WHAT’S YOUR STYLE?

A famous athlete explained that he was divorcing his wife because, “If I wanted a model or television star, I would have married one a long time ago. All I wanted was a housewife.”

There’s nothing wrong with wanting to marry a woman who has an exciting career and enjoying the extra income that results—or marrying a woman who wants to focus on the home and be a full-time mom and wife. The problem is that couples often aren’t honest about what they want before they get married, which leads to great conflict (and sadly, divorce) after marriage.

When it comes to this issue, don’t ask yourself what’s “politically correct” to desire or what you should desire. Be honest: what do you really want? Be careful about compromising on it, because if you make an exception, a small regret can grow into a great frustration that leads to divorce.

“Seeking first the kingdom of God” is a very wide umbrella. There are different ways of seeking that kingdom and expressing God’s righteousness. You can be businesspeople or missionaries, you can live a life focused on the arts or athletics or media. Your goal is to bring the light and truth of Christ into whatever sphere God brings you. The Kingdom becomes more important than your own agenda, reputation, comfort, or financial gain. The sports broadcaster or veterinarian is no more or less called to seek first the Kingdom of God than a nurse or pastor.

The challenge, when applying this to marriage, is getting two people together who agree on the same path. Don’t assume that you and a potential partner’s motivations are the same or that you even mean the same thing when you say “married.” There are many different styles of marriages and too few singles ever explore this disconnect.

As you embark on your search for a sole mate, ask yourself what your ideal marriage will look like. Will the two of you spend your lives “sucking the marrow out of life,” or working hard to establish a business and/or ministry (and often spending evenings and weekends recovering)? Will you seek to build a child-centered family, focusing on the kids, or have you always thought you’d like to do a lot of foreign travel or maybe just adopt one or
two children? Will you have separate hobbies, or would you prefer to do everything together?

Many people assume their partner is looking for the same thing they are when they talk about “being married,” but that is rarely the case. We have an image in our mind of what our marriage will be like, but we don’t usually label it or even express it. We just assume that our partner shares it.

Two people who are both hungry don’t necessarily want to eat at the same restaurant; two people who want to get married are not necessarily seeking the same style of relationship. In fact, many people often aren’t aware of what they want. They have unspoken, unnamed assumptions. Until you see marriage patterns listed, your wants may not occur to you.

Once you become “serious” about someone to marry, you and your potential spouse need to get vulnerable and be as honest as you can. The temptation will be to say what you think the other person wants to hear, but that’s setting up both of you for considerable disappointment and even lifelong frustration. Lying about what you want out of marriage because you’re afraid you’ll lose the relationship if you’re honest is one of the worst kinds of fraud you could ever commit.

You’re asking someone to give his or her life over to a lie. And you’ll eventually be found out. You can’t sustain a lie for fifty years. You may worry about hurting someone’s feelings if you begin to sense that the two of you aren’t compatible but be more concerned about hurting that person’s life.

To give you a practical tool to help you do this, we’re going to look at some of the more common marriage “styles.” Some of these are terrible reasons to get married, while others are morally neutral—preference more than values. You shouldn’t get too serious with someone until you’ve carefully considered your own motivations and future desires and then gained a decent understanding of what your partner is looking for.

We all have a mixture of motivations, but this tool will help you understand your unspoken assumptions. If you allow yourself the freedom that comes from the truth that there isn’t just one person you can marry, you’ll be more objective and honest when going through this exercise.

Rank your desire for each of the following styles of marriage on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = this isn’t me at all, and it would be difficult for me to be married to a person who wants a marriage like this; 10 = this describes my assumed view of the marriage relationship very accurately). The best way to be objective here is to rank yourself independently from your partner (or, for many of you, take this test before you even get a partner).
A SPIRITUAL SOLE MATE
This person is passionately committed to getting married for the glory of God first and foremost. Such people want to build a family that will model God’s ministry of reconciliation to the world. They want to raise kids who will follow and serve God. They want to create a home that is a fortress for God’s work on this earth. They want to partner with someone who will help them grow to become ever more like Christ.

Seeking a spiritual sole mate above all else doesn’t mean you don’t have other motivations and additional marital styles, however. I’m hoping that the spiritual sole mate model will rule every Christian’s heart, and that these other styles will be subsets, but I’m also realistic that spiritual maturity is something we grow into and that maturity brings evolving motivations.

