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RELATIONSHIPS IN A

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CONFUSED CULTURE

LOVE »

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SEAN McDOWELL

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I dedicate this book to my beautiful wife, Stephanie. You are not only my high school sweetheart, but you are still the love of my life and will be forever.

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PART 1



CHAPTER 1

A decorative graphic consisting of a horizontal line with arrowheads at both ends, pointing left and right. The line is slightly thicker in the middle and has a subtle gradient.

The Invitation

The Matrix is one of my all-time favorite films. Even though I am a huge superhero fan and have watched many of the Marvel and DC movies over and over again, *The Matrix* is the only movie I have seen four times in the theater. That's right, *four times*.

You might be thinking, *this guy is crazy*. But as a young man fresh out of college, there was something about *The Matrix* that captured my imagination. Maybe you can think of a movie that has similarly captured yours.

In case you haven't seen it, the main character of the movie, Neo (played by Keanu Reeves), is a computer hacker who discovers that reality is not what he thinks it is. The world he believes is real is actually a computer simulation—the Matrix—that has been devised by artificially intelligent beings to distract humans as they use their bodies as an energy source. Neo discovers the truth, escapes from the Matrix, and joins a small band of humans in rebellion against the machines.

There are a lot of reasons to enjoy *The Matrix* as a movie. It's full of action and suspense, has a twist of romance, and has stunning visual effects (well, at least for its time!). Yet these are not

Chasing Love

the core reasons the movie captured me. Rather, it was because the movie raised *bigger* questions that made me reflect upon the trajectory of my own life, and in particular, my Christian faith. It made me consider what I was living *for*.

In the movie, Neo has a difficult choice to make: Will he choose the pleasures of the artificial world of the Matrix (the blue pill), or will he commit his life to truth, as costly and difficult as that may be (the red pill)? *The Matrix*, of course, is a movie, but in real life, each one of us faces a similar decision: *Will we choose a pleasure-centered life focused on self-fulfillment, or will we give our lives away for a greater cause?*

Jesus invites us to wrestle deeply with this question. In fact, He invites us to ask what we are *really* chasing in life. Good grades? Work? Success in sports? Marriage? Drama? Video games? You may care about some of these, or maybe all of them. But do they capture the depth of what you're *really* seeking? As good as these things can be, my suspicion is that, like Neo, you want your life to be about something *bigger*. You want your life to matter.

Jesus invites us to reorient the focus of our lives, to live for His kingdom instead of our own. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). Jesus invites us to embrace a higher calling, living not for our own pleasures and goals but seeking *first* the things of God. Even though this road can be tough, and requires sacrifice, it is the most meaningful life we can live. According to Jesus, the God-focused life is the one that matters most. Through following Jesus, we experience God's "living water" rather than settling for a substitute (John 4:1–15).

The Invitation

So, what does it mean to seek first God's kingdom? In response to the question about the greatest commandment in the law, Jesus said to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:28–31). Simply put, the greatest commandment is to love God and love other people. Thus, if you want to seek God's kingdom first, you have to learn how to love God *and* love other people.

Thankfully, we can look to Jesus in this: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (1 John 3:16). The way of love involves humbling ourselves in obedience to what God has called us to do. But Jesus isn't just our *model* of love. His death on the cross for our sins *enables* us to love. He makes us new creations—new people—who by the power of the Holy Spirit can give up things the world says we need for the sake of that which is truly life-giving—loving God and others. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

This is the great task God has for each one of us, and the Holy Spirit is ready to help us do it.

As a young college student, I remember being paralyzed with uncertainty about my career choice. I read a book by a former U.S. president, and he essentially said, “If you don't know what to do with your career, focus on how you can best love God and love other people.” Simple, but profound.

Yet the contrast between the invitation of Jesus and the invitation of the world could not be starker. The world tells you to live for yourself; Jesus says to die for yourself. The world says to do whatever you want; Jesus says to cultivate the right wants. The world says to love yourself; Jesus says to love others as you love yourself.

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The world disregards truth; Jesus claims that truth is found only through knowing and following Him.

Like Neo, you have a choice about the direction of your life. This isn't a choice you can put off until later. You're already making a choice whether you know it or not. We are all seeking some kingdom *now*, which is reflected in the ways we treat others *daily*. Here is the critical question Jesus is inviting you to consider: Will you view your whole life as a heroic adventure of walking faithfully in obedience to Him?

At this point, you might be wondering about the kind of book that you picked up. Isn't this a book about finding true love? After all, isn't the point of *chasing* something to *find* it? And doesn't happiness come from finding "real love"? Maybe you were expecting me to address LGBTQ issues and to answer popular questions like, "How far is too far?"

I will address both these topics, and many more. At the end of each chapter, I briefly address one tough, practical question like the following:

- *When am I ready to say, "I love you"?*
- *What should I do if someone is pressuring me for nude pictures of myself?*
- *Is masturbation okay?*
- *What should I do if a friend comes out to me?*
- *I am hurting from a past relationship. How long should I wait for another?*

But this is not primarily a how-to book on sex, love, and relationships. If that is the book you're looking for, you may need to look elsewhere. The point of this book is to motivate you to chase

The Invitation

a bigger question, namely, “How do I seek God and His kingdom in my relationships with other people?” In other words, what does it mean to truly love God and love other people? If the question is framed this way, I think you will discover that you have the tools to work through the myriad of practical questions that arise in a romantic relationship, or as a single person aiming to honor God in your life and relationships.

Whether you get married someday or remain single, Jesus is inviting you to the great task of loving God and loving other people just as He loved us first. There are many ways to do this. In this book, we are going to focus on what it means to love God and others with our sexuality and in our relationships in the unique cultural moment that we find ourselves.

Are you ready? Let’s go.

»—————> QUESTION <—————«

How do I stay sexually pure?

Begin by asking God for strength. Rely upon God for His strength rather than your own. Second, build convictions about *why* you are waiting. If necessary, go back through this book and discuss it with others. Third, find a good friend who shares your convictions about sex. Your friends will deeply shape your beliefs and behavior about sex. Fourth, be wise about media consumption. Protect your eyes and be careful about the movies, music, and social media you absorb. Fifth, avoid alcohol and drugs. Alcohol impairs judgment and makes decision-making tougher, which is why it often accompanies sexual activity.

**The music we listen to, the movies we watch—
they're all telling us to keep chasing love, and
we'll finally be happy when we find it. But is
love really all we need?**

In *Chasing Love*, Sean McDowell will invite readers into Jesus' radical, upside-down approach to love, and in doing so, he'll answer some of the toughest questions we're asking about love today:

- » **How does Jesus speak to singleness?**
- » **What does the gospel say about LGBTQ issues?**
- » **Can sexual sin truly be forgiven?**
- » **How far is too far?**

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