationship status and your desire to be married may never _____, but they stop _____ your life. And you can trust in God's promise that "You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met" (*True Love Dates*, pg. 128).

QUESTION 1: What does it mean to focus on the eternal? What are some practical ways to bring your focus upward?

Engaging in healthy relationships means that we first have realistic expectations of our relationships. (For further discussion of the following three points, see *True Love Dates*, pgs. 135–37).

1. Relationships can't _____.
2. Relationships can't _____.
3. Relationships can't _____.

Dating upward means that we take the time to:

Connect with _____.

Connect with _____.

Be deliberate, because a _____ life will always lead to an _____ life.

QUESTION 2: How have you engaged in living a life of community? What are some things you've done well? What are some ways in which you could better connect? What are some things we can do as a group to foster community?

QUESTION 3: Have you experienced the overflowing love of God? If not, what is keeping you from it? How would our relationships look different if each person were overflowing with God's love?

Next Steps: Journaling Question. Where are you on your journey of dating inward, outward, and upward? What are some goals you have for each of these three stages?

Suggested Reading: Section 3 of *True Love Dates*—Dating Upward (Chapters 9–12)



NOTES

Thoughts and Reflections



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Debra K. Fileta is a licensed professional counselor specializing in relationship and marital issues. She, her husband, and two children live in Hershey, Pennsylvania. She is the author of the book *True Love Dates* (Zondervan, 2013), challenging men and women to date in a way that is psychologically sound, emotionally healthy, and spiritually grounded. Visit her blog www.TrueLoveDates.com and follow her on Twitter (@DebFileta) or Facebook (www.Facebook.com/TrueLoveDates) to get your dating questions answered and to learn more!