If you’re already in a serious relationship, try to be honest and ask if your partner would truly pursue a “spiritual sole mate” marriage, or do they just want to be married to you and know you wouldn’t have it any other way? And then ask yourself, is the spiritual sole mate model of marriage something you’re willing to compromise on, something you feel only mildly interested in, or something you are passionately committed to?

I can’t tell you how many discouraged women have come to me because they compromised and married spiritually anemic men. They thought everything else going well in the relationship would make up for a lack of spiritual fervor. To a woman, every one I’ve talked with has regretted making that compromise. If you want a spiritually rich marriage, you must marry a spiritually alive (and growing) man or woman.

Your Rank: _____________

BUSINESS BUDDIES AND ROMANTIC IDEALISTS
After Prince Charles and the future Princess Diana announced their engagement, an interviewer asked Prince Charles if the couple was “in love.” Diana jumped in and answered for her future husband by saying, “Of course.” Obviously flustered and taken aback, Charles added a famous addendum: “Whatever in love means.” It was a painful moment, and one that proved prophetic. In hindsight, they were seeking two very different things in their relationship. Charles seemed to be seeking a good match for a future king; Diana appeared to be seeking romance, fulfillment, and a storybook life.
Some people, like Charles, are looking for a life partner who is a good “fit.” Together, they can build a business, a family, a church, a name, or even rule a nation. They are not carried away by romantic notions or expectations; all that seems rather silly to them. They want a suitable partner for a satisfying and productive relationship.

Such a pragmatic matching isn’t necessarily a bad thing. The famous director Alfred Hitchcock and his wife Alma’s passion to produce iconic movies strengthened and renewed their passion for each other, leading to a rich partnership and marriage (and work that produced many Academy award nominations).

But romantic idealists—like Diana—expect to get much of their joy and fulfillment in life from a consistently intimate marriage. They expect their true love to be their best friend and constant lover, and to work hard at keeping the romance alive. Romantic idealists can be marked by obsessive clinginess, fear, jealousy, frequent feelings of being slighted, and even acts of desperation. (I don’t mean to make this sound unnecessarily negative. It’s possible to be a mature and even secure person with a romantic bent; my descriptions, for the sake of clarity, travel to the extremes.) For whatever reason, a romantic idealist’s sense of security, self-worth, and happiness are directly tied to the current health, vibrancy, and romantic intensity of the romantic relationship. If either partner sacrifices “relational” time in their pursuit of success, hurt feelings will follow.

If you’re a romantic idealist, you’re going to become very disappointed when your partner focuses on his business or hobby. If you’re married to a romantic idealist and you’re not one yourself, you may become exhausted with the demands placed on you emotionally, physically, and relationally.

What are your expectations in this regard? Do you want to join yourself to a suitable partner, or do you want to get lost in a wild, never-ending romance? Without critiquing who you think you should be, admit honestly who you are. (If you think you’re “in between,” you can simply rank yourself a “5” in each category.)

Your rank:
Business Buddy: _____________
Romantic Idealist: _____________

ADONIS AND APHRODITE
This is a relationship based on sexual attraction and beauty. In its crassest form, it’s when you see the bodybuilder marry the petite woman who has
had various cosmetic enhancements. I’m not trying to suggest that every such coupling is so superficial—many times it may not be—but it helps to point out a potentially troublesome motivation. While physical attraction is a key component for marital satisfaction, if it becomes the main attraction, what are you going to do when your body ages?

To be fair, sometimes such attractions are due to lifestyle more than appearance. Healthy living, healthy eating, and fitness are noble values. If physical attraction is the main thing drawing the two of you together—even if it’s through things like exercise and competition—what happens if your health-loving spouse gets cancer or suffers a stroke? Mutual attraction is a shaky foundation, because marriage is about growing old together more than it is about being young together.

Is this a person for whom age will increase your devotion and respect, or will this person gradually lose what most draws you to them now? Are you in this relationship because the sexual chemistry and attraction is so strong, or because the respect and honor you feel for this person is so deep? Beauty and strength serve a ten-year Hollywood career very well, but they’re painfully short-lived servants of a fifty-year relationship.

Your rank: _____________

**COOKBOOK COUPLE**

A “cookbook” relationship exists when one partner thinks they just need to find the right strategies, add in the correct ingredients, and then they’ll get just what they want out of the relationship. Such people typically read a lot of how-to books, fill out several relationship surveys, and want many sessions of relationship-oriented discussion.

I’m not suggesting that advice books aren’t helpful, but if you’re going to marry a cookbook spouse, you’d better be ready to participate in these kinds of discussions. They’re going to want to be in marital counseling (which is a good thing; every couple could benefit from counseling now and then), reserve some weekends for marriage conferences, and give you books and articles that they will want you to read—and be very frustrated if you don’t.

There can be many positive things about being married to someone who wants to continually improve their skills as a communicator and spouse, but some people would see such a relationship as exhausting. If a cookbook partner is marrying someone who despises that approach, there will be great frustration. If they both enjoy that sort of thing, their common bent will help them build deep intimacy rather than threat it. They may, indeed, end up with an all-star marriage.
THE PASSIONATE PARTNERSHIP
A passionate partnership is marked by two people who are committed to making each other their highest priority—above recreation, child-rearing, vocation, extended family, hobbies, and just about anything else (notice I didn’t say God). A passionate partnership can seem intimately intense and satisfying when two people enjoy it and suffocating when just one of them wants it.

A person with a passionate partnership mentality reads this and thinks, “Of course, doesn’t everybody want this?”—not realizing she may be dating someone who really enjoys focusing on his business but doesn’t want to talk about it when he comes home. Or a guy marries a woman who is so into her kids and homeschooling that she would perhaps rather her husband take the kids out for a nature walk when he gets home from work than spend forty-five minutes re-living his day with her. Some guys would rather play eighteen holes of golf on Saturday morning without their wives. Other couples think any hobby in which both can’t participate is simply unacceptable.

Ideally, every marriage should prioritize the marital relationship above work and even parenting—but passionate partners take it a notch higher. Whatever they experience, they want to experience together, so if one is called away on a business trip, the other will try to come along. Long conversations, plenty of time alone as a couple, and making each other the emotional center of their existence are expected, enjoyed, and cherished.

Two people sharing this vision will, indeed, maintain an intensely intimate and satisfying relationship. They will not have problems with leaving the kids for a date night or a weekend away; indeed both will be committed to this and even look forward to it. They may well look forward to becoming “empty nesters” so that they can once again focus on each other. The problem arises only when you have one who wants to have a passionate partner relationship and one who doesn’t.

THE HORROR-SHOW HOUSE
This is a relationship style that has no upside, and I mention it so you can avoid it. Some people become interested in a relationship only when they are terrorized by or terrorizing their partner. It’s true. These couples fight, argue, make each other miserable and afraid, and may even have quite vigorous
makeup sex. Exhausted and spent, they peacefully coexist for another short season until routine sets in and they start the horror cycle all over again.

The problems with such a relationship are many. Often, the one who once felt comfortable being terrorized eventually gets tired of it. And this form of love is so directly in opposition to agape biblical love and marriage that it’s a relationship doomed to fail.

If you feel most connected to someone when they are terrorizing you, or you feel closest to someone when you are terrorizing them, you need to know this is a spiritual sickness and a fake intimacy. You need to get healed, not married, and in that order. You can’t build a healthy relationship on an unhealthy pattern of relating. You need to deal with this before you even think about making a lifelong choice. Not only is it personally destructive, it’s a prescription for parental disaster. Kids crave stability and are harmed significantly by never-ending crisis.

Your rank: _______________

HOUSE AND HOME MARRIAGE
We lived by a neighbor who was obsessed with her yard. She mowed the lawn every other day. Just about every other week, she was spreading some new fertilizer or growth aid on the grass. Every time she spoke with us, she talked about her plants, her edging, her landscaping, and the health of her trees as if they were her children.

Other people fixate on a home’s interior. If you added up how much time they spent on the Internet checking out new furniture, fixtures, home accessories, etc., it would put their Bible study to shame. Remodeling is to them a fulfilling hobby and they will never truly be done tinkering with their house or yard.

Others see the house as a place to retreat to and may even enjoy living in an aesthetically pleasing house, but they certainly don’t want to sacrifice several weekday evenings and Saturday or Sunday afternoons to keep it up. They’d rather exercise, go to a movie, take a walk, or even take a nap.

This is largely a matter of choice, but where it becomes a problem is if one partner is more concerned about hospitality than house projects, or if one would rather spend three thousand dollars on a trip to Europe than on a new sofa. You’re also going to run into problems if one would rather get more aggressive in their financial giving than spend the money on lawn equipment or plants.
Be honest. How will you focus your energies: on a mansion or a mission? If you’re a mission person marrying a mansion person, you’re going to be very frustrated.

Your rank: _____________

THE KIDS ARE US COUPLE
Kids Are Us couples can’t wait to have children—sometimes lots of children—and have a relationship that is often focused on the children. They may have a “date night,” but even this might be done with a view toward modeling a good marriage—for the children. Homeschooling or expensive private schooling may often be a priority. This means an extra part of the budget, space in the house, or time on the clock are spent focusing on the kids. Even vacations may be chosen with educational or family fun in mind.

You can love and enjoy kids without being a Kids Are Us couple. But if you are truly a Kids Are Us man who marries a woman who wants, at most, two children, and can’t wait until they enter preschool at age three, you will be sorely tried and deeply disappointed with your life. If you’re a woman who dreams of having three natural-born children and adopting another three or four, and you’re marrying a man who might, at most, be willing to put up with two of his own (biological) children, you’re making a big mistake.

Your rank: _____________

BOHEMIAN BUDDIES
Do you envision Sunday mornings or early afternoons taken up with reading through the New York Times, checking out the latest indie movie, having an apartment or house full of books, going to concerts, regular foreign travel, and fulfilling (as opposed to lucrative) vocations? That’s fine, unless you marry a person who is dedicated to business, or devoted to ministry to the down-and-out, or centered around the life of the local church. This is also one of those lifestyles that usually precludes having lots of kids. It’s one thing to raise ten kids on a farm or five kids in the suburbs, but it’s a little more difficult to have a large family while living in Manhattan or downtown Seattle.

If you truly aspire toward an arts-oriented lifestyle, you’ll be frustrated hanging around with a partner who puts mass-produced prints on the walls and listens to exclusively mainstream music. And this is one preference that really is difficult to compromise on. A woman can join a book discussion group if her husband doesn’t read, but what about vacations? What about
weekends and evenings? If he just wants to read the *Wall Street Journal* and listen to Fox News or CNN while she was hoping to check out a movie or browse a used bookstore, neither partner is going to feel much rest or intimacy on any given weekend or evening.

A quick warning here: I’m throwing around a lot of stereotypes. It’s certainly possible for someone to read the *Wall Street Journal* and still be into the arts. This is intended to start a discussion. The main point is to encourage you to consider who you really are rather than base your marriage on an “ideal” view of yourself that doesn’t square with reality. It’s also designed to help you push past the blindness inherent in infatuation so that you can objectively evaluate whether someone you’re crazy about is a good fit.

Think about your passions here and write the appropriate number in the blank below.

Your rank: _____________

**POLICE PARTNERS**

Some people find themselves energized by a police arrangement—either they want to have somebody they can keep checking up on, or they need somebody to keep checking up on them. If one spouse is or was an addict, the other spouse will regularly check the garbage for bottles, the Internet history for sites visited, the bank statements for unexplained withdrawals.

Some people feel most comfortable fulfilling the role of a traffic cop, as it preoccupies their attention and keeps them from having to think about their own shortcomings. It gives them a sense of purpose, and sometimes even feeling fear and suspicion is more energizing than feeling bored or apathetic.

Other people like to be policed; it absolves them from having to look after themselves. They’ll keep running into trouble because their partner acts like a safety net, ready to catch them so they don’t hit the ground too hard. They may act like they resent the interference, but deep down, they know they need it.

There are considerable problems with entering this kind of marriage. First, if you’re the “police,” you’re assuming you don’t need someone to hold you accountable. If you’re the criminal or in the save-me-role, you’re indulging your laziness by refusing to love, look after, or serve someone else. That makes this relationship character-corrupting rather than character-forming.

There can be a sense of satisfaction in thinking you’re the only one who really understands her, and you’re the one he desperately needs, because it
can feel good to be needed. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to help someone out; there is something wrong with choosing an untrustworthy, crisis-prone person to become your spouse. When it comes to choosing a marriage partner, avoid the messianic complex. There is only one Savior, and it’s not you.

We’ll touch on this more later: do you really want to raise kids with someone who needs to be rescued from himself or herself? You’re almost guaranteed to become a de facto single parent. Is that truly the kind of father or mother you want to give to your children?

One engaged man admitted he was already “exhausted” with his fiancée’s clinical mood swings. If he is exhausted now, in a dating relationship, how tired do you think he’s going to be when they have three kids and he has a fulltime job? Plenty of other men could handle this without being depleted by it. Be honest about what you’re capable of handling for the rest of your life.

Your rank: _____________

WARRIORS
Some people like to fight. Maybe it’s what they grew up with; it’s how they process emotions; it’s what keeps life from being so boring. And they may even think that makeup sex is the best kind of sex.

Fighting releases adrenaline, which can make us feel more fully alive. But it’s a destructive way to stave off boredom, and it’s a disastrous living arrangement in which to raise children. If you can’t express what you really feel about each other without using four-letter words and hurtful comments, you lack the basic relational skills necessary to build a satisfying marriage. Either you’re not ready for marriage, or the person you’re with isn’t capable of having an intimate marriage.

There will be seasons of life when you need encouragement, forgiveness, and acceptance; a marriage style defined by fighting usually lacks these essential qualities. Conflict is an inevitable and necessary part of every healthy, mature relationship, but I wouldn’t want to be married to someone who is energized by altercations. I’d rather they be energized by service, motivated by love, and moved by compassion, kindness, and God’s gentle leading.

Your rank: _____________
STUDENT-TEACHER
One person likes to learn; one likes to teach. The most common form is the much older, usually financially successful man or woman marrying a considerably younger spouse. He thinks it’s “cute” that she is enthralled by fancy restaurants she’s never been to before, and when he explains the wine list to her and she looks at him with awe, it makes him feel like a man.

Women can get an ego rush having a younger man chase after them, and for a while they may enjoy doing “younger” things, reliving an earlier life. But if that’s the main attraction in your marriage, how long can you sustain that kind of bond? Your “young” man won’t be so young in another decade.

There can also be a “spiritual” parent/teacher relationship—the mature believer leading an unbeliever to the Lord and being his or her primary spiritual influence.

The most solid marriages are mutual—where each partner contributes to and challenges each other, and the “power balance” shifts rather than centers on one or the other. Students eventually grow up and want to be in a more mature relationship. Being a student is okay for a while, but eventually you want to graduate. If the person you’re married to won’t let you do that, resentment is inevitable. You want to kill a sexual relationship? Sow the seeds of resentment. It works every time.

These are short-term situations at best and usually don’t make a healthy basis for a long-term marriage.

Your rank: __________________

FINDING YOUR MATCH
Perhaps I’ve yet to describe your ideal marriage style. That’s okay; I’m just trying to get the conversation going. Jennifer liked to go out several times a week; she was a social butterfly. Her husband, Riley, developed properties for contractors and worked long days. The hard labor made him want to plop on the couch as soon as he got home. When Jennifer mentioned a party or friends getting together at a restaurant, Riley felt that taking a shower and heading back out was the last thing he wanted to do.

Neither Jennifer nor Riley were “right” or “wrong” in their evening preference. Working hard was what Riley did. Needing to enjoy a good dinner party on a regular basis was part of Jennifer’s DNA. Jennifer and Riley eventually got divorced. I’m not saying their dramatically different social preferences were the main cause, but they certainly didn’t help. This is something I wish they would have considered before they got married.
Take the time to write out a description of your ideal marriage style. It might not be one that I mentioned above. Describe with detailed scenarios what sounds most exciting and rewarding to you.

- How will you spend your evenings?
- How close will the two of you be?
- Will you try to spend every hour outside of work together, or will you sometimes pursue separate hobbies and ministry opportunities?
- How central will church involvement be in your life?
- Will you take vacations with the kids, without the kids, or even perhaps individually?
- When you’ve daydreamed about the most satisfying moments of marriage, are you and your loved one walking on a beach, scouring antique stores, working on a mission field, taking your children to the park, or doing something else?

If you’re already in a dating relationship, compare your answers, and then bring them up in a group setting. This group step is important because sometimes men and women are more likely to be honest when they see others sharing their views. Guys might be shy telling their girlfriend, “Yeah, I’m not so into the handyman thing,” but when another guy says it first, your guy can laugh and say in a little moment of truth, “You got that right.” When a woman says, “You know, I don’t really know if I want to have children,” your girlfriend’s unfiltered facial expression in response will tell you a lot about how she really feels.

Labels aren’t nearly as important as how well your assumptions about married life match up with those of the person you’re thinking about marrying. If your partner is antagonistic to an activity or style that’s important to you, don’t try to make yourselves fit into each other’s lives; there are other people out there. Remember, if there’s not “one right choice,” there is likely a more compatible person out there with whom you can share your life in a more fruitful and satisfying manner.
